

## **Making an Inclusive Community Through Inclusive, Barrier-Free Theatre**

Presented at the North American Drama Therapy Association Conference October 2018

by Sally Bailey, Britt Burr, Paige Dickinson, Tracena Marie, Patti Woolsey, and Michelle Yadon

Abstract: Drama therapists can work under many business structures when establishing a therapeutic theatre company to serve their clients and their communities. The business models the authors have found to provide homes for their acting companies are applicable to any type of therapeutic theatre. These include working under the auspices of already-established arts, educational, and service nonprofits to creating their own LLC or 501(c)3 nonprofit. This article offers action steps and advice so more drama therapists can establish their own theatre companies.

Search Terms: Therapeutic Theatre, Barrier-Free Theatre, Drama Therapy, Devised Theatre, Inclusive Theatre, Performance

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Therapeutic theatre can serve a specific population (e.g., people in recovery from eating disorders, released from prison, or living with mental illness) or can offer a general, inclusive theatre experience to integrate people from all strata of the community for the purpose of breaking down stigma and enhancing inclusion. Plays might be devised by the group, written as

ethnodramas, or adapted from stories relating to group issues. In any case, the theatre troupe is created not only for artistic reasons, but also for therapeutic outcomes (Bailey 2009, 2010).

The authors of this article direct companies that we call Barrier-Free Theatres or Inclusive Theatres. These troupes for actors with and without disabilities, devise plays based on their ideas. While some of the actors may not fit into other performing environments, they deserve the opportunity to experience the joy of making theatre: to express themselves, use their imaginations, and find solutions to problems through the arts. We believe that everyone is creative, and every town needs a therapeutic theatre of its own.

### **Why Is Barrier-Free Theatre a Necessity?**

Benefits from Barrier-Free Theatres are abundant for participants, their families, and community members. Participants often increase self-awareness, self-confidence, social skills, and assertiveness, while breaking patterns of learned helplessness. Families of participants gain new insights into their family member's abilities. Systemic issues relating to stigma around disabilities can be addressed in communities through exposure to Barrier-Free Theatre productions.

To explore if audiences feel therapeutic theatre is an important entity in their community, the first author surveyed audiences of the spring 2018 Barrier-Free production, *Monster, MD*. An audience questionnaire and interview protocol was approved by the Kansas State University IRB. Surveys were distributed by ushers at three productions, and 91 surveys were returned. Of these, 70 respondents came because they knew members of the cast; eight of those were in attendance while on the job as staff of Big Lakes Developmental Center, which runs the group homes where many of the actors and their friends live. Two thirds of the responders (60) had never seen a Barrier-Free Theatre show before. The other 31 had seen between one and nineteen

previous productions for an average attendance of three performances each. Eighty-seven responders said they would be willing to return for a future play, and four people did not mark yes or no on their survey.

The survey had two open questions. In response to “What did you like about this year’s Barrier-Free Theatre show?” 22 people commented on the enthusiasm of the actors and the fun they seemed to be having performing, eight remarked on characters in the play, six on the story and theme of the play, six on the singing and dancing, six on audience participation opportunities, and six on how everyone in the cast was included. Fifteen people just said, “Everything!” The other open question was about how to make the shows more accessible to attendees. Suggestions included keeping the price low, closer accessible parking, and having actors wear microphones.

Nineteen responders volunteered to be interviewed, and nine interviews were completed. Three were parents and one was a foster mother of an actor, two were service providers, and four knew parents of an actor. Five, including the foster mother, were attending a Barrier-Free show for the first time.

Responses to the question, “What is valuable about a Barrier-Free Theatre?” included:

- It gives individuals and families and friends a sense of pride in the actor.
- It provides the actors with self-esteem.
- It’s an extra learning avenue.
- It’s an outlet for their emotions and for what [the actors] are going through in their everyday life.
- [The actors] have a way to put that [their feelings and ideas] out to the world, not just keep it inside themselves, but put it out constructively.

