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Inclusive Design, Audio Description, and Diversity of Theatre Experiences

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Key words: audio description, accessible theatre and inclusive design

ABSTRACT

The conventional approach to audio description (AD) uses third-person narrative, factual delivery style, post-planning, and third-party delivery, making it incompatible with inclusive design principles and equitable access to sensory stimuli.

This paper discusses Clay & Paper Theatre's alternative AD approach, involving actors, script writers, musicians and directors. With no previous exposure to inclusive design, the creative team developed the design process: script modification, characters and music integration, and sensory tour presentation. Innovative methodology taught actors and directors to think about accessibility from the start of their creative processes.

Actors found the inclusive design process useful in developing a better understanding of character roles. Audience members enjoyed the play through the role of music and its link to the narrative and characterization. Clay & Paper Theatre's alternative AD approach exemplifies social innovation in inclusive theatre design for blind and low vision (B/LV) audiences, with an emphasis on process and service outcomes.

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PAPER

Directors and other cast members in live theatre rarely consider how their entertainment shapes theatre experiences for individuals who are B/LV. When cast members and directors consider the experiences of B/LV individuals within their dramaturgical practices, creative and engaging payoffs can evolve, benefiting B/LV theatre goers and practitioners. Conventional AD practices designed to assist B/LV individuals can prevent the development of director and actor produced (and often more entertaining) AD strategies for theatre access. In this paper, we define non-conventional AD as an inclusive design strategy that supports the subjectivity and creativity of the directors and actors. In contrast, conventional AD advocates for objectivity and neutrality in description, which are foreign tenants to the expressive artistic discipline of theatre and interfere with the principles of inclusive design.

Audience members reported enjoyment and better comprehension of the play through the role of music and its link to the narrative and characterization. They also expressed enthusiasm for having the opportunity to connect with actors and musicians directly, having a more personal experience and learning about unusual instruments, some of which they had never heard before. A comprehensive analysis of collected interview and questionnaire data in the context of inclusive design is presented in full. This paper is an example of social innovation in inclusive theatre design for B/LV theatre goers with an emphasis on process and service outcomes.

THEATRE NORMS AND CONVENTIONS

Socially accepted norms for live theatre tend to revolve around behaviour that will not disrupt neighbouring audience or cast members on stage (Cresswell, 1996 and McGrath, 1996). This includes staying quiet during a performance, restricting body movements, and attending to the happenings on stage (Elsaesser, Hagener, 2010). Audience members who do not know, or who cannot abide by these expectations due to disability or alternative access needs can be inadvertently singled out or discriminated against (Kitchin, 1998). Being singled out can potentially reduce the experiential quality of the show or limit the participation of the individual (Kitchin, 1998).

According to Clarkson, (2003) inclusive design supports the representation of a full and diverse range of humans, including diversity of sensory, mobility, and cognitive ability. Reconsidered and revised theatre conventions and expectations of acceptable audience behaviour will make theatre become a more inclusive art form. By adapting conventional perspectives on theatre audiences, Clay & Paper considered how to create a more inclusive theatre experience for B/LV audiences. Training actors in various needs and experiences of B/LV spectators (and how those may differ from sighted audiences' experiences), Clay & Paper helped actors understand diversity of sensory perception and created new ways of approaching theatre for these actors.

CONVENTIONS IN AUDIO DESCRIPTION

Prior to 1985, there were no established and publicly sanctioned AD practices for live theatre (Udo, Acevedo, and Fels, 2010). AD had been practiced for many years informally through the "whisper mode", a method where friends and family interpret the entertainment experience by relaying what they think is important to their B/LV friends or family member (Snyder, 2007).

In following the common assistive technology approach, Pfanstiehl and Pfanstiehl (1981) articulated a simple one-size-fits-all solution to improve theatre access for B/LV audiences. This approach promoted factual "non-subjective" interpretations of visual stimuli, even if they misrepresent the intended meanings of the director (Udo and Fels, 2010c).

