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The Audio Descriptor As Cast Member: Audio Description At Every Performance

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In the 1990s, Access Theater and Rod Lathim in Santa Barbara, CA pioneered a system whereby an audio description script is developed throughout the rehearsal process for a show in close consultation with the show's artistic staff (director, designers, performers). The audio description was available at any public performances on demand. This sort of "every performance" availability is generally only found via *recorded* audio description, as used for several Broadway productions in New York. But it is typically unavailable until well into the run of a show and, of course, a set recording for a live event is often technically and aesthetically infeasible.

With live audio description available at each performance of a performing art event, the individual developing and voicing the audio description, often the same person, is a trained audio describer who benefits from the close

association with the production staff—he/she is a “cast member”, but not really: there is no need for the individual to be a member of Actors’ Equity Association and, unlike a cast member, he/she need not attend every performance beyond the first half-hour of the show if no one has requested the audio description service. Generally, the describer is offered a set fee for the overall commitment – or with a longer run, a per-show cost can be arranged.

The script for the audio description is not recorded or even memorized, but relied upon loosely—“half an eye on the script and one-and-a-half eyes on the stage”—it’s a *LIVE* performance after all. The delivery of the audio description is made via an infra-red or FM system already available at most performing arts spaces. Further, as with Access Theater’s award-winning production of Storm Reading, the audio description script can tour with the show and be available for use/adjustment by local, trained audio describers. A brief clip from the DVD of a live performance for which I wrote and voiced the audio description is available at:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1IB8KsNe1ZfSgIKfdQ9_WzONgOt7PF43o/view?usp=sharing

A formal audio description service—the world's first—was begun under the leadership of a blind woman, Dr. Margaret Pfanstiehl, at The Metropolitan Washington Ear, a radio-reading service based in Washington, DC. Radio reading services still exist throughout the United States principally with the participation of volunteer readers; I began working as a volunteer reader at The Ear in 1972 and was proud to be a founding member of its audio description service in 1981.

Radio reading services are heavily dependent on volunteers and The Ear's audio description service was also structured around voluntary contributions of time and effort. Cognizant of the limits on the time available from people who often maintain full-time employment elsewhere, audio description was conceived as a service that would be offered at only two performances of a theatrical run and preparation for the audio described performances was based on the observation of only two or three performances early in the run of a production. Even then, it was understood that optimally audio description would be prepared with more in-depth observation of the theatrical event, even during rehearsals, and that audio described should be offered at every performance in the run of a show. But the limitation of the volunteer structure prohibited that arrangement. The

proliferation of audio description for live theatrical events in the United States and elsewhere has been based primarily on this volunteer, limited preview/two-described-performances model.

So the current practice of offering audio description at one or two performances in the run of a show was established over 40 years ago; it has never represented equity and in my opinion can no longer be tolerated. The belief, often stated by the founders of that first audio description service noted above, was that the service must be offered to theaters for free or at absolutely minimal expense – if not, the theaters simply won’t offer the service. My assertion is that access is not an add-on—it is a requirement and a necessary cost of doing business—and must be practiced by professionals who are every bit as committed to the success of every performance as every formal cast member.

Some have countered that “any audio description is better than none.” I believe that the opposite is true—I have witnessed first-time audio description patrons take ear buds from the ears when they experience audio description that is less than optimal, distracting rather than

enhancing. That patron likely will then not be inclined to use audio description at other events.

A brief story about access at every performance: In 1995, I made a trip to New York City to attend a performance by the company “Theatre By The Blind” (TBTB). I was excited—a troupe of actors who are blind! Surely the company would use audio description—a company of blind actors would certainly want to be accessible to blind audience members. I was eager to sample their audio description work.

The group had NO audio description as traditionally practiced.

No audio description?! When I learned that, I was disappointed and ready to “preach the gospel of AD” to these people! Instead, TBTB (now known as “Theatre Breaking Through Barriers”) taught me an important lesson about accessibility and universal design. According to George Ashiotis (a blind man, one of the TBTB founders and a professional actor), audio description was so important to the mission of TBTB that it must be a part of every performance of every show. Further, it needn’t be an “add-on”—it should be an integral part of every script and a critical part of every

director's concept. At TBTB, every production's planning and rehearsal process includes consideration of audio description from the beginning.

How can the audio description be integrated within the production? Will the production add a "narrator" character that propels the action and also provides cleverly crafted description of visual elements? Perhaps the script can be modified to include descriptive elements spoken by the various characters? In this way, the audio description becomes part of an inclusive process, part of a universal design concept, helpful and aesthetically viable for all audience members.

In the same way, theater that welcomes deaf audience members can be designed inclusively by employing shadow interpreters (a "twin" character/actor who signs is paired with a speaking character/actor) or displaying subtitles. And in the case of theater that is principally signed, "voicers" are used to match sign with the spoken or sung lines (I recently voiced the title character in a production of "Julius Caesar" at Gallaudet University, the world's first university for deaf students.) Along the same lines, I had an opportunity to visit Tel Aviv and attend performances by the

Israeli company of deaf/blind actors, “Nalaga’at”. It was a honor to offer a workshop on the development of audio description for their productions.

Fast forward to 2014: with support from the D.C. Aid Association for the Blind, the Audio Description Project of the American Council of the Blind proposed a more expansive audio description arrangement for two productions at Arena Stage in Washington, DC (where the first audio described theatrical performances occurred in 1981). We collaborated with Arena on an experiment: Jo Lynn Bailey-Page, the Audio Description Project’s Coordinator, attended rehearsals for a production, met with the stage director, actors, the designers (scenic, costumes, lighting, sound) and developed an audio description script throughout the three-week rehearsal period. The script was then available for Jo Lynn to voice at every performance beginning with opening night and with, of course, an eye on stage action as changes could occur from performance to performance. Again, the describer, essentially, was a “cast member”, attending every rehearsal and performance.

The arrangement had two benefits over the traditional model of audio description development for live performance:

- 1) time was available to carefully observe the theatrical process and construct descriptive language that was more thorough and considered; and
- 2) people desiring the service could attend any performance with no advance notice and be assured of access to the visual aspects of the production.

Other innovations included Braille and large-print programs, models of the set and props in the lobby, and a tactile “scrapbook” of costume pieces.

It was gratifying to note that attendance for the productions by people using audio description tripled over levels experienced at Arena using the traditional volunteer model.

Not only does a live, every performance practice provide parity with sighted audience, it can result in increased revenue for the performance venue (audio description patrons are no longer limited to particular performances when the event is made accessible). New estimates from the American Foundation for the Blind, based on data from the federal government, reveal that in the United States there are over 32 million people who are

blind or have low vision. It is past time for performance companies to consider how accessibility can result in aesthetic innovation, be made available at every performance, and open up untapped sources of revenue.