RELAXED PERFORMANCE GUIDE
FOR PERFORMERS
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RELAXED PERFORMANCE GUIDE FOR PERFORMERS

Melbourne International Comedy Festival is the largest dedicated comedy festival in the world and one of Australia's most loved cultural events. The Festival aims to discover, develop and showcase great talent for the entertainment and inspiration of a broad-based audience. The Festival values irreverence, inventiveness and creativity, inclusiveness and accessibility, freedom of speech and respect for all.

This guide provides information for producers and artists to stage a Relaxed Performance by focusing on simple adjustments to their show and its environment, all while maintaining creative integrity. The Guide outlines steps you can take to prepare your audience, adapt your venue, and modify performance elements. You'll also find tips on considerations, expectations and potential successes that make your show more accessible to a wider audience, meaning more bums on seats!

The Festival is committed to making changes to Festival Managed Venue (FMV) environments and patron experiences where it reasonably can, without losing the "Festival vibe". It will also provide advice that you can use to make an independent venue more accessible for a wider audience.

What is a Relaxed Performance?

Festivals, by their very nature, are loud, brash and often busy environments that can be overwhelming for some people. Loud noises, bright lights, unclear rules, and unfamiliar spaces can be challenging for certain audience members to feel comfortable attending a show.

A Relaxed Performance helps break down those barriers by taking the pressure off audiences to behave in a certain way, allowing them to take part on their own terms. These performances are for anyone who would benefit from a more relaxed environment. This includes, but is not limited to, people with autistic spectrum conditions, sensory or communication disorders, learning disabilities, as well as people living with anxiety or have experienced trauma. It can also appeal to anyone who simply prefers a performance that is more laid back in its approach!

GETTING STARTED

There are lots of ways to plan for a Relaxed Performance. You don't need to have an answer for everything right away and the solution isn't always clear-cut. What is inclusive and accessible to some may not be considered accessible to others, so it's sometimes tricky to decide if a show is suitable for a Relaxed Performance.

The following checklist should help you get started with brainstorming some ideas. It's unlikely that everything will be perfect, but you're making important steps towards inclusivity, so congratulations! Remember, the more people know, the more likely they are to go.

Here are some things you should consider under three main pillars:

(1) Adjusting Performance Elements

- Can sound levels, lighting, or audio/visual effects be adjusted to create a calmer atmosphere?
- How will creative elements of your show be impacted if they are modified or removed, if patrons don't stay seated the whole time, or if you have to inform your audience about these changes before they arrive?
- Could you include a pre-show talk to discuss characters, content, lighting, voice overs, AV effects, etc. that may cause alarm?
- Is your show scheduled during busy times? Are there alternative times or navigation routes that might be quieter for audiences?
- Could performance times be extended on both ends to allow for early entry and gradual departure?

(2) Adapting the Venue Environment

- Can seat types and layouts be modified in your venue? You may need to reduce your capacity to allow for different seating types.
- Is there room for your audience to move around during the show or use stimming devices if they need?
- Can the doors be left open during the show, and is there a Quiet Space or Chillout Zone at your venue?
- Are signage and pathways clear and accessible?
- Can patrons bring food & drink into shows?
- How will adjustments, like reduced capacity and increased staffing, affect your budget?

(3) Preparing for Your Audience

- How will you share show elements, venue information, and potential triggers with your audiences before they arrive?
- What transport options are available to and from the venue?
- Could you host a familiarisation session before the show?
- Are additional staff needed to assist audiences?
- Could you create a Visual Story to outline the customer journey from start to finish?
- Does your marketing plan include a strategy to promote the Relaxed Performance to attract new audiences?
- Can patrons bring food and drink into the show?

TIMELINES

This section walks you through planning and delivering a Relaxed Performance in chronological order. Remember, this is just a guide, so the order might vary depending on your show, and not all elements may be possible in full.

Before your show is on sale:

Decide on ticket pricing — Preparing for Your Audience

Price can be a barrier for some, so we recommend including Concession tickets in your price structure. If ticketing through Red61, Companion Card tickets are available alongside a paid ticket for Companion Card holders. If ticketing through another provider, please ensure this option is still available through at least one sales channel.

Reduce your capacity — Adapting the Venue Environment

Selling to approximately 75% capacity provides room for patrons to move around and allows for flexible seating layouts. It's much easier to increase capacity later on than it is to reduce it after tickets have been sold.