Conventional AD inserts description into the spaces between dialogue and music (not integrating music with dialogue, which could create a more entertaining experience). Generally, it is designed separately from the play's content and usually produced after the production by a separate third-party vendor (often with little or no knowledge of the artistry

and the directors' intentions) (Udo and Fels, 2009). As such, conventional AD does not support the central tenants of inclusive design (Udo and Fels, 2010c).

Inclusive design is an important theoretical underpinning in contemporary design (Holt, 2011 and Cope and Kalantzis, 2011). It considers the widest possible user base at the onset of the design process, ensuring interaction and flexibility are inherent throughout the entire project (Dong et al., 2005). Approaches to inclusive design within theatre can be entertaining and enable greater access to diverse audiences (DiMaggio and Useem, 1978), performers (Malone, 2011), playwrights (Lewis, 2005), subject matter (Mintz, 2007), and dramaturgical processes (Udo, Acevedo and Fels, 2010).

Inclusive design approaches did not appear until after this initial description solution (1985) and as a result, the development of a more inclusive dramatic art form did not emerge. Expected norms for AD that are labelled "conventional" remain based on the 1985's AD practices (Udo and Fels, 2009, Udo and Fels 2009a, Udo, Acevedo and Fels, 2010, Udo and Fels, 2010c, Udo and Fels 2010d).

Given that technology has changed, user understanding has grown, and new models of disability have been established, it would seem a logical to reconsider practices and methodologies. Some scholars (Udo and Fels, 2010a) have begun to consider non-conventional AD, also known as integrated AD, in a series of research projects. In their work, their AD approach is an integral creative element of the performance narrative. The description styles (such as colour commentary, news reader style, and third-party led with focus on entertainment) are developed during, or at the beginning of the production, and ideally delivered by someone integral to the creative process (Udo and Fels, 2010a, Milligan, Fels, and Dumocel, 2011). Unlike conventional AD, integrated AD recognizes the subjectivity of arts and culture and considers the creative and artistic intent of the director as a driver of the AD approach (Udo and Fels, 2010a).

An example of the integrated approach can be found in (Udo and Fels, 2009) a theatre production of *Hamlet* (2009), in which the audio describer/actor developed an integrated AD strategy following the director's vision for that production of *Hamlet*. As a form of entertainment in and of itself, the AD was stylistically equivalent to the dialogue, providing enhanced entertainment for all audience members.

Recently, there has been considerable research that provides some evidence regarding the efficacy of non-conventional AD in supporting the entertainment of audiences who use AD. Most audiences enjoyed the non-conventional approach and found that the style of description added to their entertainment, although. (Udo, Acevedo and Fels, 2010, Udo and Fels, 2010a, Konstantinidis, Price and Fels, 2008).

HYBRID APPROACH IN AD

Not all productions or companies are able or willing to adopt a full-fledged integrated AD approach, but they may be willing to consider a hybrid approach to AD. In this approach, elements from conventional and integrated approaches are combined. For instance, hybrid AD can be delivered and designed after a production, but includes emotive elements from the describers. Although not a theatre production, *Kids in the Hall: Death Comes to Town*, (Mudhar, 2011) is a recent example of the hybrid approach to AD. B/LV audience members surveyed during the show reported that the description is a form of entertainment in and of itself, as it is similar in style to the show, using a similar jargon (Naraine and Fels, 2011).

Using this research, a new proposed standard document in Canada, *The Descriptive Video Production and Presentations Best Practices Guide for Digital Environments* (Version 1), suggests that description is a "creative process regardless of style, implementation or quality" (Milligan, Fels and Dumochel, 2011). This document proposes that the purpose of

description is entertainment that suits the visual stimuli and style conveyed in the original media. It also outlines the importance of description occurring within the production process rather than after the fact and recommends a diversity of approaches to reflect the diversity of theatre expression and directorial style.

The Guidance on Standards for Audio Description, developed by the Independent Television Commission (ITC, 2000) in the United Kingdom UK, articulates the conventional approach to AD within their standard. The standard does not recommend the director's involvement in the process, other than occasionally within the script review, nor does it approve describer subjectivity (ITC, 2000). Similarly, *The American Audio Description Standard* developed by the American Council of the Blind (2003), does not support subjectivity in description: "Describe what you see without interpretation or personal comment".

