



Babes in Arms Relaxed Performances

This is a resource aimed to support touring theatre companies and venues to provide 'babes in arms' relaxed performances for their audiences. Making shows accessible to new parents and making the experience of bringing a baby into a show as positive as possible for the company, the venue and the audience.



Credit: Tyneside Cinema bringing in baby screenings Photographer: Steve Lomas

“I love theatre but I didn’t get to go to a show for 12 months after my baby was born. I didn’t feel like I could” -mother and theatre goer

Introduction

New parents are often unable to attend theatre performances as they are busy caring for their new baby. If they are attending theatre it is usually performances made for children not for adults. Many parents, especially mothers (who may have previously been regular theatre goers) can feel disconnected with the theatre scene once having a baby. This is often due to the fact the time shows are usually scheduled does not work for them, accessibility can be an issue and often they are told they are simply not allowed to bring a baby into the auditorium to see a show unless it is a piece specifically for young children and babies.

This resource has been created by Curious Monkey after a tour of ‘preggers’, a show that included babes in arms relaxed performances at six UK theatre venues. It has been informed by feedback and discussions with artists, venues, audiences and parents who were involved with or attended the show and sessions held at Devoted and Disgruntled and Mothers Who Make.

“Thank you for welcoming me and my baby, it was so great to have an experience that was for me where my baby was welcome.” -‘preggers’ audience member

Programming

Deciding which shows are suitable for babes in arms performances is totally subjective as parents and carers will have different tastes in the kind of theatre they like to watch. The idea is that shows are for the adults not for the baby. There is a lot on offer for babies and young children from various activity groups to performances but not so much that is for the parents themselves. There may be shows that seem more obvious to offer a babes in arms show e.g. shows about pregnancy and parenthood - but it is also important to consider that parents do not necessarily always want to talk about or listen to stories about parenthood, they may appreciate something completely different as well. Within a season a venue could offer a few contrasting shows with babes in arms performances, encouraging an audience to come back and see different things. A theatre goer with a baby may opt to see shows they might not have necessarily chosen had it not been for the babes in arms offer, exposing audience members to a wider range of programming. There may be some shows that do seem inappropriate for a babes in arms offer eg: very loud and raucous shows, or those with multiple sudden noises or gunshots

“We are continuing to program between two and three babes in arms shows each season now” -venue programmer

Practical considerations for venues

Many people's perceptions of an auditorium full of babies is that it will be loud, hectic, distracting – full of chatter and babies crying. From our experiences of putting on babes in arms shows, the majority of babies are either sleeping, feeding quietly or completely mesmerized by the lights and sound of the performance. There are moments of gurgles and babbles and some cries but parents and carers are generally very good at knowing how to keep their baby content. If babies are very distressed or distracting most parents and carers are very aware when it is the right time to leave and take them out of the auditorium for a while. Babies are very perceptive and pick up on the vibes the parent or carer is giving out. If they are relaxed and comfortable the baby is also likely to be relaxed and comfortable. There are many easy things staff at theatres and companies can do to help parents and carers relax, creating the best experience for them.

Parents or carers may be nervous about a first trip to the theatre with their new baby – they may be sleep deprived, they may have had a difficult journey, they may be still getting used to parenthood, they may be worried about how it will go, if their baby will 'behave', if their baby's nap will happen at the right time. By being flexible, giving permission to parents and carers to do what they need and asking what help or support is needed can make their experience really positive and they will want to come back.

Flexibility

The most important thing to consider is that a babes in arms performance will be a bit different and may need to deviate from the usual practice, rules and structures in place in a venue. Allowing for flexibility is so

important.

Giving Permission

Actively giving permission to parents to be there with their babies and letting them know they are welcome will make a huge difference to their experience. Giving permission for them to be able to do whatever it is they need to do to enable them to attend is very empowering for parents and carers.

Asking

Asking a parent or carer what support or help they need to attend the theatre when they book or when they arrive is really appreciated, rather than waiting for them to ask staff for help - they might not want to 'be a hassle' or 'cause problems'

"There was a very positive response from the audience. The mums were so happy to be included in the theatre's programming" -front of house staff

Timing of the show

Most theatre tends to start at babies' bedtime. Talk to your audience to find out when is the best time for babes in arms shows. Daytime is usually best but not too early in the morning - It sometimes takes a while to get organized to leave the house. Two shows a day can allow for people to work around nap times.

Journey to the Theatre

It is useful to consider that the journey from home to the theatre may not be straightforward for all parents and carers. Leaving the house, travelling by public transport, stopping for feeds or unexpected nappy changes or finding parking might be a challenge. Any support or information a venue or company can provide beforehand to make the journey smoother can be really helpful. Parents may arrive late for various reasons or may take a while to get into the auditorium and get settled - being flexible on start times and late comers policy is important.