Create a marketing plan — Preparing for Your Audience

Plan how you're going to promote your Relaxed Performance, from sharing the venue layout to any relaxed elements in your show. Your plan might include:

- A Visual Story – *Outline the visitor journey. This can take time, so start early!*
- Community engagement – *Contact disability organisations and advocates to increase your exposure.*
- Promo code discounts –*Promote your show to targeted communities with discounts offers to encourage engagement and track take-up / how successful the campaign is.*
- Social media – *Share information about relaxed performances and what's different about the show through your own channels. Share this info with channels your audience may follow or engage with.*
- Pre-show information – *Compile relaxed elements and venue information for your web listing and pre-show emails.*
- On-the-day information – *Plan what needs to be introduced as part of a pre-show briefing.*

Map out your budget — Adapting the Venue Environment

Before committing to a Relaxed Performance, make sure you budget for any additional resourcing and/or reductions in income. These may include:

- Ticket pricing & reduced capacity – *With more concession tickets sold, comps offered for community advocates, and fewer sellable seats, your box office income may be less than your other performances.*
- Staffing & venue access time – *Longer door-open times or additional front of house/technical staff may increase labour or venue hire costs.*
- Sensory Packs & Quiet Space – *Supplies, furnishings and equipment may need to be purchased/hired if they're not already available at the venue.*
- Marketing avenues – *Targeted outreach and advertising through accessible communication channels may have costs attached to them.*

TIMELINES

Before your show is on sale (continued):

Investigate partnerships & funding opportunities — Preparing for Your Audience

Unfortunately, majority of the financial burden of mounting a Relaxed Performance falls on you as the producer or artist. Explore partnerships and funding options early to help expand your audience reach and offset any additional costs. Some opportunities to consider include:

- Community partnerships – *Connect with disability organisations and representatives who may help promote your show through their channels (newsletters, social media, community groups, disability-focused platforms).*
- Word-of-mouth – *Building trust with disabled communities takes time, so early engagement leads to a higher chance of success.*
- Funding sources – *Look for grants or organisations that support access and inclusion to help subsidise reduced box office revenue and additional venue or equipment costs.*

While you're writing your show:

You may have already written your show before it goes on sale, or you might still be tinkering with it right up until opening night. Either way, here are some items to tick off during this process.

Assess your show's suitability — Adjusting Performance Elements

Review your show's creative content, including themes, sounds, and lighting, and think about how they impact the overall performance. Embedding relaxed elements in your show's creation is likely to create a stronger Relaxed Performance than retrofitting it later.

If you're performing in a Festival Managed Venue, we can help with the production elements directly, but you're always welcome to reach out to our Programming Team regardless of where you're performing.

Share relaxed creative elements — Preparing for Your Audience

Those attending a Relaxed Performance are less likely to book last-minute, so sharing information early and in plain language helps to build audience confidence. Be clear on:

- Bright lights – *including screens, flashing lights, stage lighting, overhead lights, timings*
- Sudden or loud sounds
- Costume characters or puppets
- Challenging content – *like potentially scary or triggering scenes*
- Method of delivery – *e.g. song, dance*
- Tone – *e.g. fast-paced, audience participation*

We can add everything to your web listing and to ticket confirmation emails (Red61 ticketed shows only). Remember, pre-show content is all digital, so it's easy to make changes if you need to.

Please note, it is assumed most Festival Relaxed Performances will:

- Keep the house lights up
- Leave the doors open
- Offer a dedicated Quiet Space
- Provide a Visual Story
- Allow food and drink items, and
- Welcome stimming devices

TIMELINES

While you're writing your show (continued):

Assemble Sensory Packs — Adapting the Venue Environment

Sensory Packs include tactile items that can help neurodivergent people focus and feel calm by engaging multiple senses at once. They contain objects with various textures, smells, mechanisms and sounds. Suggestions include ear defenders, fidget tools (e.g. stress balls, fidget spinners), weighted items, sunglasses and a Communication Board (found here).

These packs are borrowed for the duration of the show and returned to you at the end. If there are other performers at your venue, you could even share them between you (cleaning them after each use, of course!).

You could also arrange pre-bookings to gauge how many are needed. If you're ticketing through the Festival (Red61), we can include a form link in ticket confirmation emails so you can collate the results. If you're ticketing through an external provider, you will need to manage this yourself.

For those performing in a Festival Managed Venue, Sensory Packs will be provided by the Festival.

Seeing Your Venue for the First Time:

Depending on your venue agreement, this might happen before or after you've written your show and put it on sale. Either way, this will be part of the on-site visit with your venue.