- It gives [the actors] the confidence and willingness to speak, not being afraid to communicate because someone else might not understand.

When asked why every town should have a Barrier-Free Theatre, people said:

- It can help educate citizens as to what differently-abled people have to offer.
- It can serve as an inspiration to other differently-abled people
- It is testimony to the diversity of our society.
- There's a lot of value in being inclusive.
- Engaging people with a disability with the community and interacting with others who are like them, and then showing their talent to folks in the community...benefits everybody.
- It's just as much a value to the people in the community as it is to the special needs participants. For the participants, it gives them a sense of belonging, of being part of the Manhattan Community, of feeling like this is their place. For the community members they can learn about people that they have been kept apart from. It helps the actors become employed in the community or have other opportunities.

### **Creating a Theatre Program with Sponsors and Community Partnerships**

Instead of waiting around for the job of their dreams or finding a job listed under "Drama Therapy" in the want ads, many drama therapists have needed to become entrepreneurs. This is true for all five authors. We looked for organizations that could use our services and convinced them that they wanted to hire us. A variety of agencies can be approached to sponsor a program.

In order to implement a Barrier-Free Theatre program at a new organization, the directors of that agency need to understand the benefits of drama therapy for their clients, families, and community members. When they understand that therapeutic theatre allows for the growth of

self-actualization, self-determination, community awareness, and enhanced inclusion, they will be willing to undertake this kind of programming.

### **Non-Profit Arts Centers**

One kind of organization that can be approached to sponsor a therapeutic theatre company is a non-profit arts center. Non-profit educational institutions are expected to be inclusive if they receive any government funding, as required by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1992. Sally Bailey was hired by Imagination Stage in Bethesda, MD as their first Arts Access Director to create programming for children with disabilities. The impetus for the creation of this position were parent advocates whose non-disabled children were able to take drama classes there, but whose children with disabilities struggled to succeed. As Arts Access Director Bailey's job included bringing drama to special needs schools, integrating children with disabilities into regular Imagination Stage classes, and preparing children with disabilities who had no drama experience with appropriate skills so they could succeed in regular classes. Bailey was also tasked with creating a reverse integrated performing company. The actors were mostly teens with disabilities, and a few neurotypical teens were included as role models. Over ten years this reverse integrated company grew to become two teen troupes, each with about 14 actors, and two adult companies with about 18 actors each. A Deaf Access company was created to integrate teens who were deaf and who were hearing. That became so popular that it also grew into two companies.

### **Non-profit Organizations That Provide Services Directly to Clients**

Non-profits that provide direct services are also potential sponsors of therapeutic theatre companies. When Michelle Yadon was first interviewed for Program Supervisor at a non-profit organization serving adults with disabilities in Indiana, she made it clear that if she was hired,

she wanted to implement a Barrier-Free Theatre as part of their mental health services. Once she was on board, the agency wrote the Barrier-Free Theatre into her job duties. The directors discovered many benefits to the program as participants increased their social skills and community involvement. Barrier-Free Theatre began with Yadon supporting 12 client-actors in writing self-revelatory monologues about their lives. The show, *I AM YOU*, was produced at a local professional theatre. Rehearsals were scheduled during the clients' Day Program. Tickets were sold through the local box office of the professional theatre. The two evening performances were very well attended. Actors felt empowered and started making drastic changes in their lives. Community members stated that they had deeper understanding of people with disabilities.

The following year, Yadon developed an inclusive playback troupe with an integrated group of 12 actors. The playback troupe rehearsed weekly in the evenings at the Day Program Center for eight months. Yadon also rehearsed with 12 other clients from the Day Program to create a new set of self-revelatory monologues. The first act of the show the self-revelatory monologues were performed, and in the second act stories were told by audience members and performed by the inclusive playback troupe. The service organization and Yadon received awards from the city because of the benefits for the clients, of increased awareness for citizens, and increased acceptance for all community members.