DRAMATIC CHOICES IN AD

Today, enjoyment of arts and culture is considered a right (Weisen, 1996). The non-integrated method of theatre access for B/LV audiences, however, has positioned AD as an appendage to cultural expression, as opposed to being cultural expression in itself. Many access features, such as AD, are superimposed onto other traditions, such as theatre, with little consideration for the art form.

By engaging in the process of developing AD, theatre practitioners can discover the artistic and creative potential inherent in AD. Decisions in AD production and delivery can dramatically affect the comprehension and enjoyment of the narrative. Theatre practitioners should consider various ways AD can be implemented, including open or closed, scripted or non-scripted, conventional or non-conventional AD.

Knowledge and a sense of artistic curiosity sparked Clay & Paper's engagement in the process of AD development. By delivering the service itself, Clay & Paper had control over the logistics and delivery of the production. In this paper, we present their actor-inclusive approach as well as the audience reaction to it.

CLAY & PAPER THEATRE

Clay & Paper, a small non-profit theatre organization, annually produces and delivers new Canadian plays in Dufferin Grove Park, Toronto. During the production of *Horse Feathers* (2008) and *Between Sea & Sky* (2009), Clay & Paper undertook an initiative to develop sensory tours and integrated descriptive dialogue in an open form of AD. Clay & Paper's alternative hybrid approach to AD, its scheduled post production integration and script modification process, artistic development and in-character delivery- is unique in comparison with most mainstream Canadian and international theatre practices today (Udo and Fels, 2009). AD is generally used in theatres as an adaptive strategy rather than a creative one. Although research (Branje, 2006) has shown that AD can be taught and delivered effectively in a short time span, mainstream companies continue to regard AD as foreign to creative performance processes.

Complementary to its narrative style of theatre production, Clay & Paper creatively delivered AD in character during its play and pre-production sensory tours. Most actors had multiple characters which they portrayed to audiences during the sensory tour. Character differentiation was illustrated through masks, props, costumes, multiple voices, and accompanying musical instrumentation. The approach that they took for the AD during the play was to integrate it into all levels of the production including the script, character development and music. Their approach involved people from the creative team; including the director, cast members, community members, B/LV consultants and a B/LV marketer. Some other considerations whether the AD was to be open or closed, whether to offer an introductory sensory tour of the set and costumes before the performance and how the

important element of music could be leveraged to enhance the entertainment experience of B/LV audiences.

OPEN/ CLOSED

Closed AD is an adaptive strategy for B/LC audiences, disseminated through digital or analogue audio receivers worn by individual audience members. The advantage of closed AD is that it can deliver a different experience to different audiences, dependent on who is wearing a headset. For instance B/LV audiences can receive a more descriptive version of a dance sequence, where sighted viewers would experience it visually. The intended meaning of the abstracted movements in the dance sequence would be revealed to those wearing headsets. Closed AD can also offer an alternative entertainment experience to traditional theatre. One case study exists on the alternative approach to AD where the director and describer developed a script that was delivered from the perspective of the embodied memories of the antagonist (Udo, Copeland and Fels, 2011). Unlike conventional AD, the describer “simultaneously acts as an access strategy as well as an alternative means through which to engage the audience” (Udo, Copeland and Fels, 2011).

Open AD is an overt and inclusive design in which description is available to all members of the audience without segregation based on sensory ability (Udo and Fels, 2010a). There is no need for the specialised listening equipment used for closed AD. Clay & Paper chose to use open AD because they thought it best suited their space, electricity access, budget, and inclusive mandate. Clay & Paper engaged its summer actors in developing an open, non-conventional AD framework. Scriptwriters consulted with experts from the B/LV theatre community to make modifications that clarified visual-only elements in the original screenplay. The directors employed their actors to consider possible solutions for problems of visual only information within their character’s role and dialogue. The fact that the AD was open made it comfortable for B/LV theatre goers to enjoy the experience with others, sighted or not, which research has proven is not always the case (Fels et al., 2006).

