

## **Writers Guild of Great Britain Disability Issues Committee**

### **Response to The Strategy Unit's Consultation On its Interim Analytical Report on The Life Chances of Disabled People**

#### **1. Preamble:**

**1.1** The Writers Guild of Great Britain is the TUC-affiliated Trade Union for writers of books and stage plays and writers working in radio, television and films. Its broad sweep takes in the Arts, Media and Entertainment Industries. All Full Members have had at least one full-length work professionally performed or published.

Each of these five areas has a committee of writers committed to that sector of work, which meets regularly, and there are also specialist Committees, such as Writing for Children and the recently-formed Disability Issues Committee, which cut across media-specific boundaries.

We none of us stop being disabled when we write a television play rather than a radio play, though obviously for some impairment groups, eg blind or visually impaired writers, television poses specific challenges, where radio does not.

**1.2** The Disability Issues Committee (DIC) welcomes the research and publication of the Interim Analytical Report, as a serious attempt to get to grips with strategic issues affecting disabled people in all areas of their lives.

Inevitably, given who we are, we're bound to be single-mindedly concerned with employment opportunities for disabled writers and this report will have that as its principal focus. With that in mind, we need to note the casualised state of the arts and media industries (not dissimilar to the building trade) and need to argue that a discussion of the employment prospects for disabled writers is necessarily part and parcel of a discussion of the employment prospects of all writers.

Many, though not all, of the problems facing disabled writers, to get their voice heard and their message across to the public they want to reach, are simply typical of the industry, but it's that bit more difficult to climb the mountain, if you have an impairment.

**1.3** One member who came to the last DIC meeting has Repetitive Strain Injury and her ability to type away, for hours at a time, to meet her deadlines is inevitably affected by this.

And another member, (Yorkshire-based and thus not situated near to TV studios) with several episodes of *Doctors* to his name, reports that his ME can affect his health on days when he is due to travel (but this may not be clear until he has set out on his journey) and so his ability to meet producers for a script conference they want to hold with him, can sometimes be in doubt.

It is hardly his fault that the meetings are held at TV studios (that's how it works in the industry) and many miles away from him. It is hardly his fault that he has ME. It is hardly his fault public transport is not that accessible for disabled people and that

train operators may be given till 2025 to set that right, but it is his work opportunities that are affected for another 20 years till it has been got right.

**1.4** Thus we have a piquant situation: a writer having an impairment gives him or her specialist insight into, and knowledge of, a number of medical conditions, and of the Health Service, and what it is like to live with those conditions, which is useful if s/he wants to write for *Doctors*, *Casualty* or *Holby City*, and can confer an edge, over non-disabled writers, as regards getting a commission, yet precisely because s/he has the impairment, s/he may not get the work, or as much of it, as they do.

**1.5** This then is the twin paradigm we face, as disabled writers. However lively our imaginations are and however rich the life-experiences we can draw on, two things can then occur.

Our impairment may make it harder to do the writing (and research) and get the script word processed (the production at home) and then the same occurs again, re the script then getting a production in the industry!

**1.6** The overriding question for government is whether intervention in a casualised industry to stabilise employment patterns is an economic (or other) imperative (eg issues concerning the cultural life of the nation, films as export earners, the high unemployment in the industry) and within that, what kind of intervention is advantageous to disabled writers, actors etc?

**1.7** With longevity increasing, the birth rate falling, the post-WW2 baby boomers now starting to reach pensionable age, and a clear correlation between age and disability, and with writing being one of the few kinds of work one can do from home, without a significant increase in square footage being needed, it can be expected that increasing numbers of people disabled in mid-career may wish to turn their hand to writing as a way of remaining productive and schemes to encourage this are arguably useful social interventions for governments to make.

**1.8** Traditionally, writers tend to have been (self-)recruited from among the ranks of ex-actors, ex-journalists and ex-teachers/lecturers. It can be a long time before the trickle of income from writing becomes a steady stream such that one can give up the day job.

Some never do, Chekhov remained a doctor who also wrote and never made the transition to a full-time writing career: his writing was not of “amateur” standard, however and clearly significant contributions to drama and literature are not the sole preserve of those pursuing writing full-time.