### **Community Parks and Recreation Programs**

When Bailey was hired by Kansas State University, she arrived in Manhattan, Kansas to find a Barrier-Free Theatre already sponsored by the City of Manhattan Parks and Recreation Department's Special Needs Program. This was again the result of parent advocacy. When Jane Gibson, the mother of an actor in the Imagination Stage company in Bethesda, moved to Manhattan, she wanted her son to continue to participate in a Barrier-Free Theatre. Being

involved in therapeutic theatre encouraged him talk more, make friends, and experience a creative, social outlet for his emotions and ideas. She went to the Parks and Recreation Department and insisted that they create a theatre program for teens with and without disabilities. The program was an easy sell because Parks and Recreation, as part of the local government, is required by law to offer programming to all members of the community. Bailey consulted in the creation of the troupe. When she moved to town, the troupe was in need of a new director, and she stepped right in. Kansas State University quickly became a partner to the Manhattan Barrier-Free Theatre as graduate students in drama therapy became the neurotypical peers in the troupe. For a number of years, plays were rehearsed and performed at the Manhattan Arts Center, the local non-profit community theatre, a second community partner. Currently, they perform in the new Purple Masque Theatre on the K-State campus.

Back in Indiana, Michelle Yadon applied for Inclusion Program Supervisor at a local community parks and recreation facility with a therapeutic recreation division. The Program Supervisor would oversee all programming for people with disabilities. One of the position requirements was certification as a therapeutic recreation specialist. As Yadon was a Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialist and a Registered Drama Therapist, she applied. During her interview, she again strongly advocated for including drama therapy in their program, showing recordings of her therapeutic shows at the non-profit service organization and talking about the benefits of drama therapy. The recreation administrators were sold.

Yadon first implemented an inclusive playback troupe for actors with and without disabilities. The troupe rehearsed weekly and was scheduled to perform twice a year on the stage at the community center. The troupe also traveled to residential facilities, day centers, and schools to share performances.

After three years, the acting troupe wanted a new challenge, so they produced a Shakespeare in the Park performance at one of the local park amphitheaters. The inclusive cast chose scenes and monologues from Shakespeare's plays. The actors then decided they wanted to follow the Barrier-Free Theatre structure and devise their own show. The performance was at the community center, sound was donated by a local community theatre, a preschool raised funds for the costumes, and the community center had a set design class that created the set. The inclusive ensemble continues.

There have been many benefits from implementing Barrier-Free Theatre through the community center. The parks and recreation organization has received one state award and one national award for the program. Actors are able to practice social skills and experiment with different roles in rehearsal that can be transferred into other aspects of their lives. One actor stated, "I can be anyone I want to be, and this helps me when I go to work" (personal communication). Family members get to see their actor grow and increase in skills. One mother said to Yadon after a show, "Wow. I didn't even know he could do that. He has abstract thinking, and he's so smart. I see my son differently" (personal communication). Community members also increase their empathy and start to see that all people have strengths. On one occasion an audience member said to Yadon, "I thought I was an open-minded person, but I now see areas that I need to change my thinking" (personal communication).

### **Community Theatre**

Tracena Marie serves as the Therapeutic Arts Director for Muncie Civic Theatre in Muncie, Indiana. She has learned the need for continuous effort to build connections and develop a professional network, especially in an area where the creative arts therapies are not as

prominent. In her job she has implemented and sustained programming by focusing on community partnerships, community engagement, and procuring grant funding.

At her initial meeting with the board of directors and the executive director, Marie explained how Barrier-Free Theatre would help fulfill Muncie Civic Theatre's mission of enriching their *whole* community through performance, education, and outreach. They were intrigued. The discussions provided Marie with the framework for a clear, specific written proposal to match the vision and mission of the theatre as well as their current constraints.

