

A WORD IN YOUR EAR

A theatre describer's introduction to AD

AUDIO DESCRIPTION (AD for short) is both very old and very new. It has existed ever since society reached the point when blind people could survive in it and sighted friends and family kept them in touch with what was happening around them. But theatre description as we know it only dates from 1980, when Arena Stage in Washington D.C. installed a sound amplification system for hard of hearing patrons and decided to explore its potential for blind theatregoers.

News of developments in Washington soon crossed the Atlantic; discussion and experimentation followed, and last year saw the 25th anniversary of the



Anne Hornsby of Mind's Eye,
Britain's oldest audio description agency

first audio described performance in a mainstream British theatre – Richard Harris's *Stepping Out* at Theatre Royal Windsor on 6th February 1988. Larger companies took longer to react: the Royal Shakespeare Company's first audio described performance was *Romeo and Juliet* at the Barbican Theatre in September 1992, followed by the National Theatre's *Trelawney of the Wells* in the following March.

The best description of AD was written around 70 years before the term was invented. It comes from an account of a film show attended by blinded World War I veterans, which was enhanced by "Lady Waterlow's happy way of creating mental pictures by flashes of suggestive description interspersed at appropriate moments".

What theatre describers aim to do is to relay all the visual information a blind or partially sighted theatregoer needs to follow and enjoy the production, without intruding on the play itself. Timing the description to fit the gaps in the dialogue is one of the describer's biggest challenges, demanding verbal dexterity and technical skill. Talking over the actors is a major crime, although listeners sometimes say it bothers us more than it bothers them because they are used to dealing with competing voices. The describer's training includes various techniques for conveying essential information when the "appropriate moment" does not coincide with a suitable pause in the dialogue, or the pause that originally existed shrinks or disappears completely on the night of the description.

Teamwork is an important element of the job. Theatre describers commonly work in pairs, splitting the workload between them. Having two describers



*The Sightlines team,
Julia Grundy, Jonathan Nash
and Margaret Spittles,
who specialise in describing opera*

working on a production not only enhances the description – on the ‘two pairs of eyes are better than one’ principle – but has a number of practical advantages, including the ability to rehearse each other and provide emergency cover.

Our basic tools are the script used by the cast and a DVD of the show, plus house seats to preview, rehearse, and monitor each other’s delivery during the audio described performances (usually one or two per production, depending on the length of the run). The DVDs are

invaluable for timing our initial scripts but gradually become redundant as the run progresses, the pace speeds up, scenes shift and change, or the show transfers to another venue and is re-blocked. It takes around 40 hours to prepare a description, longer for a 3-hour period drama.

Given the sheer amount of material to describe and the limited amount of time to describe it, we have to be highly selective. Priority is given to what the listener most needs to know: who is on stage (entrances and exits); where they are supposed to be (scene changes); who is speaking (especially important for period drama with large casts of predominantly male voices); vital plot information (“creeps up behind him, dagger in hand”); and an explanation of any noises – including audience laughter – which are not obvious from the text. If time allows, the ‘nice to know’ details can be added: lighting effects, costume changes, minor character interactions and stage business. Storyline always takes precedence over stage effects.

General information about the setting and characters is given in advance, with an introduction to the performance delivered live 15 minutes before the show begins. This also gives listeners a chance to adjust to their headsets and ask FOH staff for any help they need. Introductions are written soon after previewing the show, in time to be recorded for inclusion on the venue’s website and for CDs to be sent to visually impaired patrons who book for the performance. All advance recordings of AD introductions carry a warning that the content may differ from the introduction delivered live on the day because of understudies and other last minute changes. Providing introductions in advance depends on the duration of the run: a week is usually too short.

Touch tours of the stage, with a chance to explore the dimensions and detail of the set and to handle costumes and props, are a highly effective way of introducing blind and partially sighted theatregoers to the show. Originally treated as an optional extra, touch tours have now become an integral part of the audio description service. Their timing varies from theatre to theatre: at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, for instance, they take place two hours before the performance begins, to avoid company warm ups and routine stage checks, and give visitors time for a pre-show bite. Other venues, with a more local audience, schedule touch tours for an hour before the advertised performance time. The tours usually last 30 minutes, and are free to blind or partially sighted patrons and their sighted companions. They typically involve the describers working on the show, Front of House and backstage staff, and whenever possible, some of the cast to model their costumes, demonstrate props, and familiarise listeners with their characters' voices.



*Touch tour
at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre*

Audio description is sometimes referred to as a commentary but this is not strictly accurate. Theatre describers never comment on what they are describing. They are objective observers, trained not to impose their own opinion or interpretation of the play on their listeners. The aim is to sound engaged but not over-involved (the only exceptions are pantomimes and plays like *The Rocky Horror Show* in which audience participation is a feature of the performance, and the describer, who is notionally one of the audience, can opt to join in); to retain the listener's attention but not divert it from the play; and to know when to stay silent and let dramatic pauses or music speak for themselves.

Technology is a major factor. Radio is the transmission method of choice, though many theatres still use infra-red systems popular in the 1990s. Ideally, the describer's work station has a direct view of the stage, preferably from a box at the back of the stalls as shown in the photo on page 1 taken at Norwich Theatre Royal, but this is seldom possible at older venues and describers frequently work from a monitor in a remote corner of the building – which can be anywhere from below the stage to under the roof. The photo also shows the ideal equipment setup: chin microphone connected to a mixer unit with fader controls, allowing the describer to adjust the volume of her output and the level of the stage sound fed into her headphones.

Human as well as technical factors influence the AD audience's experience, and we are immensely appreciative of Front of House staff who ensure AD users are in the right place at the right time, take care of guide dogs, explain to new listeners how their headsets work and what to expect from AD, advise them on how to avoid sound leakage, check on their progress, and generally act as trouble shooters. Front of House staff are often the main channel for feedback since they are the natural recipients for comments made by listeners when returning their headsets. Feedback is vital for service development, and most venues supplement the informal feedback received by from staff with more structured audience research such as questionnaires and consumer panels.

Theoretically, describers are themselves members of the audience, taking the place of the 'muttering friends' who traditionally told blind theatregoers what was happening on stage. This is why we use 'right' and 'left' to refer to the audience's right and left (not stage right and left) and restrict stage terminology to words like 'backdrop' and 'wings' which have passed into everyday speech. It is always the audience's perception of the performance that guides us when we are writing our introductions and scripts: we are the eyes of our listeners, not the voice of the director. Some describers would argue for a more proactive approach in conveying the directorial vision, but if directors succeed in communicating their vision to the audience, it will automatically be reflected in the audio description.

Unlike genuine audience members, however, who typically see the show once only, describers have the opportunity to study individual productions in depth, which gives us a rewarding insight into the way the relationship between characters develops and enriches the performance.

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