

People with learning disabilities often face being stigmatised. Meet Frankie Clifford, the 73-year-old Derry-based actor and singer who is helping to change all that.

Frankie has long been a member of the Lilliput Theatre Company. It is a working theatre troupe that is based full time at Derry's iconic Playhouse, two former schools - and Grade II listed buildings - which were transformed into one of Ireland's foremost theatres. In 2009 the Playhouse reopened after an award-winning refurbishment, supported by HLF.

All 24 members of the Lilliput Theatre Company have learning disabilities and their shows are not only entertaining and confidence-boosting, they are also helping to challenge stigma and change attitudes towards disability.

Accessible to all

The Playhouse set out with a simple philosophy that it should be for all and accessible to all. The success of Lilliput, which has toured in Germany and Poland as well as putting on a show at Northern Ireland's parliament at Stormont, is testament to how seriously that mission is carried through in practice.

Niall McCaughan, chief executive of the Playhouse, is passionate about how Frankie and his colleagues in Lilliput have contributed to the Derry arts scene. He points out that the company was based in the building even before it was renovated. He says: "Their members have seen the transformation made to our building with the assistance of Lottery funding but equally, their importance to us as residents is unmatched in terms of their creative output.

"The lives of Lilliput members have been transformed not just by our more user-friendly building, disability access and services, but their own confidence, skills development and creativity have been nurtured and encouraged, building their great work on our stage as a producing and touring theatre company."

> “Everyone seems to know Frankie – going into town together can take ages because of all the people stopping to chat with him.”
>
> - Shona McEleney, care assistant

Frankie remembers the building before the transformation. “It was so cold that one girl used to bring a hot water bottle to sit on – and you should have seen the toilets!” he laughs.

Now, thanks to National Lottery players, the building has been totally transformed into one of Ireland’s most exciting and vibrant arts spaces - all of which are fully accessible. Frankie, who is a wheelchair user, and his fellow actors use the dance studio as their rehearsal space.

He loves it.

“It’s fantastic, we all look after each other and I really enjoy it,” he says.

Frankie is a popular singer and his work has made him very well known in the city.

Lilliput have toured schools and colleges with a series of sketches called “Extraordinary Scenes from Ordinary Lives” which highlights the types of discrimination adults with learning disabilities face today, which is based on members’ own experiences.

They have also written and performed a series of sketches based on how people with learning disabilities are treated in hospital situations. The "Hospital Care Guidance" sketches have been used as a training aid for education and equality



Frankie Clifford and his care assistant Shona McEleney prepare for the next production at the Playhouse Theatre