**1.9** Yet anyone who is serious about writing wants to do it full-time, or as full-time as possible, given the constraints their impairment may impose on their stamina. It is by and large true that the more you do, the better you get, and it is perhaps only true that writers run out of material if they draw their material mainly from their own lives and those of their immediate circle of friends and neighbours.

It is said everybody has a book/play/story in them to tell (their own life) but everybody only has one autobiography to relate ... The use of imagination, empathy and research will necessarily be involved if a writing career is then undertaken.

**1.10** Perhaps the major intervention, historically, that should be looked at, as a model, is the Federal Theatre Project in the USA in the 1930s. Part of Roosevelt's New Deal, it aimed to set up troupes of unemployed actors, writers, designers, etc across the nation, not just to combat the high unemployment of the Depression years but in the belief that the arts are an important part of everyone's life.

**1.11** The Federal Theatre Project stimulated some important work, not least because it encouraged the formation of ensembles, semi-permanent companies in which the same actors would perform a succession of plays. Writers could therefore write parts with particular actors (and their strengths) in mind, and it has often been the case that writers do their best work in these conditions.

Both Brecht and Shakespeare benefited from there being a permanent company (at the Berliner Ensemble and at The Globe) to work with, and this method of work at its best leads to roles like *Mother Courage*, written for the actress Helene Weigel.

**1.12** Clearly £X billion invested in live theatre will create more jobs than the same £X billion invested in films or television production. Theatre is, comparatively, low-technology and it is easier for new companies to get started. They don't need their own theatre building, but they will need their own van, to move people and props from one venue to the next, eg a diesel, long-wheelbase Mercedes Benz.

**1.13** However the problems for the disabled writer will increase if s/he writes for touring, rather than building-based theatre. With accessible transport schemes still in their infancy, and the train and tube network likely to remain outside of disability legislation till 2025, the problems of the writers getting to performances are considerably magnified.

And where s/he chooses to write parts for disabled actors, who are wheelchair or powered scooter users, the vans needed have to enable them to enter, adding significantly to the cost. And if the people take up more space, there is less room for props and a second vehicle may be needed.

**1.14** Thus we have the paradox that the intervention most readily able to create work for unemployed writers and actors, will not be particularly accessible to, nor particularly benefit disabled writers and actors, by virtue of the transport difficulties of disabled people not yet being satisfactorily solved.

Unless there is an accompanying package of measures to ensure that there is equal access to provision, given their impairments would place disabled writers and actors at a disadvantage in obtaining the work thereby created. A case, if ever there was one, for some joined-up thinking and different government departments working together.

**1.15** The other feature worthy of note of the live (touring) theatre is that the number of work opportunities it can offer is potentially unlimited, and the increase stimulated by intervention could be exponential in growth.

Where the number of TV channels is finite and the building of a new repertory theatre can be some five years in the planning (city centre sites are expensive and need to be acquired for the purpose) live theatre performances can take place in any school, youth club or community centre or even in streets, shopping parades, parks and public open spaces, anywhere with reasonable acoustics and no distracting noise.

## **2. The media should reflect the society they serve**

**2.1** This has been the Government position for some time now. Tessa Jowell has had more than once to berate broadcasters for their slow progress in increasing the numbers of disabled people both in front of the cameras and behind them.

With some 15% of the population of working age being disabled, it has to be regarded as disappointing that these numbers are not reflected in the workforces of the major broadcasters, figures of 1% - 2% being the norm, and this despite the efforts of the producers in the Broadcast & Creative Industries Disability Network (BCIDN) (which began as an initiative by the Employers Forum on Disability) to develop Action Plans, annually reviewed, to make an impact on the situation.

**2.2** Earlier this year, Ms Jowell called for major drama series, such as *Casualty* and *EastEnders* to feature disabled characters in major roles by Christmas and such jolly-along tactics are probably useful in keeping the issue on the front burner. But we would comment that whilst this is good news for disabled actors, there is no guarantee that any disabled writers will be involved in the creation of these characters, and it was not part of Ms Jowell's rallying call.

