



Theatre as an Inclusive Practice T.I.P

Guidelines for Audio Description

These guidelines have been produced by professional audio describer Alastair Sill. They combine general guidance on what to consider and the importance of audio description, along with further detail on the process and how best to implement audio description.

AUDIO DESCRIPTION HAS COME A LONG WAY IN THE LAST TWENTY YEARS BUT...

...there are still a lot of people who have never heard of it - people who are partially sighted and theatre professionals as well. However, there are lots of opportunities for companies and venues to engage with new audiences and for everyone to enjoy new experiences, which is really exciting. So, this document provides an introduction to audio description, the process involved and some guidelines.

WHAT IS AUDIO DESCRIPTION?

TRADITIONAL AUDIO DESCRIPTION

Traditional, conventional audio description is a commentary that describes body language, expressions and movements, making the production clear through sound. The audio describer uses the natural pauses in the dialogue to add in these pieces of description. Before the show, a touch tour is an opportunity for visually impaired audience members to meet the cast, explore the costumes, set, props and world of the play - including different character voices. In traditional audio description, the audio describer speaks their description into a microphone, while watching the performance from a sound proof booth or technical gallery. The visually impaired audience members listen to the description through headsets. It might be an infra red system or wireless radio system.

INFRA RED

WIRELESS RADIO

SENNHEISER'S MOBILE CONNECT APP



Sennheiser are a big producer of these systems and have pretty much cornered the market. Sennheiser's new Mobile Connect App, is designed to let people access the audio description through their phone. The audio describer still describes live through a microphone. The difference is that the audience member downloads the app and listen to the description on their phone with just a pair of headphones.

CREATIVELY EMBEDDED DESCRIPTION

You don't just have to listen to audio description through a pair of headphones. Description can also be embedded into the language of the play, so that it is the characters who speak it rather than an audio describer. Characters might comment on each other in a descriptive way, or talk about themselves or to the audience. So, there are different points of view and the potential for exciting creative discoveries, which the whole audience can be part of.

But for any of this to happen, whether it's traditional audio description or integrated description, it's important for audio description and the audio describer to be considered from the start, as part of the process. Tagging it on at the end doesn't help anyone.

THE PROCESS

If this is at a Research and Development stage or before the start of rehearsals and it's a new piece of writing or devised work, the opportunity to embed description into the language of the play might present itself. It's worth seeking the advice of an audio description consultant or audio describer. This could be through the voice of one / all of the characters / the creation of another character. The integration of audio description into the fabric of the play, is for the benefit of everyone in the audience, not just visually impaired audience members. If it's a pre existing script, there is still the possibility to integrate description into the text but there are other considerations which need to be factored in before going down this route. It's all about having the options available in front of you and recognising which is the most appropriate.

Traditional audio is also very creative - choosing the right words and style, the appropriate tone of voice... How would it be if two voices were used in the audio description? How can the audio description reflect the themes, feel and atmosphere of the production? For example, in a production of Romeo and Juliet, could there be one voice for the Capulets and one voice for the Montagues?



GUIDELINES

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

This can be worked out between the venue and the audio describer / the producer and the audio describer. Roles and responsibilities can be made clear.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF VENUE OR COMPANY

- A sound proof booth or place to describe from with a good view of the stage and comfortable seat
- Audio Description Box must be free from noises which might be transmitted over the microphone.
- Table large enough for an open AD script, a desk lamp and microphone (if not using radio headset)
- The lamp mustn't distract the performers or the audience. If a view of the stage isn't possible, a colour monitor with stage sound available through headphones. If this approach is being taken, will the wireless radio signal reach the auditorium?
- Script made available as a hard copy and electronic.
- Recording of production.
- Point of contact established for audio describer, so that tickets can be booked for watching the show.
- Extra front of House Staff made available for touch tour and AD performance.
- Can time be allocated during the meet n greet / first day of rehearsals, for the audio describer to talk about their role in the production and to have a few minutes with members of the Creative Team? Director, Set and Costume Designer, Lighting Designer, Choreographer.
- The audio description is always going to be a subjective account of what's going on between people (description of facial expressions for example) However, having the input of the creative team, actors included, will maintain an authenticity and clear up any confusion about particular moments.

