

Enabling through the creative arts



Engaging students with special needs in the creative arts is the aim of new charity Decibels. At the helm, [Ken Carter](#) has been instrumental in forging links with a unique degree course at the University of Reading



Through the inspiring and pioneering work of Deafax over the last quarter of a century, Decibels has emerged as a new complementary organisation which aims to promote the education and training of children and young people with a variety of special needs and disabilities, including deafness, for the purpose of enabling them to learn, appreciate and enjoy sound, music, the arts and drama through the use of technology. It seeks to advance this work by providing facilities, equipment, research and a spirit of innovation and incorporating technological developments with a view to including young people in the community and the musical and artistic worlds.

As Decibels is based on the same university campus as the Theatre Arts, Education and Deaf Studies (TAEDS) BA (Hons) course, a very positive and creative relationship is developing between them through the interaction of Cathy Wardale (Programme Director of TAEDS), Simon Floodgate (former Programme Director of TAEDS) and Sannah Gulamani (Research Co-ordinator of Decibels) and myself as founder of Deafax and Decibels.

Last summer the TAEDS course celebrated its silver anniversary. It was designed initially as a one-year certificate for deaf actors and Teachers of the Deaf to develop acting and drama workshop skills, based at Bulmershe College of Higher Education (later the Institute of Education, University of Reading). Through a lot of dedicated work, Daphne Payne and Simon Floodgate were instrumental in taking this course and making it a highly acclaimed one. It has

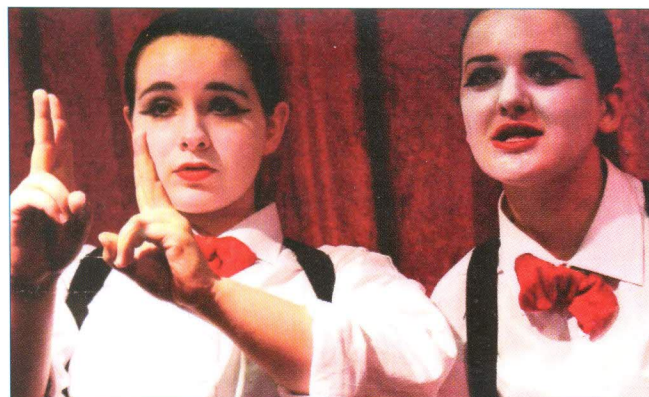
now evolved into an internationally unique degree and is the only theatre and education programme for deaf and hearing students in the UK and indeed across Europe.

On this special anniversary, students, alumni, current and former staff gathered for refreshments before touring the new TAEDS building at the London Road Campus (Institute of Education, University of Reading). This was followed by an emotional and outstanding cabaret of signed poems and songs, monologues and performances ranging from current students' work and showcases by alumni to a rendition of Dylan Thomas's *Fern Hill* by Ian Stewart, a former lecturer on the programme and original acting member of the British Theatre of the Deaf in the 1960s and 70s.

The present deaf and hearing students on the three-year programme study drama, theatre and the skills required in teaching and leadership roles, within a Total Communication environment. With emphasis on the physical and visual aspects of performance and the needs of deaf people, students develop theatre-making skills and create performance work for integrated audiences, also delivering drama workshops in mainstream hearing support units and schools for the deaf. Students have the additional opportunity to gain Signature-accredited professional qualifications in British Sign Language.

The course incorporates a work placement, which students can arrange to match their own field of developing interest. TAEDS has numerous links with





professional theatre companies and practitioners such as Graeae Theatre, Deafinitely Theatre and Pegasus Theatre, as well as with professionals in the education, communication and medical fields associated with the subject.

Decibels is planning to offer work placements and consultancies to present students. All the TAEDS students were recently involved with a Decibels workshop through its current project, Sign Along with Music, which is funded by the BBC Children in Need and orchestrated by Sannah Gulamani. As it was such a great success, other workshops are being arranged in 2013 by Cathy Wardale.

As a result of having to recruit professional trainers, Decibels was able to offer part-time consultancies to Lucy O'Keeffe and Laura Goulden, who are both former TAEDS students and who are now running the Handprint Theatre. This company creates theatre that is accessible to both deaf and hearing

integrated audiences, not segregated but allowing all to see performances that communicate across language, disability or culture. They use puppetry, physical theatre, British Sign Language and a combination of anything they can get their hands on, with the company striving to make a new style of theatre. It is my intention to gain support, in a variety of ways, and especially through fundraising and social media, for the pioneering and highly creative work being undertaken by the TAEDS course and the Handprint Theatre.

The Decibels trustees, directors, advisers and friends also want to integrate their growing number of projects, such as KidzAloud, Drama & Technology, Shakespeare 4 Kidz, Colour Music, Sign Along with Music, Circle of Sound, Seeing Music, Making Music, Visual Music, Art/Design and ICT, Music through Technology, Recognising Speech, Strictly Latin, with TAEDS, Handprint Theatre and other collaborative partners, including hearing support units, schools for the deaf and other schools for children with disabilities and special educational needs.

With the financial support of Awards for All (The Big Lottery), Decibels has worked with a number of schools over the past few years to deliver KidzAloud workshops with autistic pupils, focused on the Olympics 2012. The aim was to develop the pupils' own creative outlook and perspectives on the Games to enable positive national recognition and an attempt at inclusiveness. Short musical pieces using *Soundbeam*, drums and other musical equipment were created to enable both a visual and auditory concept of their perspective of the Games. Autistic children were given a voice in the build up to the Olympics and in the celebrations.

If you would like to know more about Decibels, the BA programme, TAEDS, the Handprint Theatre or Deafax, please do contact us and look at our websites. We would love to hear from you.

Ken Carter is the founder of Deafax and Decibels.

Further information

- Decibels, G14, Building LO 11, Institute of Education, University of Reading, London Road, Reading, Berkshire RG1 5AQ Tel: 0118 931 3240. Email: ken.carter@decibels.org.uk or Sannah@decibels.org.uk Web: www.decibels.org.uk
- TAEDS. Email: Cathy Wardale at c.j.wardale@reading.ac.uk Web: www.reading.ac.uk/education/ug/ioe-BATheatreEducationDeafStudies.aspx
- www.handprinttheatre.moonfruit.com
- www.deafax.org