

Graeae Theatre Company

Description

Graeae Theatre is a renowned British theatre company that has significantly contributed to the performing arts world, particularly in promoting disability-led theatre. Graeae was founded in 1980 by Nabil Shaban and Richard Tomlinson after they met at a university in Coventry. It has since become a platform for disabled artists to showcase their talents and challenge societal norms surrounding disability. Both shared a vision of staging productions with disabled people. In May 1980, an ensemble of disabled performers performed the first Graeae play, *Sideshow*.

Today, Graeae is a disability-led theatre company that highlights the skills of actors, writers, and directors with physical and sensory impairments. The company develops artistic, aesthetically accessible productions that appeal to disabled and non-disabled audiences. They work with more than 7,000 people each year, delivering projects across the UK and internationally. What started as a platform for disabled artists to be involved in theatre productions has now become a pioneer in reimagining what an inclusive space should look like. A compliment from Andrew Hayton (*Postcards from the Gods*) sums up what a force to reckon the theatre has become 'Pretty much the blueprint for what I wish mainstream British Theatre was like.' They have managed to capture the hearts and praise domestically and garnered international acclaim with their international tours and themes that resonate with global audiences.

Graeae is a registered charity whose extensive work is made possible through the support of grantors, sponsors, and donations from the public. Under the artistic direction of Jenny Sealey, Graeae's work varies from intimate and poignant studio performances to large-scale, breathtaking outdoor spectacles. All performances are accessible and provide audiences with subtitles and/or British Sign Language and an audio description at each performance.

Accessibility is fundamental to Graeae's work, providing an inclusive working practise for artists and staff and an accessible theatrical experience for audiences. Since 1980, Graeae has earned an international reputation as a pioneer of accessibility in world-class theatre while still focusing on the original impulse of its founders.

Graeae Theatre has produced an impressive range of productions, including original plays, adaptations, and musicals. They have collaborated with several renowned theatre companies, including the National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company. One of their most notable productions is "Reasons to be Cheerful," a musical tribute to the iconic British band Ian Dury and the Blockheads. The show was a huge success and went on a national tour in the UK and abroad.

Another notable production by Graeae Theatre is "Blindsided," a play that explores the experiences of a blind woman navigating the world of love and relationships. The play was praised for its honesty and sensitivity towards the experiences of blind individuals, and it was performed at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 2017.

Training & Learning is a bold and ambitious part of Graeae's core work. As Hana Pascal Keegan, an ensemble Graduate, indicates: "Graeae's training for Deaf and disabled artists is radical. Training with Ensemble equaled empowerment, guiding me on how to get the support I need to work as an emerging theatre director." The training and learning opportunities include a young ensemble, artistic residencies in schools, professional artist development, production-related workshops, and consulting and training for change in the sector.

Deaf and disabled artists, children, and young people are at the heart of Graeae's Training & Learning projects. Graeae has an excellent track record of creating work for and with young people and artists at all stages of their careers. The company ensures that learning environments provide a level playing field for all and encourage imagination, curiosity, and creativity.

"Write to Play" is Graeae Theatre's flagship programme dedicated to developing the skills and experience of emerging writers in collaboration with some of the most exciting theatres in the United Kingdom. The programme has nurtured the careers of 30 deaf and disabled playwrights, including Jackie Hagan, whose play "Cosmic Scallies" was co-produced by Graeae and the Royal Exchange Manchester in August 2017 was co-produced.

In addition to "Write to Play," half-day workshops are held for beginners, while Play Labs offers theatre makers of all levels a day of research and development in Graeae's safe and accessible spaces.

In addition to its productions, Graeae Theatre is also involved in community outreach and education programs. They work with schools and community groups to provide workshops and training in disability-led theatre, promoting inclusivity and diversity in the performing arts.

Graeae Theatre's commitment to disability-led theatre has earned them several awards and accolades. They won a special award in the Evening Standards Awards in 1984, Promotion of Diversity at the UK Theatre Awards in 2012, and Euan's Guide Most Accessible production for Jack Thorne's *The Solid Life of Sugar Water* at the 2015 Edinburgh Festival Fringe, among others. In addition, Jenny Sealey MBE, the artistic director, and CEO since 1997, was awarded the Liberty Human Rights Art Award.