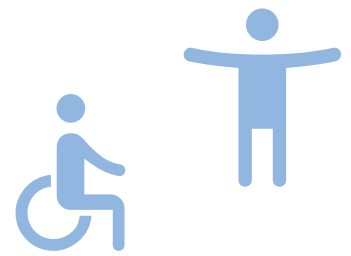


## Arts & Accessibility



by Abby Stonehouse

My introduction at this point with all of you readers seems redundant. So I'm just going to get into it! I have been asked to write an article about my experience with being in the arts and having a disability. Oh boy, do I have things to say! First, let's start with the question I get most often as a stand-up comedian with hearing loss: "Does my hearing loss influence my joke writing/material?" As a comedian who is truly incapable of writing and talking about anyone else but myself, YES, of course it does. But I like to hit a healthy balance of many things in my life.

Now let's get into the nitty gritty. As all of us in the Hear Community know, hearing loss is an invisible disability. I love the art of stand up, but I have never been in an environment that was SO inaccessible to me. Here, I give to you my List of Grievances:

**Music and background noise:** The moment you walk into any venue, there is always blaring music and people talking over each other. Because of this it's hard to talk to the people I work with and the audience members. I can't tell you how many times I have been asked a question by a comedian friend of mine I am completely incapable of answering.

**Wheelchair accessibility:** Being in an old and falling-apart city, all of the venues I perform at, except for a couple, are NOT for people with limited mobility. Which truly breaks my heart. I live with limited mobility. But I am fortunate enough to be able to manage with these barriers. It truly breaks my heart that some people can't experience some art forms because of this.

**Lack of closed captioning and ASL:** These accessibility measures are not part of the narrative in stand-up comedy. When it is considered, it is often vetoed because of the cost. With more virtual opportunities these days, I am also seeing the same trend. Adding closed captioning to live shows seems complicated and sometimes costly, but more frequently, it's not even part of the planning.



The fact that accessibility is not usually part of the narrative for this art form was further emphasized when I helped put together *Comedy for a Cause: Accessibility for All* in May 2019 with Hear Québec. Our goal for this show was to produce a **FULLY** accessible comedy show. It was easy to sell tickets to our members and CHHA members, but when promoting it to the general public, we were hit with the hard truth that hearing loss is **VERY misunderstood**. Many didn't realize the importance of some of these accessibility measures for inclusion, and how inaccessible most performing arts can be.

It was amazing to see the excitement about this show and how engaged everyone was allowed to be. The greatest outcome of this event was people without hearing loss seeing the benefit of having the added accessibility measure for their viewing pleasure. My best friend's girlfriend, who is a francophone, loved that she could follow along more thoroughly!

There are many ways the arts, not just stand-up comedy, can open themselves up to being accessible:

### Relax performances

These performances/shows are adapted or modified for adults and children who benefit from a more relaxed environment.

### Wheelchair Accessibility

This means barrier free access to the building, such as the use of ramps, wide enough doors and priority seating.

### Visual accessibility

Accessibly visual content



### Hearing loss accessibility

Captioning, ASL, T-Loop and FM systems

Abby Stonehouse is a stand-up comedian/writer/producer. Her storytelling comedy style juxtaposes her hopeful and honest approach to life with the horrific nitty-gritty of reality. Abby made her OFF-JFL/Zoofest debut in the summer of 2018 and will be part of the festival again this year. In May 2019 she performed and co-produced Montreal's first fully accessible comedy show. She is now the creator and producer of the comedy show GET FXCKED. She is also the co-producer of Comedy on Demand (formally known as Lawn Laughs) and Funny Juice Open Mic. If that isn't enough she will be dropping a new podcast this summer.

Of course, accessibility is part of some peoples' narrative, and I am seeing a trend for the better in mainstream social media, to be more accessible. There are some great theaters, producers and organizations that are making an effort to be inclusive as well. In my research, I found that in many big cities you can find theaters or companies that include accessible performances.

Many of these places have reported benefits to adding accessibility. The first one is inclusion. This needs no explanation. All of us want to go to a show and not have the usual barriers we face. Another benefit of accessibility is expanding the audience base. Many of these places saw an increase in sales due to the added accessibility. The last benefit of accessibility is education. Accessibility is subtle, yet powerful. Having accessibility at art productions opens up conversations and tears down stereotypes.

I want to change people's perspectives about accessibility and lead by example whenever I can. That is why for my podcast, House of Stone, I'm making it a priority to add accessibility measures to the videos. This form of art, podcasting, is rarely accessible to the hearing loss and Deaf community. I am happy that I will offer some content for this community and have an opportunity to educate and demonstrate what accessibility looks like in the arts.



@abbypstone\_mtl