SENSORY TOUR

Sensory tours give theatregoers a multi-sensory experience of a play and are intended to provide alternative access to some of the inaccessible or partially accessible visual stimuli that could be directly experienced using other senses (Mitroo, Herman, and Badler, 1979; Karam, Russo, Branje, Price, and Fels, 2008; Udo and Fels, 2010b). Touch, scent and sound can extend, enable and provide alternative experiences for some of the production components that are not described in the show itself (e.g., sets, props, costumes and musical instruments) (Udo and Fels, 2010a). Clay & Paper decided that a pre-show tour for B/LV audience members was an important way to provide additional access to their performance. The tour also showcased their crafted musical instruments (see Figure 1), as these played an integral role in the development and delivery of the production and were not described in the show. Furthermore, it gave participating audiences insight into small-scale theatre. For example, the director played in the two-person band and participated in the sensory tour. During the sensory tour, he had direct interaction with the audience, a rare occurrence in theatre. The multi-sensory and interactive experience of the instruments and tactility of the costumes was also entertaining to a diverse audience, not just the B/LV audience.

Figure 1: Director (male) providing a tour of the instruments he used during the play.

ROLE OF MUSIC

Music can be a dynamic element of many theatre performances. Theatre combines multiple modes of expression – images, sounds, music, and speech – in order to achieve its intended meaning (Lopez and Pauletto, 2009). Unlike descriptions of paintings, performance descriptions can link with other non-visual modes of expression such as music to help emphasize artistic and narrative elements (Lopez and Pauletto, 2009). For example, diegetic

sounds, such as musical instruments, can link to specific characters, communicating their arrival, departure, personality, and mood. Sound stimuli can augment visual stimuli in a variety of dramatic and creative ways, thereby further supporting inclusive design outcomes.

Clay & Paper's performers developed the play's sound scenery to enhance their characters and their characters' surroundings. The director, also a musician, developed musical motifs for the play's characters to augment the entertainment experience of dramatic visual stimuli. Instruments were not only works of art in themselves but also were used as tools for cueing, themes, character enhancement and entertainment. The two-person ensemble played an array of instruments; including drums, a glockenspiel, and a 'pong-o-phone' (a tubular instrument played with a ping pong paddles). This unique ensemble of instruments provided a dynamic educational, entertaining and interactive social function for audiences, including children, adults and seniors, participating in Clay & Paper's sensory tour.

EXPERIENCES FROM AUDIENCES AND ACTORS

Ryerson University's Inclusive Media and Design Centre (IMDC) engaged in working with Clay & Paper Theatre in order to explore their integrative AD methodology and gather audience reactions to their AD delivery and actors' feedback on the process and experience of AD development and delivery. The first year of the project there were no participants; however, during the second year, 11 participants attended Clay & Paper's AD production, *Between Sea & Sky*. In this paper, we present the results of interviews with the actors for both years and the audience evaluation results from the second year.

CHANGES FROM THE FIRST TO SECOND YEAR

There were many suggestions offered by the first year actors and many of them were adopted for the second year production. These included offering Braille and large print programs, hiring a B/LV person to market the play, providing B/LV people with transportation, and marketing in advance to targeted specific clubs and organizations. As a result of these changes, the B/LV community was better informed and could attend the performance in the second year of the study.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What approaches and insights into the production of AD were gained by the directors and actors of the Clay & Paper theatre company?
2. How did the audience respond to the AD and sensory tour produced by the Clay & Paper theatre company?

METHOD

We conducted pre and post-play questionnaires with cast members and B/LV theatre participants to assess the entertainment value for participants and learning experience for cast members. There were nine questions in the pre-play questionnaire and nine questions in the post-play questionnaire (see Table 1). In the pre-play questionnaire, participants were asked to provide demographic information such as age and vision status, as well as prior experience and opinions of sensory tours and AD. Participants were also asked about the frequency of their AD television use, AD knowledge (including differentiation between open and closed AD), and open AD experiences (quantity of open AD performances attended).

AUDIENCE

In the post-play questionnaire, the first seven questions were asked using a 5-Point Likert Scale (where 1 is most positive and 5 is most negative response). The last two questions (8 and 9) were open ended (see Table 1).

Table 1: Post-play questions for B/LV audiences.

