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[At London's Chickenshed theatre, 'there are no labels'](#)



By Louise Kinross

[Chickenshed](#) is a vibrant British theatre company that does professional plays and musicals, [high school and university education](#), children's programs and outreach in schools, prisons and hospitals. Its current show on climate change—[Don't Stop Thinking About Tomorrow](#)—has a cast of nearly 200. What makes the London company unique is it celebrates diversity. About half of its members have disabilities or are considered vulnerable in some way.

Two years ago, Lou Stein became Chickenshed's artistic director. Lou is a London-based theatre director who founded the famous Gate Theatre in Notting Hill, and has directed numerous plays in London's West End and for the BBC. He learned about Chickenshed when his son Ethan, 11, who has Down syndrome, began taking acting workshops there. Lou is married to [Deirdre Gribbin](#), a Northern Irish composer who worked at Holland Bloorview in 2014 to bring sound to ScreenPlay, our interactive waiting

room. I met this amazing family then. Lou and I spoke about what inclusion means at Chickenshed.

BLOOM: You say Chickenshed has inclusion at its heart.

Lou Stein: The centre of our culture and ethos is that there are no labels. In other words, if someone walks through the door, whether an audience member or staff member, everyone works with one another. A significant number of our constituency has additional needs, or some form of intellectual or physical disability. The company tends not to call it disability, because of the word's perceived negative connotation.

BLOOM: That's so interesting, because there's a campaign by North American advocates to get people to use the word 'disabled.' They see disability as an inherent part of who they are and something to be proud of.

Lou Stein: I'd like to read more about that. You won't see the word disability in any of the Chickenshed brochures, because of our policy of not labelling. As a father of a boy with Down syndrome, I have a somewhat different perspective in relation to using the word. I personally like people seeing the difference. It is part of who my son is. I'm encouraging a debate within Chickenshed about that part of our culture, which I think is healthy.

We have 20 to 30 young people, ranging in age from seven to young adults, who have Down syndrome. We have people with cerebral palsy. Some can get out of their chair, and some have very limited mobility, but they join in our courses and shows. We have all kinds of global disabilities. We have people who are blind or can't hear well, or not at all. At Christmas, all of our 60-plus shows are signed.

BLOOM: Wow! I read that you had sign-language interpreters at shows, but you're saying the actors speak and sign at the same time during the performance?

Lou Stein: Absolutely. The actors in our big shows learn to sign and the audience accepts it. But it would be incorrect to call us a theatre company that works solely with people with disabilities, because the whole point of Chickenshed is that all kinds of people are part of the group. We mean diversity in the widest sense. So we have children who live in foster homes, or who have mental health issues—all types of diverse young people.

I can tell you stories of people who were beat up by their parents, and turfed out in the street, and they worked with us. And on the other side, rich North London Jewish kids who want to work with us. We've had black

kids from bad neighbourhoods in London, who were subjected to knife crime. It's that combination that is so exciting.

Although we do have a huge number of disabled people, it's that kind of mixture of care for one another, in a mixed group, that is Chickenshed's strength.

BLOOM: How does inclusion make your shows better, or different, than they would be without?

Lou Stein: The way we work, every individual changes a production. If you were to come and be in a show, the production would change. Whether you're disabled, black, Puerto Rican, whether you're a professional or an amateur actor, what we do is use the differences that people bring and celebrate them, rather than making that person into something they're not.

I come from the professional directing world, and one of the exciting things for me is we have a professional arm with shows that are reviewed professionally, so the quality is judged externally as well as internally.

In our spring production of [One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest](#), one third of the inmates have cognitive difficulties. They're actors, they're not playing themselves. So it's interesting to see the play through their eyes, rather than casting an actor who is pretending to be in a mental institution. They bring a new way of looking at the parts. It's a completely different thing. They're able to bring their filter and lens to the art.

BLOOM: It seems like any diversity would add more to a show because it creates more opportunities for different ways of seeing things.

Lou Stein: That's the centre of the power. Even in the West End here and in other professional theatres, it's a big deal when they cast someone with a disability. There's more and more of it happening now, as if 'Wow, aren't we being inclusive?'

What they're forgetting is what that amazing person brings to the production as a person. It's important to remember that if Ethan is in a little group doing a scene in the Christmas show, he completely changes the nature of the show, as would your son Ben, or yourself, or anyone.

