



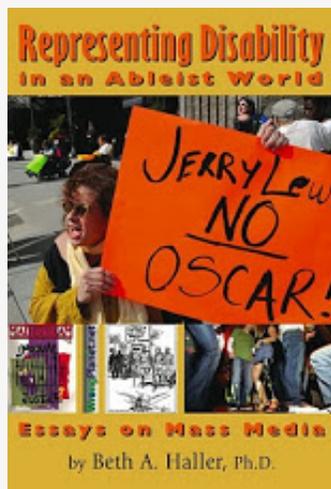
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# Media dis&dat

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## BA Haller's book



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Tuesday, January 5, 2010

## Irish wheelchair users fight lines to get concert tickets

From the *Irish Times*: <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/health/a-ticket-to-accessibility-1.1265571>



Concert-goers who are wheelchair users have to endure long waits when buying tickets, and often end up in less than optimum positions.

Going to concerts has become a major part of Irish life. But what about those who love music, and just happen to have a physical disability that requires them to use a wheelchair? For them, going to a concert is not so straightforward; the process from the outset is often fraught with difficulties, depending on the venue and the promoter.

“What frustrates the life out of me,” says Jason Ryan (pictured), a civil servant who has been in a wheelchair since he was 12 (he’s now 27), “is the special needs line which directs you to another number, then you get through and ask

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for tickets. . . I was in the O2 a couple of weeks ago; I brought my little cousin to see Miley Cyrus. But to book tickets, I was left hanging on the line for 45 minutes waiting to have my call answered.”

Able-bodied people, however, can simply go online, punch in their details, select “seating” or “standing”, and they’re on their way.

And Ryan is not alone in his frustration. For many wheelchair users, the ticket-buying process seems to be the most frustrating part of the experience. Rosie McAdam, who works in telecommunications, echoes Ryan’s sentiments. “When you call the special needs helpline, you could be waiting 20 minutes on the phone, and it ends up being expensive. If you’re calling any contact centre, you shouldn’t be holding more than two or three minutes.”

For Lorraine Maher, a student, it’s not just the wait that bothers her. “I hate the fact that you have to actually speak to someone . . . it’s just an added hassle. It should be the same for everyone.”

When online ticket agent Ticketmaster was approached about its policy of allocating wheelchair tickets separately, a spokesman said: “We go out of our way to try to look after wheelchair users, but actual allocation of spaces is a matter for the venue and/or promoter. Ticketmaster facilitates wheelchair ticket purchases through the 0818 number as this is answered in head office in Dublin and is charged only at a local call rate and, therefore, should not cause undue expense.

“Otherwise, those wishing to buy tickets would have to go through our call centre where the knowledge of individual venues and layouts might not be as great.”

Promoters and venues offer their own specific advantages and disadvantages. MCD, for example, offers wheelchair users one free ticket for their attendant - the person who

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accompanies them into the concert area and sits with them in the wheelchair area. The promoter Pod, on the other hand, doesn't, although a spokeswoman for the company emphasised its concern for wheelchair regulations, emphasising that the Tripod venue in Dublin was recently overhauled and redesigned "with wheelchair access in mind".

But how does this translate to the user? McAdam says she found the facilities there less than ideal. "I'm less than three feet tall, and in Tripod there are panels in front of the wheelchair area, so I couldn't see anything. After fighting for 20 minutes, they finally let me downstairs but at that point I was so annoyed and frustrated . . .".

Frustration is a common theme, and often reflects badly on the training given to venue staff. While the O2 comes out well - "staff are excellent, well-trained and work well with you", says McAdam - other venues suffer, with staff who just aren't quite sure how to speak to wheelchair users.

"I was at a Bruce Springsteen concert in the RDS last year," says Kevin Healy, who also works in telecommunications. "I went with my brother - a wheelchair user too - and four friends. We were in the wheelchair area which, when we got there, was overcrowded. We had to wait to take up our positions. The staff, although pleasant, badly lacked any disability awareness training, often asking my friends if I was okay."

McAdam has similar memories. "I was in the Olympia a few years ago, and the guy [working there] turned to my friend and asked, 'do you have tickets for upstairs?' and my friend replied, 'don't ask me, she booked it!'. Things like that make a difference - if you're asking someone with a disability something, direct the question to them."

Older venues throw up various difficulties. While people were, on the whole, satisfied with Vicar Street, the O2 and Croke Park (the U2 concert in

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particular getting warm praise), the Olympia came in for some criticism, with confusion over wheelchair access.

Liam Lynch, a civil servant, says that at the Manic Street Preachers gig last June, there was “no wheelchair area at all”.

“So it was either up the front, or at the very back. I thought I wouldn’t see anything if I went to the back, but at the front, the speakers were beside me and it was really uncomfortable.”

McAdam adds: “The Olympia has a ramp that fits one person in a wheelchair, which may or may not be working on the night of the gig. They seem to allow only two people in wheelchairs at a gig. If you’re the third person, you’re likely to be turned away.”

Brian Whitehead, chief executive of the Olympia Theatre, says the venue has a good relationship with wheelchair users. “We allocate four wheelchair tickets per show,” he says. “The individual is contacted prior to their arrival and told who to meet - Peter, who is trained in dealing with people with disabilities, looks after them for the night.”

Whitehead admits that there have been problems with the ramps - “we’ve had nothing but trouble with them since we bought them; we’re looking into repairing or replacing them” - but says there are alternative measures in place. “We have been putting wheelchairs in the front pit on their own and, depending on the show, we would sometimes build a ramp at the back of the auditorium.”

In the case of the Olympia, there is not all that much that can be changed. “The building is under a preservation order,” says Whitehead. So the venue works with what it has to facilitate everybody. “There is no room to put a ramp in at the front . So the wheelchair access is through the circle entrance.”

Difficulties don’t begin and end at the venue

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either. "If you're going into town, you have to allow for up to two hours to get in and find a parking space," says Ryan. "Sometimes they have wheelchair parking but there's a mad rush to get into it . . . One time, I parked in a disabled space but literally couldn't get back in my car because the cars on either side were so tightly parked. I just had to wait for them to come back."

So we come again to the long wait - but it's one that the fully able have to contend with, as much as those who are wheelchair-dependent. The O2, the shiny new example of compliance with wheelchair regulations, is not always the easiest place to leave, says Ryan, although the Luas has improved things.

A spokesman for the O2 said the venue holds 14,000 people, while the Luas holds 300. "Obviously, there's going to be a rush," he says. "But that's no different for those who have wheelchairs."

On the whole, the people I spoke to weren't angry about the situation. Maher wanted to go to Oxegen last year but cancelled her plans due to weather conditions. "In the end I didn't go," she says, "because I just didn't want to be literally stuck in the mud. But that's no one's fault - that's one of the difficulties you come up against when you go to an outdoor gig."

Posted by BA Haller at 3:45 PM 

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