(1) How entertaining was the play?
(2) How noticeable was the audio description?
(3) How enjoyable was the style of audio description?
(4) How much of an impact did the audio description have on your enjoyment of the play?
(5) How much impact did the sensory tour have on your enjoyment of the play?
(6) How many changes were made to the original production (speculate)?
(7) Would you have preferred closed description (please explain)?
(8) What was the best part of the experience?
(9) What could have been improved?

Post-sensory tour questionnaires containing nine questions were also given to participants. The first seven questions were asked using a 5-Point Likert Scale (where 1 was most positive and 5 was the most negative response). The last three questions (7, 8 and 9) were open ended (see Table 2).

Table 2: Post-sensory tour questions for B/LV audiences.

(1) How enjoyable was the sensory tour?
(2) Did you find the layout/ design of the sensory tour effective?
(3) In general, did the sensory tour provide you with enough detail?
(4) Specifically, did the sensory tour provide you with enough detail of each of the following: characters, set, costumes, props, puppets, and masks (the options were listed in a five point Likert scale from “too much detail” to “not nearly enough detail”)?
(5) Do you think an hour was enough time to participate in the sensory tour?
(6) Did you enjoy that the actors were an integral part of the sensory tour?
(7) What was the best part of the sensory tour?
(8) What part could you improve?
(9) Do you have any additional suggestions?

The majority of the 11 participants were between 30 and 39 years old and had low vision. Most participants (eight participants or 72%) had never attended a live audio described theatre production. Only two participants (18%) had experienced an artistic production with AD (not including Clay & Paper’s production). Furthermore, only one (9%) participant had experienced an open AD production and only one participant rated his level of familiarity with AD as “very familiar” on a five point Likert scale.

ACTORS

In order to assess the AD development process undertaken by the cast, 13 open ended pre-play questions were administered to actors and one question was asked using a 5-Point Likert Scale (see Table 3).

Table 3: Pre-play questions for the actors.

(1) What kind of theatre training do you have?
(2) What kind of theatrical performances have you been involved with?
(3) What is a sensory tour?
(4) Who can participate in a sensory tour?
(5) What did you think AD is?
(6) Who uses AD services?
(7) Where is AD used?
(8) Before participating in this production, had you been (formally or informally) taught how to make a production accessible?
(9) Accessible to individuals with what kind(s) of disability?
(10) How do you think this will change the production?
(11) Have you ever participated in an accessible production?
(12) Where did you gain this knowledge and from whom?
(13) How much AD do you think will be required to make this play accessible? (Likert scale response with 1 being "none" and 5 being "a lot")
(14) What are the most important visual events in this play?

An additional five open ended post-play questions was given to actors (see Table 4).

Table 4: Post-play questions for the actors.

(1) How has your understanding of AD changed through your participation in this project?
(2) How has your understanding of sensory tours changed though this process?
(3) How has your understanding of the B/LV community changed through this project?
(4) What was the best part of your experience?
(5) What could be improved?

Reported in this paper are two different sets of six actors, 12 in total, who participated in interviews over a consecutive two year period. All actors had a substantial amount of theatre/performance education and experience. All second year actors had at least one year or more of post-secondary theatre education, whereas only four actors (66%) had post-

secondary drama education from the first year of production. All actors in year one and year two had participated in at least one or more drama performances (including professional, semi-professional and amateur productions in high schools, universities and within the community). In year two, actors had more varied experiences, including stage management, two out of six (33%), and directing, one out of six (16%). Thirty-three percent (two out of six) of actors knew nothing about AD before participating in the production in the first year of the play, compared with 83% (five out of six) who knew about AD in theatre practices. Thirty-three percent (two out of six) of the second year actors had experience working with audiences with specific disabilities (e.g. hard of hearing individuals, B/LV and individuals with learning disabilities). However, of the 12 cast members, only one had been taught (informally or formally) about how to make performances accessible to individuals with disabilities. Although limited by sample size, this preliminary data suggest there is a lack formal education within theatre post-secondary education. This in turn raises important questions regarding how theatre, as a discipline, defines its audiences and diversity within its audience, and how this may impact actors' perceptions of theatre audiences (especially B/LV audiences).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

SENSORY TOUR

AUDIENCE

The majority of B/LV audience members (10 of 11 or 91%) rated their level of enjoyment as very enjoyable or enjoyable. All audience members rated the design of the sensory tour as very effective or effective and rated the level of actor involvement as very enjoyable. A majority of participants (9 of 11 or 82%) thought that there was enough detail to gain an understanding of the show and that an hour was enough time to experience the tour (8 of 11 or 73%). Specifically, a majority of participants rated the level of detail for the characters, setting, costumes, props and puppets/masks as sufficient (91%, 82%, 91%, 100% and 100% respectively).