**2.3** This raises a number of issues. There are those in the Writers Guild who would assert that you don't have to be disabled to write about disability. And there are those who would assert that just because you happen to be disabled does not thereby oblige you to have to write about disability issues. Both positions are off-shoots of the maxim of the Roman playwright Terence: "*I am human, Therefore everything human is of interest to me.*"

Both views are partly coloured by strong feelings about prescriptive formulations as to what writers should write about, be they from market forces (eg all plays must be drawing room comedies in the manner of Terence Rattigan or Noel Coward) or from Zhdanovite Commissars of Culture (who decree all art must be Socialist Realism).

**2.4** But both views see the issue in individual terms.

It is undeniable that the social inclusion agenda on disability is gathering momentum and that the Civil Rights of disabled people are increasingly a matter of public concern, government legislation and institutional reviews.

It is equally undeniable that disabled people are starting to "Come Out" and become visible, There are also more of them and their numbers are swelled by wars, by car, plane and train accidents and by dangerous sports, unsafe working conditions in heavy industry and the stresses of modern living.

And equally undeniable that with improvements in modern medicine, people are now surviving conditions, that only a generation earlier, would have killed them, but they do so as “damaged goods“.

**2.5** That there should be interventions to increase employment opportunities for disabled people in our industry, like in any other, is semi-inevitable.

It is the way society is heading. And both groups of writers, characterised above, will have to come to terms with this as a feature of the burgeoning and renascent cultural industries that both progressive social policy on encouraging inclusion and new economic measures taken to give inclusion some tangible results, will bring about.

**2.6** Part of coming to terms with who should write about disability will be the parallel issue of whether non-disabled actors should play disabled characters. This is no longer acceptable on race. Peter Sellers’s obsequious Indian Doctor and the caricature dobi-wallahs of “*It Ain’t Half Hot Mum!*” are simply passe and the starting point for the Asian satire show “*Goodness Gracious Me*“.

Olivier’s blacking up to play *Othello* seems ham acting to modern eyes. Among such demeaning roles, only Ben Kingsley’s film portrayal of Mahatma Gandhi still remains credible.

**2.7** In many ways disability in the 2000-10 decade is where race was in the 1970s. Tentatively, step by step, TV moguls overcame their trepidation and black characters began to appear on our TV screens. Starting with “*Love thy Neighbour*” about a black couple moving in next door to a white one and “*The Fosters*” in which all the main characters were black, for the first time on British TV.

Norman Beaton and Carmen Munro (the parents in the *Fosters*) Lenny Henry (the son) all built solid careers on the parts that had been and continued to be created for them.

**2.8** Equity had an Afro-Asian Artists Committee in the 1970s to press for greater representation of black characters on TV, which took its inspiration from American Equity and American TV shows in which black people were increasingly shown as professionals and not in the stereotypical negative roles, such as drug dealers and prostitutes, which an unthinking industry had traditionally cast them.

**2.9** Similarly the first few steps are being taken on disability now. A disabled actor has now played Hamlet, a major character in the award-winning comedy “*The Office*” is disabled and there was a TV drama with the two main characters being disabled, a love story about a man with short arms and a woman of short stature, featured in the DRC magazine *Eight Point Six*. The DRC piece did not mention whether the writer was disabled, though, and our issues remained invisible ...

**2.10** These seem remarkable now, as were the first few black faces to appear on TV, 30 years ago, but 30 years on, there seems nothing particularly remarkable about senior newsreaders like Trevor Macdonald and Moira Stewart happening to be black. We have grown accustomed to their face, and attitudes have changed.

**2.11** However, if a wheelchair user or a deaf/blind person were to be a newsreader, it would seem groundbreaking and worthy of comment. It should not be forgotten that Roosevelt would not permit photographs of himself to be taken in a wheelchair as it was assumed the American public had to be gulled into believing the President was fit, able-bodied and “normal” for him to be thought fit to lead them.

**2.12** And in our industry, the author H. G. Wells had to hide his dyslexic spelling, all of his life, swearing his secretaries to secrecy, because of a comparable stigma attached to people who can't spell being assumed to be uneducated or illiterate. Publishers would have been less inclined to read his manuscripts and grasp the many important things Wells had to say, if they thought he couldn't spell for toffee.

**2.13** Dyslexia is regarded as a disability nowadays, and a useful TUC paper on *How to Handle Dyslexia in the Workplace* was presented at the recent TUC Disability Conference, which a WGGB DIC delegate attended. However whilst social policy is gradually becoming more enlightened, the images used to represent disabled people are distinctly lagging behind. This is residual consciousness stemming from a time when most disabled people were locked away in institutional care, out of sight and out of mind, and most people, and most writers, hardly ever met them.