BUDGET

- Cost of Audio Describer
- Cost of equipment (Hire cost and availability)



SCHEDULING OF AUDIO DESCRIBED PERFORMANCES

- The audio describer needs to have enough time to be able to prepare. This is dependent on the nature and complexity of the production. For example, a piece of dance takes longer to prepare than a conventional stage play.
- Before the brochure goes to print, a conversation with the audio describer about time required to prepare for a show.
- A home grown production, with a 3 or 4 week rehearsal process and a two week run is very different to a touring production, with a 1 week run.
- The timing of described performances - matinee and evening. It's important to give people a choice.
- If this is the first time you've tried an audio described performance, go and talk to your local visually impaired audiences and ask them what they think.

POINT OF CONTACT FOR AUDIO DESCRIBER

It's important for the audio describer to have a point of contact at the theatre (someone who has a good all round knowledge of the organisation and with contact details of theatre staff) This person can chase material required for the description, organise tickets for the audio describer and trouble shoot.

DATE AND DESCRIBER AGREED. WHAT NEXT?

- A script made available. Hard copy and emailed.
- Programme, including a full cast list.
- A recording of the production (this could be available in advance for touring productions or at a dress rehearsal or first performance)
- Audio describer contacts the theatre to organise watching the production
- It's sometimes useful to watch the production from different angles to get the full picture.
- In addition to this / instead of this, the audio describer may choose to make their notes in the audio description booth.
- A meeting between the audio describer and Stage Manager will help in the planning of the touch tour.



- A meeting with the actors to discuss the touch tour. If this isn't possible, the Stage Manager can pass the information on to the actors.
- Conversation with Front of House re: touch tour and audio description.

AUDIO DESCRIBER PREPARES THE AD SCRIPT.

Using notes made from watching the live performance and the recording, the audio describer puts together their description - choosing the most appropriate words to help paint the picture.

DAY BEFORE AD SHOW

The Audio Describer completes a dry test run, with someone listening in the audience. This is also an opportunity to test the equipment.

DAY OF TOUCH TOUR AND AD SHOW

- Audio Describer arrives approximately 1 hour earlier than the touch tour.
- System check (Technician on hand)
- Await arrival of patrons.
- At the end of the Touch Tour, Headsets are given out and tested again.
- Patrons given the option to be seated earlier, avoiding traffic.
- Audio describer reads the introduction.
- AD performance first half
- Front of House staff inside the auditorium with spare headsets.

INTERVAL

Audio Describer / Front of House, checks all is ok with patrons.

END OF PERFORMANCE

Audio Describer and / front of house collect headsets and say goodbye.



HOW DOES AUDIO DESCRIPTION FIT IN WITH THE REST OF THE PROCESS?

The scheduled AD performance is often at a later stage in the run, giving time for the audio describer to watch the show in the auditorium, watch the show and make notes in the AD booth, record the show / receive a recording of the show and prepare their script (during which time, any questions can be directed to the relevant member of the creative team).

A ROUGH IDEA OF THE PREPARATION REQUIRED

a) 4 week rehearsal period and 3 week run.

- Meet n greet / day one of rehearsals - Opportunity to introduce yourself, your role and talk to the creative team. Encourage actors and team to tweet about the AD performance.
- If the producing company / venue would like to promote the audio description with an audio flyer / described trailer, this is an opportunity to talk to the relevant members of the production team - for instance the Sound Designer. Audio Describer is emailed rehearsal reports, schedule updates - so they can judge if it would be helpful to come in and watch.
- Half way through the rehearsal period / first run through - Visit rehearsals. Make a few notes. Physicality of characters. How do characters move about? Relationships between characters. If the rehearsals are taking place with the set and costumes, a good time to take a few pictures.
- First / Second night - The Audio Describer watches in the auditorium.
- End of first week - The Audio Describer watches and makes notes in the AD booth / back of auditorium. Before / after the show, the audio describer meets the Stage Manager and has a look around the stage, talks about the Touch Tour and takes a few pictures.
- Middle of second week - The Audio Describer records the production from a convenient position / receives a recording of the production.
- The Audio Describer spends approximately five days / one week putting together their script, leaving time to do a dry run / practice run before the AD performance. If it hasn't been possible for the audio describer to meet the Stage Manager and actors in person during the rehearsal period, it's helpful if time can be set aside during the run of the show (preferably quite near the start). During this meeting, the audio describer can brief the actors and stage manager on the touch tour.



