

Support Graeae's training for young disabled theatremakers

by Promoted content -

Graeae's Ensemble programme has already helped 14 young people prepare for a career in theatre. Now, The Stage is supporting Graeae's fundraising efforts to ensure that a third year of this important scheme can go ahead. Find out how you can help...

Graeae, the UK's leading D/deaf and disabled theatre company, has been creating and championing bold, diverse and inclusive work for nearly 40 years.

Led by artistic director [Jenny Sealey](#), the London-based company has changed the face of theatre, through both its pioneering touring productions and its ceaseless [work to improve access across the industry](#).

In 2015/16, Graeae launched Ensemble, a unique artist development programme for six D/deaf and disabled young people passionate about a career in theatre. Eight more artists took part in Ensemble's second successful programme in 2017/18, bringing the total number of participants so far to 14.

Now, Graeae and The Stage have joined forces to fundraise in support of Ensemble's third year, aiming to provide more vital training for those who cannot get it elsewhere.

The programme, run in partnership with four leading drama schools, was initially set up to combat the historic access barriers D/deaf and disabled students face in education and beyond.

"Each time we run Ensemble, we are so acutely aware of there being so many more young, D/deaf and disabled people out there for whom the programme could be a real lifeline," says Graeae's creative learning director Jodi-Alissa Bickerton. "Without it, this talent that deserves to be seen could remain hidden away."

An exclusive 2017 study conducted by The Stage revealed that of 2,274 graduates polled from eight different drama schools, only 28 identified as having a physical impairment or sensory impairment, which equates to just 1.2% of all students.

That lack of representation is echoed in the wider industry. According to Arts Council England's published data, while 16% of the working-age population is disabled, just 1.6% of staff in arts organisations are. Graeae has been tireless in trying to change that.

Through Ensemble, professors, experts and acting coaches from [RADA](#), [LAMDA](#), [Rose Bruford College](#) and the [Royal Central School of Speech and Drama](#) work with experienced D/deaf and disabled facilitators and role models to deliver a comprehensive and innovative training course at Graeae's east London home.

The exchange of skills is a key part of the programme, according to Bickerton, helping to spread its influence across the theatre industry.

“It works both ways,” she says. “Our Ensemble artists get to train with some of the best acting coaches in the country, while the coaches get skilled up when it comes to improving access. They learn how to be more inclusive, then take that back to their drama schools.”

The programme, although still relatively young, is already providing essential support for the drama schools it involves.

“Ensemble has acted as a beacon of accessible practice for our teachers,” says Kathy Dacre, former director of learning at Rose Bruford. “Our staff have really enjoyed working with such talented and enthusiastic student actors and I hope the good work can continue and help to effect real change within the industry.”

“Over the past four years, Graeae has been incredibly generous sharing its expertise with us, and helping us to make our training more accessible,” says Rhiannon Fisher, LAMDA’s access manager. “Ensemble provides a unique opportunity to learn from each other and take positive strides within the industry.”

But Ensemble isn’t just about evolving the wider industry – its chief focus is on providing top-class training for a select group of D/deaf and disabled artists. And the testimonials of former graduates prove that it’s doing just that.

“I have grown more than I could have imagined,” says Ensemble graduate Josh King. “I have worked with some of the industry’s best and have broken down personal barriers. This was the best way for me to start my career as an actor. Graeae has helped me so much.”

“Ensemble has a level of patience, encouragement, support, understanding and space to breathe that’s extraordinary,” says another former participant. “This is a very high level of professionalism.”

The career success of Ensemble graduates points to the programme’s potency. Participants have made waves across the industry, from starring roles in Graeae’s own productions, to working backstage in top theatres, to acting in acclaimed plays.

Previous Ensemble artists include Jamal Ajala, who was the first Deaf actor to perform at London’s Royal Court as part of Debbie Tucker Green’s [Ear for Eye](#) last year; Kellan Frankland, who starred opposite Kathryn Hunter in [The House of Bernarda Alba](#) at Manchester’s Royal Exchange in 2017; and Hana Keegan, who is assistant director on *All My Sons*, which opens at the Old Vic in April.



Graduate Kellan Frankland taking part in the programme. Photo: Becky Bailey

However, for Ensemble to keep providing training and invaluable life skills for artists such as these, and to keep improving accessibility across the industry, Graeae needs to raise money.

“Although we get Arts Council funding to cover Graeae’s day-to-day running costs, we have to fundraise for each project we do, including our productions,” explains Bickerton. “Ensemble is totally reliant on charitable donations from trusts, foundations and individuals.”

“We need to raise a minimum of £20,000 through public giving in order to run Ensemble again,” she continues. “These donations are specifically for the programme. Every penny we raise will go directly to providing training for D/deaf and disabled artists.”

For more information about Ensemble, visit graeae.org/our-work/ensemble



How to donate to the Ensemble programme

To donate*, please visit easydonate.org/STAGE

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STAGE to 70191.*

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