

Firebird Theatre: A charter

This charter is to help anyone who works with us to know more about who we are, what is important to us and what we need and/or expect from others.

We work with what is written in the charter and will only add to/amend it after proper company discussion and agreement

What is Firebird?

It is a 'family of actors' who support each other on and off stage. The Company work as an ensemble: we work together. It is important to understand that we have been around for 25 years and have a lot of experience. Some people think they know better about us and this isn't always the case, you cannot beat talking and listening to each other.

Firebird is a theatre company first and foremost; it is not an activity centre, therapeutic group or a day centre. It is for people who are serious about and committed to making and performing theatre.

We also like to design and run workshops for disabled and non disabled children, young people and adults.

We also plan how to involve other disabled people in Firebird's activities, particularly people who are interested in becoming members of Firebird.

- We have business meetings too, we like to plan how Firebird works and what we want to do. We like to work closely with our Trustees and be able to tell them what we need; we do not want them to feel we are not interested in the business side of our Company. We want to work with people who plan **with us not** 'for' us.

We are a flexible and open theatre company and are happy to experiment and try out ideas about how we make theatre; this includes working with different people, making new working relationships and partnerships. We also want to be able to work with people we have worked with before and develop these relationships through collaboration and experimentation. With all the different people we work with it is important that we maintain

the last say in how our company is run, artistically and in other ways too.

We work under the social model of disability.

The social model of disability establishes that everyone is equal and demonstrates that it is society, which makes barriers that prevent disabled people participating and restricts their opportunities.

Here the notion of discrimination is key, in other words, disabled people do not face disadvantage because of their impairments but experience discrimination in the way we organise society. This includes failing to make education, work, leisure and public services accessible, failing to remove barriers of assumption, stereotype and prejudice and failing to outlaw unfair treatment in our daily lives.

Every disabled person can make their own list of the barriers that limit their participation. When these barriers and other people's negative attitudes are considered, it is easy to see how disabled people's opportunities are limited by a multitude of barriers.

Disability Rights Commission

Access:

We have individual and group access requirements. Sometimes it is difficult to explain what our needs are – we just need other people to be understanding and to listen to us.

Physical access for wheelchair users – these are specific requirements based on Penny's access needs but they also include general points for any wheelchair user and people with mobility impairments.

Level access to and inside:

the rehearsal / performance space
dressing rooms or an appropriate private area
fully adapted toilet for a wheelchair-user, an acceptable distance from the backstage area (i.e. not in another building and preferably inside (not outside) the same building)

OR ramps and lifts to all those areas if necessary.

Blue badge parking outside the venue – Penny's wheelchair hoist needs plenty of room to work and she needs the door opened wide

to be helped in and out of the car so ordinary parking spaces are often not an option.

OR a dropping off point for unloading wheelchair and any necessary equipment for the performance

Everyone in Firebird needs good physical access for rehearsals and performances

Access needs specific to the Company as a whole

Time

We need to be given as much time as possible for nearly everything we do:

For making decisions: we cannot and must not make decisions on the spot. We need time to get the information we need, we need time to discuss that information before we make a decision.

For meetings: last minute arrangements or dates for meetings or invitations are not good for us. We need time to plan, make arrangements for support and transport, talk with carers about all of these. We need as much notice as possible for everything we do: dates, rehearsals, meetings, performances

For making performances: we need to have time to make our work and own it. We need time to meet collaborators and talk to them about our ideas – one-off meetings are not always enough. We need time to work with things like props before a performance. We want more time in a performance venue prior to performance; we would also like a rehearsal AFTER we have had a tech rehearsal so we have time to acclimatise ourselves to stage, lights, set, sound, etc.

We need time to produce good theatre.

Last minute plans/arrangements are not good for us.

Support

We want people to work with us and for us rather than be in charge or make decisions about Firebird. Workers, supporters need to ask us not tell us, not assume anything about us.

We think that workers should be as committed as we are to working with Firebird and its members.

Comfort and security – we like our meetings to be regular and consistent, we like to keep to the same venue, same day and times as much as possible – this helps us plan our lives and what we do. We like to have drinks and biscuits in our session – we make a contribution to this.

We like people who work with us to get to know us, our names, who we are

Transport

Transport is an issue for all of us in one way or the other – we need support to plan and make journeys;

Some of us are worried about travelling at night – we need support when making a journey in the evening/night.

Information

We need good clear information and things explained to us clearly (check we have understood) and people being clear about what is needed

A timetable is important for us: it gives us dates and times of meetings, rehearsals, performances and it is a way of keeping in touch with our families and supporters. If they have a copy of our timetable then they can help support our commitment to Firebird. It is always good for us to have written information so we can share it with people at home

A newsletter is also a very good way of keeping in touch with our families and supporters; the AGM is a good way of getting people together, including our families and supporters

Access for our audiences

We like to make work that is as accessible as possible for our audiences

We are very interested in making relaxed performances

We like to include BSL in our performances, for every performance if possible, also audio description

Other important Firebird notes

Firebird is about making friends and good contacts inside and outside the company

We have ground rules to follow – these help us to keep focussed (see Appendix 1)

We need good supporters to help us achieve what we want to achieve.

We work and meet one day a week, at the moment a Monday suits us well.

Some of us are happy to give more time to Firebird but this must be planned carefully. For example, a school's workshop or taster workshops for new people, or meetings with other people, or visits – we would not want these extra days to happen all the time but as and when they were needed.

Leading up to a performance we need to plan for extra rehearsals, sometimes 2 weeks, including Production week.