Assess your Venue's suitability — Adapting the Venue Environment

Your venue may or may not have the structures, equipment or resources to assist with a Relaxed Performance. Ask your venue about:

- Leaving the doors open during the show – *Assess the level of outside sound and see if it would distract from your performance.*
- Lighting – *See if lighting can be dimmed instead of turned off during the show.*
- The program schedule – *If there are lots of shows starting at the same time in your venue, it might be too crowded for your audience. More time between shows is ideal.*
- Transport options – *ilf public transport isn't an option, this will limit your audience to those who can drive or who can afford for someone else to drive them.*
- Pathways – *Make sure there are wide clear pathways when moving around the venue.*

Extend performance times — Adjusting Performance Elements

This doesn't necessarily mean changing the duration of your show. Speak to your venue about early entry (at least 15 mins) and a gradual exit so patrons can familiarise themselves and leave without pressure.

Plan for a Quiet Space — Adapting the Venue Environment

A Quiet Space is an area where people can regulate sensory overloads, reduce anxiety, improve focus and reset from their surroundings. If a designated Quiet Space isn't possible, a quieter area away from crowds might be an alternative. Try to find a space that can have ambient lighting, soft furnishings (e.g. bean bags), white noise/meditation music playing, weighted blankets, and/or ear plugs available. You should also welcome comfort items like stimming devices. If you can share photos in advance (e.g. as part of your Visual Story), this is ideal.

TIMELINES

Seeing your venue for the first time (continued):

Review signage — Adapting the Venue Environment

Take the time to notice what signage is around and whether it needs to be improved to assist customers. It should provide clear directions without being visually cluttered or overwhelming.

Arrange seating types & layout — Adapting the Venue Environment

Typical theatre-style seating can feel rigid, implying that the audience must remain seated for the whole show. Consider varying the seating to suit different preferences, e.g. group some seats together, place some off to the side, include couches or bean bags, or encourage patrons to move their seat around as needed. The key is to give audiences space and freedom to move around.

Think about where varied seating will be stored outside your Relaxed Performance if it's not part of the standard set-up.

Make Food & Beverage (F&B) allowances — Adapting the Venue Environment

Not all venues offer food and drink, and some restrict outside items. Ideally, your venue is flexible, either by providing an on-site F&B stand and/or by letting customers bring their own items in.

If there are catering options, try to avoid long crowded queues by:

- Creating a priority queue.
- Creating a QR code for pre-ordering – *Your customers can come to the counter when their order is ready.*
- Setting up a trolley service or "last chance" bar – *This sits directly outside the performance space (or just inside it).*

If you're performing at Melbourne Town Hall, last chance bars will be available outside rooms during Relaxed Performances, as well as outside certain rooms for the whole Festival.

Create a Visual Story — Preparing for Your Audience

A Visual Story uses simple language and images to guide patrons through the entire experience, from travelling to the venue to being in the audience. Its purpose it to explain social situations and expectations, making it a powerful resource for those attending a Relaxed Performance. Share it digitally before the show and as a printed version on arrival. In your Visual Story try to:

- Include photos – *entrances, seating, etc.*
- Use simple language – *what to expect before, during, and after the show*
- Write in first person
- Use clear formatting – *sans serif font, avoid full caps and italics, and deliver as a Word Doc or tagged PDF*
- Add icons – *e.g. train/tram symbols, arrows on maps*
- Highlight elements – *explain relaxed features, warnings, and triggers*
- Include context – *e.g. "If I have a bag, I may be asked to open it by a security guard at the front entrance before I enter the venue. This is to help keep everyone safe."*

Some examples are available on the Festival's Visual Stories page.

For Festival Managed Venues, the Festival will provide travel details and information about the festival environment. You can then add in performance elements and show content. Independent venues can also request an initial template to get started.

TIMELINES

Seeing your venue for the first time (continued):

Organise a Familiarisation Day — Preparing for Your Audience

A Familiarisation Day lets audiences visit the venue in advance to familiarise themselves with layouts and processes, allowing them to navigate the space at their own pace without worrying about show start times. Making this option available to audiences may depend on your venue, hire costs and staff resources. Alternatively, you could see if early entry is available, which still gives patrons time to experience the venue at a slower pace.

If you're performing at Melbourne Town Hall, a Familiarisation Day will be held before the Festival opens.

Share relaxed environment details — Preparing for Your Audience

You will have already shared details about creative elements while you were writing your show, but now's the time to add some venue information. Aim to have everything ready to go at least a month out from your Relaxed Performance date. This includes:

- A Visual Story
- Sensory Pack details – *a list of items and any pre-booking links*
- Quiet Space information – *the location and a description*
- Transport options – *including lighting, crowds, etc within those options*
- Food and beverage rules
- Venue navigation – *e.g. location of the performance space, accessible toilets, bars, etc.*
- Seating layout – *including seating types and flexibility*
- Possible scents – *e.g. air freshener in bathrooms*
- Familiarisation Day details – *if applicable*
- Venue darkness/visibility – *before, during and after the show*

Invite someone to consult — Adjusting Performance Elements

Once your show is written and relaxed elements discussed with your venue, reach out to experts in the field. This might include contacts from disabled communities or disability organisations you connected with as part of your Marketing Plan.