Her next task was to write a letter of intent. This is similar to a cover letter, except more specific. It introduces your profession and gives a brief description of the field you specialize in, your qualifications, and why you are passionate about your work. Be sure to acknowledge the value that therapeutic arts programming can offer to a community theatre.

Next she wrote a formal proposal. This should identify examples of other successful drama therapy programs, as well as logistics of the Barrier-Free Theatre method, including duration of the series, length of sessions, number of participants and volunteers, accessible rehearsal space, the therapeutic process including goals/objectives, sample outline of a rehearsal and production process, and sample list of creative supplies/materials.

With the program approved by the board and with the help of Civic Theatre's grant writer, Marie set to work applying for grants. Enough funds needed to be gathered for rehearsal and production supplies, financial aid for participants' tuition, and payment for the drama therapist. Typically, non-profit arts organizations are on very tight budgets and cannot start something new without funding in hand. Enough grants were awarded to move forward. Marie recommends that in order to be able to provide effective grant reporting and to secure funds in

the future, it is important to collect video footage, photos, rehearsal documents, and testimonials from participants throughout the process.

While seeking funding, Marie also reached out to organizations in the community that shared a similar philosophy as the program. Barrier-Free Theatre's pilot program partnered with a disability service organization that provides residential, employment, and support services. Marie offered a free theatre workshop for their clients to assess if they had interest and for the staff to witness drama techniques in action. After the workshop, 17 clients registered for the program.

In order to integrate neurotypical actors, Marie needed to recruit community volunteers. Places to look for volunteers include universities in your community, community theatre members interested in creating outside of a typical mainstage production, retirees looking for an enriching and new experience, and educators or health professionals with a passion for the arts and healing.

As performance time draws near, have participants perform or talk at community events to share about the program. Invite the Mayor and City Commissioners as well as the state's Director of Disability Services to the play. Write letters to community leaders and educators sharing about the therapeutic arts taking place in the community and encourage them to get involved through attending, volunteering, or donating. Since the inaugural year of Muncie Civic Theatre's Barrier-Free program, 175 adults with disabilities and 100 volunteers have participated. Programming for youth began in 2016 and is growing as well.

### **Creating a Limited Liability Corporation**

Sometimes drama therapists do not find an organization open to partnering or sponsoring a therapeutic theatre under their auspices, but the drama therapist sees a strong need in the

community for drama therapy services. Britt Burr was faced with a situation of this kind and opted to create a Limited Liability Corporation (LLC). Originally, Burr had been hired by a client service organization in Maryland that had a grant for a new position: Assistant Director of Autism Services. The job focused on helping emerging adults on the autism spectrum bridge the transition between school and work by creating programming that improved social and employment skills. Just as Yadon had sold drama therapy and her skills during her job interviews, Burr convinced her employers to let her create a Barrier-Free Theatre as part of their programming. Unfortunately, the organization was struggling financially and let the development director, who wrote all the grants, go. With no one on staff to write new grants, once the initial funding for Burr's job ran out, there was no money for her position to continue. Out of a job she loved, she weighed her options and decided in order to continue working with her clients, she would create an LLC.

LLCs vary from state to state. There is a lot of information available about the process online. Burr recommends the website [www.howtostartanllc.com](http://www.howtostartanllc.com) which has step by step information on each state as well as access to the forms you will need in order to file your LLC with your state. In Maryland, the filing cost was about \$100, but costs can range from \$100 to \$300.

The first thing to decide is a name for your company that is not already taken. The words 'Limited Liability Corporation,' 'LLC,' or 'L.L.C.' need to be part of the name, and the company's name cannot sound like it is part of local, state, or federal government. At [www.howtostartanllc.com](http://www.howtostartanllc.com) a name search can be run to see if the preferred name is available. If the business name can be used as the name of a web domain, clients have an easier time finding your website. In any case, secure and pay for a web domain. While there are "free"

domain names available through other organizations, like tinyurl, Burr says it is worth the money to buy your own as your organization will be easier to find in a web search.