Box Office

For a babes in arms performance you will need more space in the auditorium for bags, buggies, babies to stand/sit on a seat or the floor and for parents or carers to stand and move around. You will need to sell at a lesser capacity than the usual number of seats available to accommodate this. Babes in arms relaxed performances often need to be subsidized. Train box office staff on giving all the necessary information to those booking and talking through how to get there, access needs, flexibility, latecomers and age appropriateness will help parents/carers to feel confident in attending (see further sections for details)

"Performing to a theatre full of mums and mesmerized babies was one of the most powerful experiences I've ever had as a performer. They were amazing!" -performer

Front of House

“We put a table in the toilets, so there was a space near a sink to do changes. Our staff were on hand to assist parents with buggies down the stairs. We also recommend bringing babies in slings if appropriate due to the venues access issues.” -front of house

“I’ve had to change nappies on dirty theatre floor corridors due to lack of facilities, but at least she has been welcome” -mum and theatre goer

There are many simple things that a front of house team can do to improve the experience of parents or carers arriving at the theatre for a show. It is important to train front of house staff so they are prepared to support parents arriving at the venue. The following are a list of needs a venue or company can help to provide to support parents/carers.

Buggy Parks - Make sure there is a safe space for pushchairs/prams to be stored during the show. Some people may want to take their buggy/pram into the auditorium. Consider there will be potentially be parents with double buggies.

Baby changing facilities - This may be adding to your current facilities if a theatre does not already have changing facilities. Include nappy bins big enough to cater for multiple nappies.

Facilities to warm up milk - FOH / bar staff can be on hand to help with this if required

“Not much help was needed just physical assistance getting buggies in and out of the building, due to the unique situation of being a basement venue.” -front of house staff

“Accessibility is always an issue for me and other multiple mums, finding space for the double buggy” -mum and theatre maker

Accessibility - Consider the journey from the front door to the auditorium. Are there steps or narrow corridors/doorways that people will need help to push/carry buggies or other things? Often parents and carers need to bring a lot of stuff!

Break out space - Make sure there is ample space before and after the show for parents and babies to hang out. You'll often find they will stick around and order coffees and food if venues offer it. Also if people need to come out during the show that there is somewhere for them to go.

“All parents and babies were happy. People stay after the shows, for tea and cake and chats.” -Venue staff

“They were brilliant. FOH staff brought me water whilst I was breastfeeding and there's spare nappies/wipes in the baby changing room!” -mum and theatre goer

In the Auditorium

Space – Allow space on the floor or empty seats so babies that don't want to be held the whole time can stand/sit. Provide space (and permission) for parents/carers to stand, move about and jiggle in the aisles or at the back. Some babies may be sleeping in a buggy or pram and it is easier for the parent or carer to bring them into the show without having to transfer them. Create or hold some space next to some seats for buggies/prams to be brought in.

Easy exit/re-entrance – Allow audience members in and out of the performance space during the show, signpost the exits and prop the door open or have an usher on hand who can open the door for people if they need to leave and make sure they are allowed back in easily. Keep the house lights up during the show to a level where people can see to move around and go in and out.

Food and drink - Allow brought-in bottles/snacks for babies to be eaten in the performance space. Sometimes this means being flexible with the 'usual' rules.

"The relaxed atmosphere was what made it great" -mother/audience member

Production

When making a show and deciding whether it is suitable for babes in arms performances it's worth thinking about whether there are things you could consider from the beginning and incorporate into the creative development of the show or things that can be adapted slightly to make it more suitable later.

Age/development - It's important to be strict about the age or stage of development of the babies who will attend with their parent/carer. Performing to a room of parents with babies that are not yet very mobile is very different from performing to a room full of toddlers who are able to get on stage and want to join in. Consider the performers when making a call on age/stage of development. Also it is important to consider how much a child can understand, there comes a point where a young child's comprehension is too high for them to just enjoy colour, light, sound and atmosphere but too young for an adult story. This may cause distress to some young children. Many people will ask if they can bring toddlers, consider why the show may not be appropriate for them and communicate this clearly to parents/carers.

"You need to consider carefully who the work is aimed at and suitable for, then be rigorous about communicating that in marketing and in person. It might mean you sell less tickets but in my experience performances can otherwise become muddy and unsatisfying" -Theatre Maker

Introduction/set up - The set up to a relaxed performance is perhaps the most important thing to consider, this will create the relaxed environment to make the show a success and make people feel comfortable. One (or more) of the performers (or someone else from the company or venue) must let the audience know at the beginning of the show that it is a relaxed performance, explain what this means and give them permission to

do what they need to do. Knowing beforehand it is ok to stand or move about and jiggle, to eat or drink, or to go in and out will help to put the audience at ease and feel free to do what they need. That the performers will continue regardless and that it is ok if a baby makes some noise.