BLOOM: I'm thinking of the current play [Amy and the Orphans](#) in New York, which stars Jamie Brewer, who has Down syndrome. There were lots of stories in the New York Times about how it was the first time a person with Down syndrome had played a lead role.

Lou Stein: Yes. It's the same when you see someone with Down syndrome on a catwalk. It's this idea that you have to be this brilliant, one-off performer. Ethan may not play Othello, or model, but that doesn't mean he doesn't bring something to whatever social situation or performance he's involved with.

There was a lot of controversy here about why they didn't cast an actor with autism in 'The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time.' I asked producers behind the production about it. They said they wanted to, but it would take too much time to rehearse them.

I said why didn't you create the time, because that would have been so brilliant. I can tell you right now that we can do that play, and I have a dozen actors with autism that can do that role. It's giving people a little time. It's getting them into the process.

BLOOM: What is the greatest challenge of being inclusive?

Lou Stein: I think the biggest challenge is keeping myself aware—of not labelling, of not putting limits on people, and actually listening to people. It's taking the time to listen to what people who are seeing things through different lenses can offer you. It's leaving your ego at the door. It's realizing how much all of these people can give you in a production and personally. The most difficult thing is keeping yourself fresh and open.

I have a story related to my son Ethan. Ethan has Down syndrome. He's great and he's confident and smart, but in a social situation with someone he doesn't know, he can kick out, or he can turn inwardly into himself.

We're used to people saying 'Oh, aren't you lucky that Ethan is around mainstream kids. Isn't that fantastic?'

One time before I was artistic director, one of the Chickenshed group leaders said 'I have to tell you something about Ethan. This term there was a child of about 14 who was going through a terrible home situation and was feeling very low. That child was in Ethan's group. And Ethan demonstrated such empathy and understanding, and made him so happy, that he pulled through.' That was the first time anyone saw the other side of what Ethan can positively do for other people.

BLOOM: Beautiful. I was surprised to hear that Chickenshed was over 40 years old. Did it always include people with disabilities?

Lou Stein: Our founder, Mary Ward, was a drama primary school teacher. Her professional partner was a musician, and they started doing Shakespeare in the '70s in a shed on a big estate. Someone lent them the

shed and they were doing it with the neighbourhood kids.

They put a notice up saying all were welcome, and someone rolled up in a wheelchair. Mary said she thought 'What do we do now?' They decided let's work with this, and that's the seed of the idea. It's not that we're including people, but they're actually teaching us. That is the cornerstone of the company.

BLOOM: I read that you need to raise about \$3.5 million dollars a year to fund Chickenshed. How do you do that?

Lou Stein: We do it through gala performances, sponsors and ticket sales. A lot of the people who come to fundraising galas are people who have been connected with Chickenshed over the years. And quite a few of them are very wealthy people. Our education arm gets government support.

BLOOM: I noticed that you have a program called Young Creators that is free.

Lou Stein: It's for young people 14 and up who are interested in some aspect of theatre—be it writing or lighting or directing, and they meet with mentors.

BLOOM: How many staff do you have?

Lou Stein: We have 106 people working for us. In April we're sending a contingent of 15 people to New York to start a Chickenshed in New York City.

BLOOM: I wish you would start a Canadian one.

Lou Stein: It all depends on a person of influence who can make it happen. Someone who has the connections with the schools and the performing arts centres to do it.

We have an American Friends of Chickenshed branch. One of them came up with a plan and arranged for someone to underwrite 15 of our people to go into New York schools to demonstrate how our processes and performances might work in a New York City context. The hope is that a satellite chicken shed starts up. We train in the process of how we do it, then hand it over.

We also have a Chickenshed in China, where a social worker became interested in us. We went out two years ago to show our processes and do performances, and they started their own shed. What we want to do is let people learn the concepts and processes and give it over to them.

BLOOM: Has anyone done a documentary about how Chickenshed works?

Lou Stein: We'd love to get a broadcaster or filmmaker interested in doing a serious documentary where the person would come and work with us. It's very hard to describe in one paragraph what we are, because we're a professional theatre company and a school and we do outreach. In a way, the professional company is our window that gets new people interested in us, and it involves all of our constituents. But telling a story of how all of our parts link together would be brilliant.

Photo below is of Lou Stein with his son Ethan.