Using business name, create an email address. This will be on your website, so getting this done sooner rather than later makes sense. The email could be @the name of your company.com or .org. Google's G Suite has a business email service.

Next you need to file a LLC Article of Organization which includes the name of your LLC, the address where you are rehearsing or doing therapy, and (if this is not a space that you rent or own) a separate mailing address, possibly a PO box, for the business. The Registered Agent is the person in charge of the LLC. This may be yourself. The Registered Agent's address needs to be on the form. If you do not have a permanent office, you could use your home address. Email in the paperwork with the registration fee and wait to get an approved copy back from your state. This takes about 4-6 weeks.

While waiting for your approved paperwork, obtain a Federal Employer Identification Number (EIN) by filing the SS-4 form available on [www.IRS.gov](http://www.IRS.gov). This can be done online or over the phone. The EIN is needed for tax purposes. When the time comes, you can do your taxes yourself or have a professional tax preparer do it, but in any case filing taxes for a LLC is similar to filing as a person. Instead of your social security number, you use the EIN.

Once you have received your EIN, you need to start a business bank account. It is important to keep a person's funds separate from the funds of the business, for general bookkeeping, tax filing, and liability purposes. Quickbooks and or another financial office organizer can keep track of your business finances.

You decide when your fiscal year starts and ends. It might run from January 1 to December 31 or start at the beginning of a month that makes the most sense for your business

calendar. Burr started her fiscal year when all her LLC paperwork arrived. When tax season comes at the end of your fiscal year, report your taxes.

You also want to create and file an Operating Agreement. This is a contract with liability clauses to protect you in case people get injured when they are working with you or if the LLC ends. Examples of Operating Agreements appropriate to your state are on [www.howtostartanllc.com](http://www.howtostartanllc.com). This Agreement is not something you would give to your clients, but you should include a liability statement in your informed consent form.

The pros of having a LLC include being covered for personal liability and making reporting on taxes on income made by the business easier. Cons of LLCs include not being able to provide donors with a tax write-off and not being able to submit for grants, as these almost always are for non-profit organizations. You will need to have a “day job” at first because as you start, you will not be making a lot of money. Burr recommends anyone thinking about creating a LLC approach it with realistic expectations. LLCs are not difficult to create, but times can be lean if you are starting from scratch. She had the benefit of already having built a clientele.

### **Creating a 501(c) 3 Non-profit Organization**

Another option is to start a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization. This requires creating the business entity and submitting it to the Internal Revenue Service for approval as a tax-exempt charity. Being tax exempt allows an organization to fundraise through writing for grants to foundations and corporations and provides individual donors tax exemptions for their donations.

Patti Woolsey is a co-founder and founding executive director of ArtStream, a non-profit arts organization in the Washington, DC metropolitan area. The ArtStream mission is to bring the arts to under-served communities, focusing on people with intellectual disabilities and autism. ArtStream started offering programming in 2005 within nonprofit provider agencies.

Then inclusive theatre companies were established at three locations in Maryland and Virginia. Non-profit status was granted by the IRS in 2006. The organization expanded very quickly after that, and as an inexperienced executive director, Woolsey says she had a lot to learn.

Starting a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization involves more paperwork and the creation of a board of directors, but allows the organization to fundraise through grants and permits contributions from individuals to be tax exempt. Recommended books on creating a nonprofit are John Riddle's *Managing a Non-Profit* (2005) and Stan Hutton's and Frances Phillips' *Nonprofit Kit for Dummies*. (2001). For local help, contact a local Arts and Humanities Council and State Non-profit Associations. These organizations are invaluable because they offer support and workshops and often are free.

Please note that many of these steps may be done simultaneously or in a different order than listed here. Choose a name for the organization and select a web domain name. Create a mission statement. It will need to identify a clear mission for the Articles of Incorporation and the IRS form 1023. Mission statements should be memorable because you will use it in promoting your services and writing grants. It should be narrow enough to focus the activities of your organization, but broad enough to allow growth. Write in plain language; forget the flowery language or current buzzwords. State the organization's purpose, the means by which the purpose will be achieved, and who will benefit from the organization's activities. Organizational values and vision may be included.