**2.14** Thus it can be understood how in the absence of contact with and knowledge of disabled people (and in the absence of a counter-culture of works by disabled writers), disabled people came to be portrayed as freaks, as misfits and as ogres, to feed the popular imagination. (Did we have no voice? Or could it not be heard?)

The British Film Institute and Disability Equality in Education have done a useful joint study of how disability is represented in Hollywood films, called *Disabling Imagery* and other such studies are needed as their representation in other media.

**2.15** But even lacking comprehensive studies, it is clear that negative stereotypes still abound of disabled people in the arts and literature and in popular entertainment. (Richard III and Quasimodo, two sides of the same coin). From Long John Silver, Blind Pugh & Captain Hook it is but a short step to Nasty Nick Cotton in *EastEnders*.

**2.16** This identification of disability, with evil, with self-hate and self-loathing, and with anti-social deviancy, as a result of hating society, is a leit-motif equivalent to racial stereotyping of black people as inferior, subordinate, deferential, less intelligent.

It has to be said, though, that portrayals of black and disabled children avoid these aspersions as to their character and tend to be sentimentalised. We can compare the choirs of black children in the Marx Brothers' films to Charles Dickens' Tiny Tim in *A Christmas Carol*, and whilst equally inappropriate as positive representations of black or disabled people, they are at least a counterweight to their/our being cast and castigated as outsiders to the decency of “normal” and white society.

**2.17** An analysis also needs to be made, linking disabling imagery to the various models of disability. Apart from the medical/charity/individual model which is the major protagonist the Social Model has to contend with, there is the Religious Model, which asserts that disability is a punishment from God for your sins (Nasty Nick's

previous behaviour towards his mother, Dot Cotton?) or, as a variant, disability is visited on the next generation for the sins of the parents (how Dot Cotton, deeply religious as she is, would see it, characteristically blaming herself for everything?) and then there is the Hoddle Model: the Gospel according to Glen Hoddle would have us believe it is our sins in a former life that cause us to be punished in this one.

**2.18** Plainly a Civil Rights of Disabled People perspective is needed to lift discussion of the issues out of this morass of internalisation of guilt, attribution of blame, and obsession with punishment into which use of other models of disability has plunged it.

But use of the Social Model of Disability in latenight BBC2 discussions, by itself will not do the trick, it needs to be translated into interesting documentaries and drama about real disabled people by writers aware of disability issues being given their head through commissioning and that in turn means that Drama Departments, script editors and producers need to be persuaded of the need to do this. (It would help if some of these posts were filled by disabled people!)

**2.19** In summary, not only do the media need to reflect the numbers of disabled people in society, but the way in which they do so needs to reflect the reality of their lives. It is this element that is missing from Government pronouncements on the progress being made or not being made by BCIDN towards disability equality.

And it is this element that facilitating work by disabled writers can help to supply. Just how useful are rallying calls for a new disabled character in *EastEnders*, if what we get is another Nasty Nick Cotton, perpetuating more negative views of disability?

**2.20** The BBC recently called for its staff to have 4% disabled people in its workforce, which is praiseworthy in that it raises the ante, and seeks to double the present numbers of disabled people it employs.

But the DRC were moved to comment that the BBC needed to specify that this target included 4% of senior managers being disabled people, or the corporate culture and ethos was not likely to change (eg about commissioning, we'd add) and our comment is to wonder whether the BBC proposes to ensure that 4% of its freelance workers (in which category writers almost invariably are) are disabled people or just 4% of its staff positions?

### **3. Some Overall Employment Issues**

**3.1** Perhaps the only industry in which disabled people are fairly represented and positive discrimination is actively encouraged, is the disability industry itself:

Self-created jobs as Disability Equality Trainers and the providing of services to disabled people by Disabled People's Organisations will often specify the job has to be offered to a disabled person, but even in the disability industry, the major charities employ very few disabled people and there are wrongs still to be righted.

The bright picture we just painted only exists in its self-organised sector, not in the industry as a whole. That challenge remains.