Sound – Are there any sudden or shocking loud noises in the sound design? Can these be adapted or taken out for babes in arms performances. Bringing the master level for sound in the piece down slightly for the whole show for a babes in arms performance is also a good idea.

House Lights – Keep the house lights slightly up during the show to allow for people to move around safely if they need to get up or go in and out.

Distressing Content – Are there any lines of dialogue/ action that are likely to be particularly distressing for new parents? This is something to be discussed that may or may not be relevant to the show’s content. For example during the babes in arms performances of Curious Monkey’s ‘preggers’ there was a line about a dead baby that we decided to alter slightly.

“What I liked most was that whatever noise and disruption from the audience, the actor just carried on totally in role as if we weren’t disturbing her at all” -mum and theatre goer

Performers

“It was such a joy performing for mums and babies. They were a total delight and I felt so connected to them and at ease because of the relaxed nature of the show” -theatre maker/performer

Performing in a relaxed performance can be the most wonderful experience if all the right things are in place and the performers and adults and babies in the audience feel comfortable. The performer can feel more connected to the audience as they may have spoken to them already (as themselves - out of character) during the setup/introduction. If there is a small number in the audience the experience will feel more intimate and with the house lights slightly up you are likely to see your audience and be able to get eye contact more easily. There will inevitably be a mixture of moments of total silence and mesmerized babies and parents mixed with moments where people are moving about and potentially noises or grumbles. Sometimes babies have an effect on each other and one may set another one off babbling or crying, but usually this is in waves and will settle down again. During the set up it is good to let the audience know that the performers will carry on whatever happens but there is the possibility they may get distracted and lose their concentration for a moment but they will do what they need to to pick it back up again. In a relaxed performance, the relaxed nature means we can be open about the fact that performers are human and may get distracted and be open to that. Some of the unexpected interactions during relaxed performances can be some of the most brilliant and memorable moments of a show. Some shows that use direct address or where the performers are playing themselves and not ‘in character’ as such may work more naturally as a relaxed performance as the performers are already having a dialogue with the audience.

“It was much easier than I imagined staying in the zone and in the moment. During the run the only show that was difficult was one with older children that were very mobile - they got on stage and tried to steal my props during a very emotional speech!” -performer.

Audience Development/Marketing

Building a regular audience for babes in arms shows takes time. This may be due to the audience being transitory, as once babies are not 'babes in arms' anymore, say 12-18 months old then it's not appropriate for parents or carers to attend anymore with their baby. A show for toddlers or those who move around is a whole different set of considerations.

Saying this there are 1000s of women giving birth every day, they are not a minority, there are plenty of parents and carers out there as potential audience, it's reaching them that needs a bit of effort and work. The best ways are through 'word of mouth' and personal recommendation or by building long term relationships with local groups that new parents access. Theatres found that marketing through traditional routes was not very effective, but that press and building relationships worked wonders. Social media and visiting groups in person to meet mums was most successful. Good contacts can be made through networks such as NCT (National Childbirth Trust), Sure Start, Antenatal groups (including pilates and yoga classes), breastfeeding support groups (La Leche League or the Breastfeeding network).

"Offering ticket deals through NCT worked for us" -box office staff

Useful Links

Curious Monkey - We are very happy to talk to you about our experiences of putting on babes in arms relaxed performances in more detail. Find our contact details here:

<http://curiousmonkeytheatre.com/>

Include Arts - lots of research and training about relaxed performances

<http://www.includearts.com/relaxed-performances/relaxed-performance-project-2013/>

Pregnant then screwed- Resource to support women with maternity rights

<http://pregnantthenscrewed.com/>

PIPA (Parents in Performing Arts) - current research to create best practise charter for parents with caring responsibilities working in performing arts. <http://www.pipacampaign.com/>

Mothers Who Make - Mothers who Make is a growing national initiative aimed at supporting mothers who are artists with regular meetings where children are welcome.

www.improbable.co.uk/workshops/mothers-who-make/

www.facebook.com/groups/1484128908536006/?fref=ts

Family Arts Campaign - a large scale, national programme to increase levels of arts engagement by families.

They have developed a set of Family Arts Standards, addressing a need for clear guidance on how best to welcome families to arts organisations. Check: <http://www.familyarts.co.uk/family-arts-standards/>
www.familyarts.co.uk/

ProCreate Project - An agency aiming to provide practical help and financial support to enable artists to continue producing work during pregnancy and motherhood
www.procreateproject.com/

Cultural ReProducers - an evolving group of active cultural workers who are also parents - making the art world a more inclusive and interesting place by supporting arts professionals raising kids.
www.culturalreproducers.org/

Theatre Parents- An informal Facebook group of parents working in theatre
www.facebook.com/groups/TheatreParents/



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