ACTORS

Before their involvement in *Clay and Paper*, actors seemed to have a very general sense of a sensory tour format and for whom it was designed. When asked what a sensory tour was, five of six second year actors (83%) and three of six (50%) from the first year mentioned "touch" in their response. Three of six second year actors (50%) mentioned specifically B/LV people in relation to a sensory tour, whereas only one actor in the first year (16%) mentioned B/LV audience members. Four of six second year actors (66%) mentioned specific objects (such as props, artwork, sets, costumes and so on). None of the first year actors mentioned specific objects, although one actor (16%) mentioned "texture." One of six second year cast members (16%) mentioned space. Only one second year actor (16%) mentioned time positioning in relation to the tour and theatre production (e.g. "prior to performance"). None of the participants mentioned entertainment or enjoyment of the experience, although four of six second year actors (66%) mentioned words associated with knowledge (such as "sense of", "know", and "understanding").

From the start, actors recognized that sensory tours were beneficial to B/LV theatre goers and they were also aware of their potential benefit across a variety of audiences. Fifty percent (three of six) second year actors mentioned only B/LV people when asked why sensory tours are beneficial. The other half of the cast mentioned B/LV as well as other people who might benefit from sensory tours (including "hands on people", "audience members" generally, and those people who wanted a "higher level" of experience with the production). Out of the three first year participants who responded to this question, only one mentioned specifically B/LV when asked who would benefit from this service and two of three mentioned "everyone". When asked who can participate in a sensory tour, five of six

cast members (83%) said anyone could participate. One of six (16%) second year cast members suggested specific people including B/LV, assistants, friends, family members, and children. This data suggests that actors are aware of the importance of company/companionship in the enjoyment and experience of theatre.

Actor understanding of sensory tours changed through the process of thinking and producing a sensory tour. This included learning how to better entertain B/LV audiences: "I learned how enjoyable it can be for people to get a chance to touch the props, masks and puppets." Although, as one actor mentioned it is not only about "re-creating a visual experience", but it is also about creating something "personal" and personalized." Sensory tours can, as these actors learned, be more engaging than simple access to physical things in the play and this was revealed in their post questionnaire comments.

The effort that the actors expended in the sensory tour was rewarded by the enjoyment and appreciation from the audience. In addition, it seems that the audience was able to gain a deeper understanding of the play's visual elements which may have in turn affected their understanding and enjoyment of the play itself.

The Play

The majority of B/LV audience members (10 of 11 or 91%) rated their level of enjoyment as very enjoyable or enjoyable. Observation of AD during the performance was very noticeable or noticeable for some (5 of 11 or 45%) and not very noticeable or not noticeable for others (5 of 11 or 45%). All participants found the style of AD to be very enjoyable or enjoyable and a majority found the style of AD had a large impact or enough impact on their enjoyment of the production (7 of 11 or 64%). The same number of people thought that the sensory tour had a large impact or enough impact on their enjoyment of the production (7 of 11 or 64%).

Actors

Although actors received no formal training in how to use AD in their theatre programs, all six (100%) second year actors knew that AD involved some sort of "description." The actors all had different ideas in terms of what they thought needed to be described. When answering the question regarding what needed description, two out of six (33%) said "going on" (possibly referencing the action of the play), three out of six (50%) said "visual" information, and one out of six (16%) used more specific theatre language such as "blocking, movement, subtext." The first year actors were generally less aware of what AD was and how it would be applied in the context of a production. Sixty-six percent (four of six) had no idea what AD was before participating in the production. One (16%) first year actor thought AD was a "vocal version of closed captioning". None of the 12 actors from both years mentioned entertainment in their definition of AD.