**3.2** Though many disabled people on benefits want to work, possibly part-time and from home, they are disadvantaged in obtaining it, sustaining it and retaining it.

The only impairment group in which 50% or more of its members are working is diabetics, but even there, diabetics experience what they regard as unreasonable restrictions on the kind of work they can do. Limits on their right to drive, if insulin-dependent, for example.

It is as if disability taints identity, in the manner of a stigma, and the disabled are seen as separate and different from the rest of the population, as regards their capacity for work and their reliability in doing it.

**3.3** It is argued, for example, that disabled people will need time off work for medical appointments, such as regular attendance at outpatient clinics. This kind of excuse was once offered by employers as an argument against women being offered jobs, as they would need months off work to have children, and all the pre-natal and post-natal medical appointments they would need would be time they weren't giving their all to the job the employer was paying them to do.

**3.4** It has to be said that these prejudices need to be reviewed, in the light of policies such as flexitime, job-sharing, paternity leave, and the view of progressive Human Resources Departments that the job needs to be fitted to the worker, not the other way around.

The Taylorism that informed and designed the assembly-line work practices of the Ford Motor Company in the days of mass-produced Model Ts is not held in respect any more, as it has been recognised that an alienated worker is a less productive worker.

Work needs to have variety and stimulus within it, and opportunities to gain new skills and knowledge through in-service training and professional development need to be provided if firms are to get the most out of their staff by harnessing their potential.

The issue we query of course is whether that view extends to the freelance workers or just to the staff.

**3.5** Further the prejudice is based on a myth, that disabled people are different from the rest of "us". Or rather, propaganda, by eugenicists and advocates of racial purity and ethnic cleansing.

The fact is that disability is a club that anyone can join. At any time. When they least expect it. There is no Us and Them about it. We are all one people.

It is estimated that 70% of people alive today will acquire a disability before they die, and in many cases, long before they die, such that they have many years ahead of them, in which they would want to remain productive and useful members of society, and not find themselves put on the proverbial scrapheap,

If only social policy on disability facilitated this.

**3.6** Yet research suggests that employee absenteeism is significantly lower among disabled workers and they tend to stay longer with their employers than their able-bodied counterparts.

This may in part be because they want to work rather than be thought of as parasitic idlers and because they readily acknowledge the difficulty of finding another employer willing to take them on. i.e. the lack of choice may well be a factor.

But it does argue the myths surrounding employing disabled people lack a foundation in reality and that these prejudices need confronting.

**3.7** The major psychological block disabled people face when contemplating work is the loss of benefits accompanying this: whether their efforts would be adequately recompensed if they go ahead: the fear they will be no better off for working.

#### **4. Some Employment Issues affecting Writers**

**4.1** No man is an island. Apart from book writers and short story writers and poets (for the page) whose work is more akin to journalists) all other writers (including poetry for performance) are, or when their work is accepted, become part of social production units in which what is written is then interpreted by other artists. Where illustrators or cartoonists are involved, book writers too, become interpreted in the way their work is presented to the public.

**4.2** The words do not stand alone, even though they are usually created by writers as solo producers of words (the exceptions being writing teams such as Galton & Simpson, group-devised theatre-in-education pieces and the improvisational techniques of the Commedia dell'Arte). The script of "*The Servant of Two Masters*" is normally attributed to Carlo Goldoni, but in fact all he did was write down the script that the Commedia troupe that created it ended up with, after some months on the road with the material. Early Marx brothers films were similarly given a try-out on the road to assess which lines got the biggest laughs.

**4.3** It has been accepted since the 1940s and the early days of CEMA. the Council for Education, Music and the Arts (the predecessor of the Arts Council), that the arts, especially innovative arts, need subsidy. Public subsidy has effectively replaced private patronage and the days of composers seeking appointments from the Crowned Heads of Europe as musicians to the Court will not return. Business sponsorship of the Arts is patchy, selective, project-minded and tends to lack an overview as to what needs encouraging.

**4.4** The arts are in many ways the Research & Development department of the entertainment industry, and no where more so, than the fringe and experimental companies working in small-scale theatre, where it is possible for writers to start their own company to get their plays produced (even though they can then end up spending more time running the company than getting any writing done).

