

# Lung Ha's Theatre Company – An Introduction

✘ Edinburgh has been a hub of all things theatrical for decades, and 2011 looks set to be another exciting year. One organisation offering something a little bit different is [Lung Ha's Theatre Company](#), who provide opportunities for people with learning disabilities to become actively involved in the performing arts. We spoke to company manager, Michael Fraser, to find out more:

“It all began in 1984 when Richard Vallis and Pete Clerke organized a one-off show starring actors with learning disabilities. They had both worked with disabled support services, so they pooled their contacts in early 1985 produced Lung Ha's Monkey, a play based on a Chinese Fable. The company was originally called Lung Ha's Monkey Theatre, but we've since dropped the 'monkey' part.

It wasn't until 1991 that Lung Ha's became a theatre company proper – until then it was a case of Richard calling in favours and getting volunteers in for shows, which couldn't really continue indefinitely. The advantage of being a 'proper' company meant we could register as a charity, so we could apply for funding.

There are currently 23 actors in the company, and we have a maximum limit of 25. The group used to be much larger, but the actors didn't get as much out of it when there were so many members, so we decided to cut back. We hold auditions every year for people to get involved, so within the current group 16 have been part of it for a while, and 7 are new members. We publicise auditions through local area network coordinators, and by word of mouth, which we've found to be the most effective tool.

In terms of recruiting actors, our policy is completely discriminatory in the sense that everyone has some sort of learning disability. Meanwhile, technical staff tend to be industry professionals, so whether they have a disability has no direct bearing on whether we use them. In an ideal world we would love to expand the company to give disabled people the opportunity to learn technical skills as well as getting involved in the acting side, but it comes down to funding. We don't have our own space, which limits what we can do. Still, that's certainly something we aspire to in the future.

A huge part of what we do is changing people's expectations, both of what the actors in the company feel they can achieve and in terms of public perceptions. We invite critics to all of the shows and conduct audience surveys after each one to see how we're doing. Last year we won a CATS (Critics' Award for Theatre in Scotland) award for best ensemble production in a performance of Huxley's Lab, which we did with [Grid Iron](#). We were up against the whole of the rest of the Scottish theatre community, so it was a great feeling.

Our work doesn't focus on one particular age group, although none of the company is under eighteen. We sometimes go into schools to give them sneak previews of our shows, which is great on a practical level because we can get feedback on how things are working. Better to find out whether a humour piece is funny before putting it on the stage!

I hope this doesn't sound patronizing, but the biggest challenge we probably face is proving to ourselves that we can do anything – that the more hard work you put in, the more you get out of it. It's all very well telling people about these awards and our past body of work, but ultimately you're only ever as good as your next production. Over the past three or four years we've upped the ante and surprised ourselves by just how much we have achieved.

Our next performance is going to be Around The World in 80

Days. It has been taken from a Finnish version of the text by Bengt Ahlfors, which was translated by Alan Goodson and then adapted by the Scottish playwright Douglas Maxwell. Music is an integral part of all our shows – not having the music would feel like we were missing a lead character! – so we’re going to have an original score performed live by [Pete Vilk](#). He goes along to rehearsals to get the measure of the show and then writes it to be in keeping with what will be going on. Dance is also very important to our shows because some people have little or no verbal communication but can still express themselves through movement, so choreographer [Christine Devaney](#) will be on hand at all the rehearsals as well.”

### **Around The World In 80 Days**

[Platform](#), The Bridge, Glasgow

**31st March 7.30pm**

**1st April 11am**

[Traverse Theatre](#), Edinburgh

**6th April 7.30pm**

**7th April 2pm & 7.30pm**