When asked who uses AD services however, there was no clear link to the B/LV community. Most actors were also confused between the needs of B/LV, and deaf and hard of hearing audience members. For instance, one actor included hard of hearing and B/LV audiences as potential users, and three actors thought deaf people used AD services (four out of twelve (33%) actors thought AD services were for deaf and hard of hearing individuals). One actor thought that the service could also benefit people with "mental and physical impairments". As AD is not a mainstream subject, eight different Canadian post-secondary theatre programs were surveyed and none taught AD. It is not surprising that so many actors have limited knowledge of B/LV audience's entertainment and access needs.

Despite AD's lack of recognition in established theatre programs, many actors were easily able to understand the concept, identifying what visual elements from the production needed description. When asked about the quantity of AD, the actors expected to add to the production. Most of the second year actors (five out of six (83%) thought there would be the need for "some" AD, whereas, five out of six (83%) of first year actors thought only "minor"

amounts would be required. When asked what parts of the play should be described, 50% of the first year actors (three of six) made reference to understanding the “story.” One of these three actors also mentioned the “characters.” One actor out of the six (16%) mentioned “action”, and two (33%) mentioned “entertainment” (either directly or indirectly through “physical humour”). Of the second year actors, all actors mentioned specific aspects of the show: props (50%), puppet show (50%), masks and make up (50%), sets (33%), scenes (33%), dances (16%). Often these were comedic elements in the show such as “the puppet show” or the “pirate dance scene.” The resulting difference in opinion over how many modifications could be related to the content of the play, its structure (e.g. narrative), and the nuances in actor perceptions or valuation of the play’s components. A wide scope in description quantity may exist, even with those individuals familiar with or playing a role in the play. Furthermore, having such an array of opinions surrounding choices in what should be described reinforces the proposition that AD is a creative process and the choices over what and what not to describe are creative choices, subject to the individual(s) making them.

AD DECISION PROCESS AND LEARNING (POST PLAY)

Actors seemed to learn how to make decisions about the quantity and quality of description. Realisations occurred during the process that clarified actors understandings of AD. One actor commented: “Less is more. Sometimes actions that I thought needed more audio description actually became evident in performance.” Actors recognised the importance of choosing what to describe and what not to: “Actors need to be specific and succinct too, so the audience doesn’t feel overloaded with information,” said one actor. Actors realised that AD was not necessarily difficult, and that AD and script modification can be “simple” while maintaining “detail” and quality.

Actors reported that they learned from their experiences in a variety of ways. Fifty percent of first year actors enjoyed being a part of the script decision making process. All actors reported that the experience was beneficial, but how it was deemed beneficial varied: “I loved considering how to best communicate with individuals with a perception of reality different from my own. I have acquired a valuable skill set and an enriched understanding of human perception.” Another actor mentioned the “improved” script, while another two mentioned the importance of learning from different perspectives. One actor mentioned how the AD enhanced the experience for sighted viewers as well: “Audio description has actually improved my understanding of the play and allowed me to be more specific with my actions and actually make some of the scenes more accessible to the sighted.” Another actor learned to think more about her movements through the AD process: She reported it “give[s] people a better sense of my character.”

This overwhelmingly positive response from actors suggests that developing and delivering AD may add value to the development of an actor and a play for sighted and B/LV audiences. This may also have implications for new materials to be introduced to the education and training of actors in general.

In response to the question about how their understanding of AD changed, one actor mentioned understanding how to “describe better”, while another actor suggested the importance of visual identification of elements to AD. Two said it “improved their understanding” of the play through the experience of being a part of the AD and sensory tour process. Two actors mentioned that “audio description should have an entertainment factor built into it.” The fact that many actors suggested that the process improved their understanding of AD may point to the notion that including actors in the AD process is not only beneficial to the audience but also the cast. It allows actors to be part of the process rather than it being a separate or isolated entity as prescribed in the conventional method of AD. It would seem that the integrated process provides this opportunity and benefit to actors as well as audiences.