Writers frustrated at getting 2-line rejection slips from theatre managements after 6 months of their scripts being read are always going to be attracted to forming a company in order to ensure productions occur. Words on the page reach nobody, they need to be put on the stage.

**4.5** Yet except in small-scale theatre, and low-budget film and video work, writers experience the arts and media industries as outsiders. As applicants, almost supplicants to it. Their work is essential to it: without a script the actor could not act, the costume designer would have no-one to dress and the lighting designer no-one to light... everybody else depends on a writer being used, yet writers rarely have any centrality in the industry. Four writers running the Liverpool Playhouse (former WGGB Chair Bill Morrison was one of these) for a period was a bold move but an atypical one.

**4.6** One of the main reasons that writers lack any central role in the industry is that whilst every production needs a writer, it does not have to be a living writer! Writers must be one of a very few groups of workers who can be scabbed on by their own dead colleagues. If every writer in the country were to picket every theatre in the country for better conditions, the theatres could brave out the strike by mounting non-stop Sophocles, Shakespeare and Sheridan and others long dead and out-of-copyright, and never have to pay out a penny in royalties.

**4.7** It was for this reason that the Theatre Writers Union (which merged into the WGGB) came up with the concept of The Dead Writers' Levy in the 1980s. This was propounded and advanced in a TWU publication, *Playwrights: An Endangered Species?* which featured a wistful looking giant panda on the cover, seemingly contemplating his or her situation as one of 1400 or so remaining on the planet. The idea of the Levy was that all theatres paid a royalty of 7.5% on all works produced. If the author was in copyright, it went to him or her, or the estate. If the author was out of copyright, it went into a kitty to commission new writing.

Thus the effect of the Dead Writers Levy, if and when implemented, would be that the financial disincentive for theatre managers to mount new work written by living writers would thereby be removed. Twenty years later, little has happened to make this a reality. In contrast, Public Lending Right, an idea similarly developed by writers, has gone from strength to strength.

**4.8** Turning to books, which is the other area where writers can achieve some limited control over production, and get on with it, (instead of eternally having to wait to first obtain the approval and permission of publishers) it needs to be said that there is a long and respected tradition of self-publication by writers, William Blake amongst them. Anias Nin taught herself how to typeset and print in order to get her work into print.

**4.9** The appeal of self-publication is considerable and it is akin to that described above of forming a theatre company to get one's plays produced, when ignored by theatre managers.

However there are skills involved, including the business skills of marketing and distributing the books when printed and bound. Not every writer may possess these

skills or feel confident about acquiring them. And as regards disabled writers, the sheer physical work of operating a printing press or a typesetting machine may just not be possible for them.

**4.10** Summarising, the situation is one of writers being marginalised from production, of not having a central role in it, though their role is essential to it. Where they do have the possibility of some control (in self-publication and small-scale theatre) it seems semi-inevitable that the print-run and audience size will be small and that the work will reach fewer people than the author would like it to (and as royalties depend on print run and on audience size) and there are inevitably consequences for the amount of the writer's income from her or his work.

**4.11** Actors get the same wage, regardless of if every seat in the house is sold, or the auditorium is half-empty, and regardless of if it is a 1,000-seater Main House theatre or a 100-seater Studio Theatre in the same building. But if a writer is on 7.5% of the Box Office, unsold seats and smaller auditoria depress his or her income. Public subsidy has made this guaranteed income possible for actors, but the benefits have not generally extended, as of right, to writers.

**4.12** There was for some years a Royalty Supplement Guarantee Scheme run by the Arts Council whereby for every £1 (up to £200) earned by the writer from the box office royalty a further £5 or £6 "top-up" was added on by the Arts Council, provided the management applied for this, and provided the Arts Council thought the script had merit. Compare the difference with actors. If the actor has the talent to get the job at audition, his wage is then guaranteed.

But getting a production offered him or her (the equivalent hurdle for a writer) does not of itself guarantee the minimum level of royalties thought appropriate by the Arts Council for a proved writer to earn from a production. (It did if the management is a revenue client of the Arts Council, as paying a minimum guaranteed royalty was a condition of subsidy, but not if the management was a project-at-a-time funded company. Then there were loopholes.