We like workers to work with our ideas and help us develop them and our skills – this doesn't mean we aren't interested in workers' ideas, we are, but there must be a proper balance

We need a director/someone to keep us focussed and put our ideas together to make a script – to provide a structure to our sessions

We need to meet regularly to keep us going – this helps our families or carers to understand we have a commitment to Firebird.

We need to perform the theatre we make; this makes sure that people know we are a theatre company.

How we work together

We talk about our new performance – if we are working from a script (The Tempest), we pull it apart, deconstruct it and work to understand it for ourselves then we put it back together again when we have an understanding of the story.

We adapt the script to make it accessible for us and our audiences.

We are very supportive of each other on and off the stage. We are very collaborative.

There is no 'star' of the show, we all have a part to play and we bring our own skills to our work.

When we devise new work (Breadhorse, Sharing the Stars, A Spark and a Beating Heart), we build a script from a long process of experimentation, writing and collaboration. Everything moves at our pace.

WE make a story/script to fit us; we do not try to get us to fit the script. How we work from a script or devise our own script is often is often similar

We are very happy to work with new people.

We like learning new ways to work and developing our skills.

Other theatre companies are always changing their company members; we don't do this and we think this makes us stronger because we know we can rely on each other performance after performance.

We are all equal, supportive, a 'family'.

We educate people and accept that not all people are tolerant but we try not to let that affect us.

Appendix 1

Our list of rules

We have made a list for ourselves about how we work together, how we work as a group; it is a sort of a list of rules or reminders for ourselves.

How Firebird sessions work: written in January 2014, amended 15th August 2016:

We meet on Mondays between 11am and 4pm. everyone tries to arrive on time.

We are a theatre company of disabled actors; we are an associate company of Bristol Old Vic. Firebird Theatre is a commitment we all want to make.

Everyone who wants a drink and biscuits during a session pays 30p (we tend to have at least 2 coffee breaks in a session)

We do everything we can not to miss a session on a Monday because it is hard for everyone if someone is missing.

- We try to make appointments on other days NOT on a Monday
- We try to keep our Mondays clear for Firebird

We turn off our phones or put them on silent – messages can be checked at coffee breaks and at lunchtime

We all provide our own lunches for our sessions

If we organise a visit to see a show at Bristol Old Vic or somewhere else and you book a ticket, you must pay for your ticket whether you turn up for the show or not.

The way we work together makes us a success as a theatre company

We try not to bring personal problems into a Firebird session, it is important for us to remember Firebird is a theatre company and we need to focus on our theatre work when we are together.

We try to behave professionally at all times, that means not overdoing the hugs and kisses. We must remember that we are an associate company of Bristol Old Vic and we do not want people to get wrong ideas about us. We need to be appropriate when greeting each other and when we meet other people, whether we know them or not

We give people SPACE, physically and emotionally; we must act responsibly.

We ask first; we do not do something to other people without asking. If someone asks you to stop doing something they do not like, or asks you to give them space, do what they ask. By the same token, if you do not like what someone is doing to you, or if they are not giving you the space you need, ask them politely to stop.

Bullying will not be tolerated in Firebird. (People who work with us often comment on how nice we are to each other. We must make sure that we live up to that compliment and behave well with each other – no putting pressure on anyone to do anything they don't want to do, or any kind of bullying)

This is how we like to behave in meetings and in our sessions: one person to speak at a time; hands up if you want to speak; listen to each other; ask when things are not clear; it is OK to disagree but please do it politely. Try to give everyone a turn in everything we do; share and let everyone have a say.

Workers generally attend meetings that happen outside a session, on other days in the week. If possible then a member or members of the Company should also attend that meeting. This is good practice and shows people on the outside that Firebird belongs to the Company artists and we are interested in everything that is said about it and things must not happen without us.

We must also speak up at meetings so that our voices are heard. We know that a worker is there to support us and to say what we think but it makes it stronger if we can also speak up for ourselves. We know it is difficult for some people to do this but for those of us who can then we should!

Whilst the Old Vic is closed then we must try to keep in good touch with the Theatre by holding meetings there; going to see plays and trying to organise the odd rehearsal there now and then and when they can accommodate us.

NOTE: these are just guidelines, we can add to them as and when necessary.

Appendix 2

New members

The main criteria for becoming a member of Firebird is that you really want to make theatre and you can work with the Company, become part of the ensemble.

A lot of this process has been determined by lack of resources and capacity, however there are key elements that work well and determine whether a new person is really interested in joining Firebird and will be able to work as part of the ensemble.

In the past: people who are interested in becoming new members of Firebird Theatre are asked to fill-in an *Expression of interest* form (this needs reworking, it is not very accessible as it stands), they are then invited to meet the Company informally, have a drink, ask questions and find out more about Firebird from the Company members. After this meeting the company decide whether or not it is appropriate to offer the person some workshop sessions with Firebird. These workshops sometimes involve a few new people or just one or two new people and are always about working alongside and with the Company members. After an agreed period of time, the Company (and workers) decide whether new people would benefit from more workshops or are not yet ready to join Firebird. If the latter decision is made, a letter is sent to people to say that the workshops have come to an end.). If people are invited to stay for more workshops then these become audition workshops and a final decision is made at the end of this period.

Now: we think the Expression of interest form still works well as a way of new people making initial contact with Firebird but it is very difficult now for new people to join the Company for workshops, they have to hit the ground running. It is also difficult for the Company to support new people because they are busy with

planning/doing a tour...they are in mid production. So, we would like to pilot taster sessions for new people, as separate from the Company's regular Monday session. Our plan is that these would be led by a Company member working with a support person.