Not everyone will offer this voluntarily, so be prepared to discuss compensation up front. You might, for example, like to offer them a complimentary ticket. Share the steps you've taken so far and invite them to attend your Relaxed Performance to provide feedback.

This feedback will give you valuable insights to improve future Relaxed Performances and welcome more diverse audiences to your shows.

TIMELINES

During Tech Rehearsals:

Test relaxed elements — Adjusting Performance Elements

See in real time how your proposed changes affect the delivery of your show. Make any last-minute adjustments and let your venue and the Festival know (so we can tell your customers). Walk through:

- Stage lighting levels – *Aim for approximately 30% illumination.*
- Audio and visual levels – *Including and adjusted levels from AV, performers, etc.*
- Sudden loud noises and lights – *Try to avoid these, especially strobe lighting.*
- Content warnings – *Are there any topics your audience might find triggering?*

Bring in and store tools/equipment — Adapting the Venue Environment

To avoid rushing on the day of your show, bring in any alternative seating, Sensory Packs and Quiet Space items during your tech rehearsal to see how they all fit in the space.

On the day of the show:

Hold a pre-show briefing with venue staff — Preparing for Your Audience

This briefing should include Front of House, Box Office, your tech team and any other relevant venue staff. Share the details of your Relaxed Performance so they can help guide patrons and understand relaxed expectations, including leaving the door open and the lights up, and removing patrons from outside the performance space if they're not there to see your show.

Adjust seating — Adapting the Venue Environment

Make any final layout tweaks to ensure there are enough chairs for all audience members, but enough space for them to move freely around the venue.

Distribute physical resources — Preparing for Your Audience

Now that you've prepared everything digitally, make sure you also supply printed versions of your Visual Story, as well as a Communication Board (found here), for patrons to collect if needed. Your Sensory Packs should be ready to go as well.

Hold a pre-show talk with your audience — Preparing for Your Audience

This is a quick chat at the start of the show to introduce your audience to the relaxed elements and flag any potential triggers. You can demonstrate visual cues, e.g. a sign for the start, halfway point, and end of the performance, or warnings for when something overly sensory is about to happen. That way, patrons have the option to stay and watch, cover their eyes/ears, or step out if needed. You might also describe characters, content, lighting, voice overs, AV effects or other creative elements so everyone feels safe and prepared.

Perform Your Relaxed Performance — Adjusting Performance Elements

It's show time! Enjoy sharing your show in a more inclusive way!

TIMELINES

After the show:

Ask for feedback — Preparing for Your Audience

Accessibility and inclusion is about progress over perfection. There's always room for improvement and asking for feedback is a great way to start. You could:

- Send out a survey – *Ask your audience what worked, what didn't, and what their overall experience was. If you're ticketing through the Festival, ask us how we can help with this.*
- Ask consultants – *Check in with anyone you invited and ask for feedback.*
- Debrief with your venue – *Find out how things ran from their perspective.*

Adapt your resources — Preparing for Your Audience

Based on your experience and the feedback you've received, update your resources so you can do things even better next time.

Connect with other artists — Adjusting Performance Elements

Consider sharing your experience and resources with other artists. They might also have ideas that you haven't thought of yet, and sharing your knowledge helps to create a more inclusive experience for everyone.

SUBMIT YOUR PLAN

Now that you've had a chance to read through all the steps and stages of mounting a Relaxed Performance, it's time to submit your Relaxed Performance Plan to the Melbourne International Comedy Festival.

Click here to start filling out your Relaxed Performance Plan

Please note: In your Relaxed Performance Plan your answers should go into detail about how you will accomplish each task (don't just reply with a "Yes" or "No"). If you'd like to access a word version of the plan template click here.

FESTIVAL SUPPORT

The Festival team are here to help answer any questions you may have and can often provide further support.

If you're performing in Festival Managed Venue, some steps may already be pre-arranged. Our Venue Program Manager will get in touch with more information, including Front of House and Production support.

If you're in an independent venue, please feel free to reach out with any questions. Our team are happy to assist wherever possible.

Here's a quick recap of what we can do to help:

- Update your website listing with Relaxed Performance details.
- If you're ticketing through the Festival (Red61), we can contact your customers with important information, and include relevant information in automated ticket confirmation emails.
- Provide a Communication Board that you can print out.
- Share a Visual Story template for you to work from (for artists performing in Festival Managed Venues, we'll provide information about the venue environment for you).
- Subject to availability, Sensory Packs may be available to borrow.
- Connect you other artists who are interested in sharing resources.

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