**4.13** As regards disabled writers, there is work to be done to create a level-playing field re attendance at rehearsals. WGGB contracts specify minimum fees for this, but the lack of reliable accessible door-to-door transport schemes for mobility-impaired writers and the fact that not every rehearsal space is accessible (we can anticipate that most theatres will be, from 1st October 2004, but not every play rehearses at the theatre at which it will be mounted) will tend to undermine this.

**4.14** Some rehearsal spaces are quite tatty and lacking in basic amenities (there being a toilet can be a luxury, never mind a disabled toilet!) and cannot be regarded as satisfactory working conditions in which good work can be done. The root problem here is that they are generally commercial lettings and most project-subsidised companies can't afford the rent the commercial managements would like to charge for their better suites of rooms, It is an old church hall or scout hut that they end up in as a result, with poor heating in winter.

**4.15** The case for investing in the plant necessary for good rehearsal spaces to be owned by subsidised theatre companies is overwhelming, yet in the context under

discussion here, the creation of new companies to develop new work, as in the Federal Theatre Project model, that would expand work opportunities for writers and actors, there will inevitably be something of a tension between creating jobs and creating good working conditions for those jobs.

**4.16** It is clear that Access Officers of local Councils can advise on accessible public halls as regards places to perform, but rehearsal space is "trickier": it is smaller, less likely to be listed as available for hire, is needed for weeks at a time, then not at all for another 2-3 months, less likely to have been upgraded to be disability-friendly to meet the requirements of the DDA.

**4.17** Of importance too, for writers is the space within the rehearsal complex where they will do their work, revising scenes to take account of problems identified in rehearsals. Will it be quiet? Will it be well-appointed/comfortable? e.g. desk and chair that suit his or her height and leg-room? Will the computer be compatible with his or her own system at home? We note that the door to the Writers Room in the rehearsal space at the Royal Court Theatre (the home of New Writing) was approached by having to take two-right-angled turns down narrow corridors, something a wheelchair user would find problematic.

**4.18** Of equal importance is the reprographic equipment housed at the rehearsal site, to make the multiple copies of the script that the cast, director, designer, composer, choreographer, stage manager all need, along with all updates to it. Will it be housed in the same room as the writer is to work? Is the writer to be expected to churn out the multiple copies himself/herself? Will other writers be popping in to use it, for another production? And how will all of this cacophony impact on the writer having a quiet working space in which to work?

**4.19** Peter Terson, a seasoned National Youth Theatre playwright (author of *Zigger Zagger*, about football followers), was well-known for his ability to disappear into a toilet and write a new scene on loo paper, on demand, but we can't all be expected to do that, and indeed, will there be a toilet at the rehearsal space, for this to be an option, anyway!? It is clear that once we create work opportunities, part and parcel of this is creating the conditions under which good work can be done, in which the needs of all employees are considered, and the particular needs of disabled employees are considered from the outset of the project. Workspaces have to facilitate disabled designers, set-builders, actors, writers and be built or acquired with the intention they be used by them. Otherwise diversity arguments have just fallen on deaf ears.

**4.20** Diversity considerations also inform the issue of the size of acting company needed by writers. This cannot be imposed by economic considerations if good work is to happen. Howard Brenton once remarked that his generation of writers had basically failed to build the epic stages they needed for their work. It needs a company the size of the National Theatre or the Royal Shakespeare Company to mount a play the size of Brenton's *The Romans in Britain* or David Edgar's *Destiny* or Peter Weiss' *Marat/Sade*. Reps just can't do it, and even the largest youth theatres suffer from the twin limitations of youthful casts and short production runs.

**4.21** Not every writer wants to write epic, historical material, some are perfectly content to write introspective examination of personal relationships with a cast of two,

Both are valid material, and as a writers' union, we would not want to decree any particular style, content or cast size to be universally desirable. We note however the enduring popularity of one-set two-handers in rep theatre, such as *When the Wind Blows* by Raymond Briggs and *Educating Rita* by Willy Russell (stage version, not the Caine/Walters film) and would observe that, fine plays as they are, this is not good for the employment of actors or for the development of writers.

**4.22** A theatre that is limited to small casts will tend to become a theatre that is limited to small concerns and the big issues of the day will pass it by, and the writers who want to write on the big issues of the day will not find it useful to their purposes. We cannot all write in the revue style of The National Theatre of Brent, and its particular style (almost a mannerism) of representing big events such as Zulu Wars by featuring moments with a cast of two.