Besides AD being a worthwhile activity in developing performance skills, many actors enjoyed the experience. When asked what was the “Best part of this experience? And why?”, all second year actors mentioned words such as “fun”, “happy”, “like”, and “enjoy”, indicating that entertainment and enjoyment were their most fulfilling experiences of the process. One second year actor said, “I just enjoy making others have a good time”. One reflected on “seeing how happy” the audience was. Another second year actor mentioned the intimacy between audience and actors during the sensory tours. When asked for “further comments”, two second year actors mentioned how much they enjoyed the experience and how “rewarding” it was. Connecting with an audience is often an important aspect of an actor’s performance (Elsaesser and Hagener, 2010). As seen from the comments of the second year actors who performed for a B/LV audience (unlike in the first year where no B/LV audience participated), this connection was not only important to them but having a positive impact on the audience made the actors’ experiences enjoyable.

The responses to the question about the impact of AD on the actor’s understanding of the B/LV community provided some important insights. Most of the actors believed that B/LV audiences need to have more opportunities to go to accessible theatre and that theatre organizations should work to make this possible. One expressed with sadness how “some [of the B/LV audience members] had only taken in less than five shows in their whole life.” Being able to easily access theatre, many actors were unaware of the difficulties others experience in accessing inclusive forms of this art. Furthermore, second year actors were exposed to a wide variety of B/LV individuals from people who had been blind since birth to people who had become blind later in life. Participating in the AD process improved the actors’ awareness and understanding of these access issues which may then translate into advocacy for increased accessibility to suit a more diverse audience in the future.

THE ROLE OF MUSIC IN AD

Music was an important element of the show: a source of entertainment for actors and B/LV participants. When asked what actors enjoyed most about the play, half of the second year actors mentioned the music. The same number also expressed that music was what they most enjoyed from the sensory tour. Although no direct questions about the music were asked of the participants, five out of the 11 B/LV audience members mentioned music in relation to their enjoyment and comprehension of Clay & Paper’s *Between Sea & Sky*. One B/LV individual said, “he loved the harp kind of instrument”, which he had never heard before. Another participant said, “it helps that the music introduces the narrator.” Music may in fact be a more critical element of AD than we had originally considered. Further investigation into the role of music in the entertainment value of AD may be beneficial to the process of AD development and delivery.

OPEN VERSUS CLOSED AD

Although the concept of open AD was not raised (either by actors or participants) in great depth, other issues, such as technological problems (that had previously been raised in research using closed AD), were also not present. One of 12 actors mentioned open AD in the context of having a “better understanding of different types of audio description.” When asked specifically, five out of 11 audience participants said they preferred open description. Two additional participants included the words “integrated” and “seamless” in their praise of the show. Another participant said the “seamless” quality made it less evident to sighted audiences and that the play was “perfect to experience with friends”, a finding also reported in other research (see Fels et al., 2006). Five participants mentioned that the open AD helped them become “more involved with the theatrical experience”, including identification with “characters”, “action”, and “dialogue.” Others specified how the closed AD can “intrude” in hearing the dialogue and create concern that the “technical aspects” will interfere in the

production. These results suggest that the entertainment experiences of live theatre can be affected by whether the AD is open or closed. In our study, having open description seemed to be preferred as it allowed for an integrated and high quality entertainment experience of the play.

CONCLUSIONS

While this article only provides limited participant data for a single performance (*Between Sea and Sky*) and two consecutive years of data from Clay & Paper's actors, the findings in this study represent some of the first research to evaluate AD from an actor's perspective. Actors gained insight and learning from working on AD, reflected in their thinking process and performance delivery. They learned that B/LV audiences enjoy being entertained and that entertainment is an important element of AD strategy and delivery. By allowing theatre practitioners to imagine atypical audience perspectives (B/LV theatre goers), actors learned how to develop and deliver AD within a relatively short timeframe. The use of integrated AD enabled actors to experience performing for B/LV audiences, reporting a fulfilling experience. Furthermore, this research provides some evidence that actors can be actively involved in the AD process with few detriments. This provides additional support for the importance of having original theatre designers participate in the creation and adaptation of improved theatre practices for the inclusion of a more diverse range of human experiences.

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