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# From the describer's mouth: reflections on creating unconventional audio description for live theatre


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## **14. From the describer's mouth:**

### **Reflections on creating unconventional audio description for live theatre**

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#### **1. Introduction**

Audio description (AD) gives individuals who are blind or partially sighted the opportunity to access and enjoy audiovisual entertainment media and events through the aural description of visual stimuli via a secondary audio track, feed or onstage character/narrator. It is most commonly known as an accessibility strategy for pre-recorded media such as television or film. However, AD is now being used to make live theatre and events more accessible to a wider audience (see Holland 2009; Orero and Matamala 2007; York 2007). This is seen as a proactive way of encouraging a new demographic to attend the theatre while also addressing the needs of an ageing population who may develop a need or interest in the service.

Several academic papers already have sought to assess the effectiveness of AD. However, the majority of these papers discuss the use of AD for pre-recorded media; some focus on third party produced AD while others assess the merits of AD that is overseen and/or created by the original content creators. Little published or publically available research exists on AD within the context of live theatre. Even scarcer are papers which discuss or investigate description from the perspective of the audio describer. Through a thematic analysis of comments made by each describer during separate post-production interviews, we present in this chapter the describer's perspective as a lens through which to document the development and execution of two unique AD strategies devised or overseen by the production's director.

#### **2. Live audio description**

Considering that the focus of this paper is on live AD of theatrical productions, we seek to present examples, whenever possible, of AD within this context. While it is important to understand the history behind the development of formalized description, we cannot assume that pre-recorded AD and its practices are interchangeable with those used for live AD.

However, we must often draw on research discussing AD for television and film, since no similar research exists to date for live theatre.

Two very different philosophies exist within the field of AD, which also tend to dictate what technology is needed and how it is used. Third party produced AD providers propose a single set of practices and processes through which to disseminate AD, whereas proponents of alternative forms hold that each production of a play should require the development of a unique AD strategy (Udo and Fels 2009a, 2009b).

## **2.1 Live third party produced AD**

Practices and processes for live third party produced AD were first developed by G. Frazier in the 1970s (see Snyder 2007). Pfanstiehl and Pfanstiehl further refined this work, creating a set of guidelines for description, informed by their experience offering live description of films at the cinema as well as live theatre events. The Independent Television Commission (ITC) provides a summary of these guidelines: “describe what is there, do not give a personal version of what is there and never talk over dialogue or commentary” (ITC 2000: 8). For Pfanstiehl and Pfanstiehl, the ideal describer acts as a “faithful camera lens”, describing what is seen objectively while disallowing assumption and personal interpretation to shape descriptions (The play’s the thing 1985: 91). Audio Description International explains that “this is not a job where your ad-libs or your interpretation of what you see is appropriate<sup>1</sup>”.

While there has been very limited research regarding the effectiveness and impact of live AD in the theatre, within the context of television some research does exist, although it has focused almost exclusively on documentary content (Pettitt, Sharpe and Cooper 1996; Peli and Fine 1996). In addition, these studies primarily assess comprehension levels of such programmes and how they change with the addition or removal of AD rather than factors such as enjoyment. Schmeidler and Kirchner (2001) did assess performance and enjoyment measures, but used only one genre, the documentary film; documentaries are information-centric, compared with other genres such as comedy or drama, which prioritize entertainment rather than education. It is, therefore, difficult to determine whether the conventional

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.adinternational.org/ADIad.html> (last accessed on 15.07.08).

approach to AD is the most appropriate method to create enjoyable programming for television audiences, let alone live theatrical productions.

Although AD guidelines do exist, they are based primarily on anecdotal evidence and the historical use of a specific set of practices and processes rather than on empirical data. Gerber (2007) believes that AD has been created for, but not formally tested and evaluated by, blind and low-vision individuals. Similarly, Udo and Fels (2010b) argue that conventional AD for television and film is often heralded as an ideal example of universal design, even though it violates several of its own tenets.