b) 4 week rehearsal period and 1 week run, beginning on Tuesday and closing the following Tuesday (scheduled AD performance is towards the end of the run, or the weekend)

- Meet n greet / day one of rehearsals - Opportunity to introduce yourself and talk to the creative team.
- Half way through the rehearsal period / first run through - Visit rehearsals. Make a few notes. Physicality of characters. How do characters move about? Relationships between characters. If the rehearsals are taking place with the set and costumes, a good time to take a few pictures. This might also be a good time to talk about the pre show touch tour (what to include and chat with actors about how this will work)
- Audio Describer watches Dress rehearsal on Monday / Tuesday afternoon.
- Audio Describer records first night performance / receives recording of first night show. If this isn't possible, the audio describer records / receives a recording of the dress rehearsal.
- Audio describer prepares the AD script on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday.
- Audio describer does a dry / practice run on Saturday afternoon and delivers the description in the evening. Depending on the performance schedule, a matinee AD show is something well worth considering.

CREATING THE AUDIO DESCRIPTION

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

- Less is often more. The skill in audio description lies in the ability to edit your words down to what is absolutely necessary. Remember that the description is for someone else, not for you. A constant barrage of words can be overpowering and detract from the performance, which is the reason the person has come to the theatre in the first place.
- A sighted audience member is drawn into the world of the play. No longer is the stage a stage (unless the nature of the production deems it so). With this in mind, using the correct terminology is important. Characters do not appear from 'the wings' for example. Upstage and downstage do not exist in the world of the play. Certain terms may be used in an introduction, to help set the scene, but must not be repeated in the description itself.
- Talking about the introduction, this prelim to the description is a really important part of 'setting up' the world of the play and the production itself. Conversations with the director and designers can be very useful. What effect does the lighting have to create various atmospheres? Sometimes it's difficult to describe everything during



the performance, so by setting the scene earlier on, you're sowing seeds and allowing the pictures to then present themselves.

- The story - generally speaking, people have come to watch a story unfold and to understand the relationship between the characters. These relationships are gleaned by the reactions of one character to another - facial expressions are incredibly important.
- How to describe facial expressions will always be a challenge. An audio describer's job is to describe what they see, not to interpret the emotion. Some stock phrases and clichéd phrases can be very useful, as they are instantly recognisable, for example, 'his jaw drops in surprise'. Interestingly though, some audience members want to know exactly how a character is feeling. Combining the two can be a good way of solving the problem - the situation allows you to interpret the emotion and then it's a case of describing their physicality. Talk to your audience and see how they feel about it.
- How does a character move about? There are so many different words for walk! And how a character walks says a lot about how they are feeling at the time. The way a character moves towards another can help to establish their relationship with this other person. Do they saunter or edge, do they sail or scuttle? These are all things that sighted audience members soak in without thinking but that help in their understanding of the story. People with sight loss need to have the same points of reference in order to build up these pictures.
- Keep your description in the present tense. It's happening here and now and we want the audience to be in the here and now, experiencing the events as they happen.
- Tone of voice is another important consideration. How should you deliver the description? You need to be engaged in what you're saying, otherwise people won't want to listen to you. Your tone of voice needs to be in keeping with the tone and feel of the play - a play for children is quite different to an Agatha Christie murder mystery!
- Don't speak too close to the microphone and if you have a cough coming, turn it to mute! The same goes if you need a drink of water. It's just about knowing how things work, being relaxed and just enjoying it. After all, you've put in all the hard work, now is the time to enjoy being part of the whole.
- And when the words fit perfectly and you're capturing the moment, it really does feel like that - almost as if you're on stage, part of the production.
- It is an intimate experience, speaking to someone through a microphone and into their ear! Enjoy the opportunity and make the most of it.



- And if you decide to go down the integrated approach, enjoy thinking of all the possibilities available. Some characters may lend themselves to the role, or it might be that all characters are involved in describing one another. How would it be if an undercover police officer was the audio describer, describing the action as it unfolds in his character's voice, into his radio? Look at what your production offers and go from there. Importantly, allow the time for these discoveries and make sure that everyone is onboard with this way of working. Have fun with it and the audience will too!