Write the articles of incorporation, including a statement of purpose and a mission statement. Develop organizational bylaws: the rules by which the organization will operate, including when the fiscal year will begin and end, terms of the board of directors, dissolution clauses, and a conflict of interest policy. The government is particularly interested in the

inclusion of conflict of interest and dissolution clauses. File the articles of incorporation at the appropriate office in your state government with the appropriate fee. These forms can be obtained online at your state government website. There are multiple incorporation forms, so make sure you find the one for tax-exempt corporations.

Form the incorporating board of directors. Often only three people are required. Potential board members will want to know about your mission, bylaws, and what you expect them to do for the organization, because board members have a fiduciary responsibility for the organization. Hold the first official board meeting after the incorporation papers are final. Start keeping minutes of meetings. *Robert's Rules in Plain English* (2005) provides suggestions about how best to run a meeting and what should be included in official board minutes. Board minutes need to be voted on after they have been typed up and sent around for everyone to see. Approval can be done by email vote or at the next board meeting. This is important, as minutes become part of the public record.

Obtain a Federal EIN. This is easy to do at [www.irs.gov](http://www.irs.gov) and free. If done online, the EIN form can be printed out at the end of the application process. With the EIN, a bank account can be opened for the organization.

Create a logo. This will go on stationary, envelopes, advertising, website, and any other important documents that will be sent from the office. Put together a website and include the logo and email address on it. Start a database of potential clients and potential donors. It is better to keep a separate donor database to keep track of contributions. Get financial information onto Quickbooks or another financial office organizer. These programs make taxes, sending out 1099's to contractors, and other necessary papers much easier.

Within 15 months of the date of incorporation, file IRS form 1023 to start the process to become a 501(c)3 tax-exempt organization. The form and instructions may be downloaded as a PDF file from [www.IRS.gov](http://www.IRS.gov). Along with the form and fee, include a copy of the articles of incorporation, the bylaws, a list of the board of directors, an extensive narrative of past, present and future activities, any brochures or promotional material, the conflict of interest policy, and a three-year projected budget, which includes the current year plus two succeeding years. After receiving your tax-exempt status, register as a charity in your state.

The organization may solicit donations while waiting to hear about tax-exempt status, as long as donors know you are 501(c)3 pending. Donations made will be retroactively recognized from the date of your incorporation. Make sure to have adequate liability insurance to protect workers and clients. A 990 form must be filed at the end of the organization's fiscal year. Small non-profits can efile at [www.irs.gov](http://www.irs.gov).

Create a business plan, including a fundraising plan. This document indicates to potential donors that you are serious. The business plan maps out a three to five-year strategic plan for your organization. If you are operating programs, make sure you have adequate liability insurance to protect your workers and clients.

Continue to build a strong board. Come up with a matrix of people with skills who would be useful for your board, such as lawyers, accountants, marketing professionals, publicists, fundraisers, and people with foundation connections. Consider an advisory board for people not willing or able to do a lot of hands-on board work, but who will lend their names, can give advice, or help with special events.

A misnomer about non-profits is that they are not allowed to make money. A non-profit can end the year with extra money in the bank. As a business every non-profit needs to make money to reinvest in the business and to ensure survival in financially difficult times.

### **Conclusion**

Therapeutic theatre companies can find secure homes and provide places for learning, healing, and growth for clients and others in your community. The authors encourage every drama therapist who has a dream of creating therapeutic theatre to hold onto those dreams and have the courage to reach out to community members for support. Partnering with other individuals and organizations is the best place to start. Often the biggest fear drama therapists have is doing official paperwork. Do not let a piece of paper with empty boxes on it stop you! Drama therapy is mightier than the form.

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