## **2.2 Live integrated AD**

Since AD exists primarily within the context of assistive technology, its value as a potentially beneficial narrative and artistic strategy is too often ignored by the mainstream. However, directors of live theatre events seem to be increasingly willing to experiment with AD techniques, especially in non-commercial venues. Live integrated AD gives the director the opportunity to oversee the development and execution of the AD in much the same way as any other aspect of the production, including, for example, costumes, props and sets. Considering that the director's role is to ensure that all aspects of the production work together to form a unique entertainment experience, proponents of having AD being produced and delivered by the creation team suggest that the director has the right and responsibility to exert creative control over the AD. Therefore, the describer's role and responsibilities in each production are dependent upon how involved the director would like to be in the creation, development and execution of an AD strategy. Several theatre groups are using the web to introduce integrated AD to others by posting documents detailing their experience. Some of these approaches have also been shared at AD conferences such as Envisage<sup>2</sup> or the Audio Description International Conference<sup>3</sup>.

Research within the field of live integrated AD is limited. However, some preliminary research does exist. Udo and Fels (2010d) present the practices and processes associated with the creation of a live integrated AD strategy for a live fashion show. The describer's AD

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.developingaudiences.com/documents/envisage\\_transcript.doc](http://www.developingaudiences.com/documents/envisage_transcript.doc) (last accessed on 15.06.09).

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.audiodescribe.com/about/articles/proceedings.php> (last accessed on 15.06.09).

strategy merged traditional AD with the colour commentary (similar in style to that used during sports events), to reflect the playful tongue in cheek nature of the event. The researchers assessed the describer's omissions and commissions during the show, as well as participant input to gauge the effectiveness of the audio described event. They concluded that the AD benefitted from having a describer use a style of AD that captured the emotion and excitement of the event while, at the same time, relaying important visual stimuli to participants.

Udo and Fels (2009b) detail the development and execution of a live integrated AD strategy for a production of *Hamlet* which was overseen by the director and written by the describer. The director and describer investigated the possibility of using a first person audio describer after watching clips from a television show in which the content creators used the protagonist as a describer (see Fels *et al.* 2006a and Fels *et al.* 2006b). Using Shakespearian English and the iambic pentameter, the describer wrote his descriptions from the perspective of Horatio. The AD also deviated from conventions in that the describer presented participants with a direct verbal explanation of the director's vision. Udo, Acevedo and Fels (2010c) discuss audience reaction to this performance, while Udo and Fels (2010a) base their study on a touch tour that was held before the show.

One of the only papers that addresses AD from the perspective of the describer is Udo and Fels (2009a). The authors facilitated the development, creation and execution of an AD strategy for a production of *Fiddler on the Roof*, which was written and performed by three grade eight students. The students divided up the script, wrote descriptions for their own sections and delivered them during the performance of the play. The students worked under the supervision and guidance of the director (who was their drama teacher). The director asked the students to describe events from the perspective of the title character, the fiddler on the roof. Udo and Fels (2009a) drew conclusions into the description processes through an analysis of the students' journals as well as an interview with the production's director. Although this paper provides insight into the description practices and processes underwent by three elementary school students as well as their reactions, it is of limited assistance when determining how adults would go about describing an event or reflecting upon it.

### **3. Method**

The primary focus of this study was to ascertain and analyze the perspectives of two individuals tasked with the authorship and/or performance of AD for two separate theatrical productions. Informed by our previous research on the processes and practices associated with the creation of AD for live theatre (Udo and Fels 2009a, 2010c), we facilitated the creation, development and execution of two unique AD strategies with separate creative teams. In what follows, we present these two distinct experiences as case studies.

Each describer worked with a theatre group which was made up of blind, low-vision and sighted cast, crew and production staff. Nora, the first describer, worked with the Glenvale Players on a production of Anne Chislett's *The Tomorrow Box*<sup>4</sup>. Debbie, the second describer, joined the cast of *Common Criminal*,<sup>5</sup> an original play by Wanda Fitzgerald, an amateur playwright/director.

Nora described herself as a retired kindergarten teacher and a member of ACTII studio, a Theatre School and Creative Drama Centre for People 50+<sup>6</sup>, where she had acted in plays and participated in playwrighting courses. She also self-identified herself as sighted and said that her age range was 65+. Debbie self-identified as blind and between 55 and 64 years old. She explained that her full-time job was at the Canadian National Institute for the Blind.