**4.23** It is encouraging that a conference has been called by Equity and the Directors Guild for September 30th to discuss Ensemble Theatre at the Pit at the Barbican Theatre in London. With several European speakers (there is more ensemble theatre in Europe as most European countries subsidise the arts more heavily than we do, Mitterand was particularly progressive on this, whilst President in France) it is billed as a chance to change the face of British Theatre.

**4.24** As noted in 1.11, writers can achieve their best work in the context of an ongoing working relationship with an ensemble, where they can write parts for actors they have worked with several times previously. Plays then become "Made to Measure" to particular casts, not "Off the Peg" which may not always fit a particular group of actors. (How many male playwrights write an equal number of parts for female characters? Shakespeare certainly did not, as the employment of actresses was not an issue for him: they were all played by boys anyway.)

**4.25** Plainly progress on diversity and equalities issues can ripple through an ensemble company and inform the work of all those who work for it, and spread beyond it to other companies for whom those theatre artists then go and work. Given the collectivism at their core, ensemble companies tend to be driven by policy and not just as regards the plays that they mount, but the way in which those plays are made, cast and used. There is a similarity to the football world where large clubs have a squad from which a team for each match is chosen, and the cast for each show is similarly chosen from the ensemble, leaving several members "on the bench" for each production. This helps not only understudying, but also work with writers on future productions, rehearsed readings and try-out of new work. All of which is difficult in the majority of British theatres casting actors by the show, and they leave when it is over.

**4.26** We would not presume to say that writers should work for a company for a long time. They may want to write for several different companies. But what we would say is that continuity of employment, albeit for several managements, is important, both for a writer's morale, and for there being an adequate income in the writer's household, for parenting and mortgages to be affordable options. So career paths for writers that allow them the chance to write a T.I.E. show for an audience of 5 year-olds, a large-scale community-play or an adventurous picaresque for a Youth Theatre, needs to be devised, to ensure variety and stimulus are maintained.

**4.27** We are looking for something more substantial than a Job Creation Scheme, for a year after which the dole beckons again, in other words. To what purpose does a Government tackle under-employment in an industry other than to make it possible for more people to enjoy worthwhile, useful, and satisfying careers within it? And enable disabled people to have the same work opportunities as are meantime being created for their non-disabled colleagues?

**4.28** The arguments posed by both the need for large casts and the need for ensemble theatres, both point in the direction of a radical rethink being needed as to the kind of company in which new work would best flourish and therefore the form of intervention needed.

## **5. Recap and Recommendations:**

**5.1** Government intervention in a casualised industry is necessary to create employment. The Federal Theatre Project provides a model for the form that intervention might take. Sectors where growth is possible should be favoured and sectors where the number of jobs created is high for the public money invested in the project (and thus the theatre suggests itself).

**5.2** Only a general increase in employment can begin to bring disabled writers and actors within the industry in significant numbers. Measures to increase employment need to consider whether they create accessible employment for disabled people or not, and what would be needed so that they did so. Measures to create a level playing field need to run in parallel to job opportunity expansion schemes.

**5.3** Acknowledging that disabled people are mis-represented in the images presented of them in the arts and the media, another parallel strand is that questions as to whether the images of "normal" and "disabled" people being presented by projects funded by the intervention are consistent with equalities and diversity thinking.

**5.4** A study of subsidised theatre in Europe, and what's possible on higher levels of public subsidy of the Arts, should inform the planning, monitoring and review of the project. The evaluation of the project should ask the questions: what is being presented to whom, by whom, where is this taking place, and why? And could elements of this equation be usefully altered?

**5.5** Disabled theatre practitioners should be involved from the outset, both as regards the project as a whole and as regards the setting up of individual companies.

**5.6** Monitoring and evaluation should look at the take-up by the mainstream media of scripts, writers and performers, showcased in this Research and Development project.

**5.7** The intention, from the outset, should be to aim to consolidate the work created by provision of proper rehearsal spaces, so that ongoing accessible workplaces are created as part of the theatre infrastructure in this country. The financial planning involved will require injection of funds into Housing The Arts, so this can be achieved quickly.