Five out of eight performances of *The Tomorrow Box* were audio described, while all six performances of *Common Criminal* were described. For *The Tomorrow Box*, the describer was positioned in a separate room and used a remote monitor and audio to follow the play. All audience members using AD employed a wireless headset (closed description). For *Common Criminal*, the describer was positioned on stage, yet in the wings, and not visible by the audience. Five performances were closed described where audience members used wireless headsets and one performance was open described, i.e. all audience members heard the description through the house audio system.

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<sup>4</sup> *The Tomorrow Box* (2008). By Anne Chislett. Directed by Lauren Stein. Toronto, ON, Canada. Palmerston Public Library. 25 January - 2 February.

<sup>5</sup> *Common Criminal* (2008). By Wanda Fitzgerald. Directed by Wanda Fitzgerald. Toronto, ON, Canada. Tranzac. 26-30 November.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.ryerson.ca/~act2/> (last accessed on 15.06.09).

### **3.1 Research questions**

Within this paper, we seek to answer the following research questions:

- What were the strengths and/or weaknesses of live content creation team produced AD process from the perspective of the describer?
- What creative and/or technical challenges did the describers encounter when working with the content creation team and cast? How were these problems overcome, or how could they be overcome in the future?

### **3.2 Data collection**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with both describers and audio recorded with their permission. Nora was interviewed by phone, while Debbie met the researchers at her workplace. The same questions were used to elicit responses from the two describers, although some were modified to take into account the context in which description was being offered. However, participants were encouraged to share their opinion on any topic related to the project.

Nora and Debbie were both asked a series of twelve questions on a variety of topics related to AD and their experience working on the project. The researchers were interested in learning the describer's motivation for describing (Q3) and the process they underwent to secure the position (Q2). The describers were asked to discuss their understanding of AD before, during and after the production (Q1) as well as the process they underwent to prepare themselves to audio describe (Q4). Each of the describers made use of a first person AD strategy, narrating events through the voice of a character in the play. As such, describers were asked if they felt like a co-creator of the role (Q5). The researchers also wanted to know if the describer believed they were a member of the cast (Q6). Questions about technology focused on the describer's comfort level and ease of using equipment (Q7), as well as on whether the describer thought the show would have been better if it were open described (Q9). The describers were asked if they had any advice for other describers (Q10) and were invited to discuss the best and worst part of the AD experience (Q11). Finally, describers were asked to make suggestions about what could be improved (Q12).

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and five themes and definitions were identified. Two researchers independently reviewed two one-page randomly selected parts of each interview. Initially they had difficulty achieving inter-rater reliability due to ambiguity in the thematic definitions which resulted in assumptions being made that were incorrect. However, category names and their definitions were refined to be more specific and definitive (see Table 1 for themes and definitions). Eventually, the researchers achieved an inter-rater reliability of at least 0.84 in all categories. At that point, one researcher proceeded to code the remaining parts of both interviews.

Theme	Definition
Motivation and background information	Describer's motivation for participating and background information
Understanding of AD	Describer discusses her understanding of AD or makes comments which suggest an in-depth knowledge of AD
Self-assessment	Describer assesses her own performance. Includes advice to other describers.
Working with others	Describer discusses her experience working with the cast, crew, director and researchers. Includes her feelings as to whether or not she was included within the process like any other members of the cast or crew.

**Table 1:** Coding themes and definitions

In what follows we present in detail the findings of the study, grouped under the themes outlined in Table 1.

## **4. Results and discussion**

We start with describer motivation and their background.

### **4.1 Describer motivation and background**



Nora made seven comments about her motivation for describing *The Tomorrow Box* or about background information. She had heard from a friend that researchers affiliated with a production of *The Tomorrow Box* were looking for an audio describer. She was intrigued by the idea and “wanted to know more about it”. The researchers showed Nora several clips of productions they had previously worked on, and described to her the processes and practices associated with the creation of AD for live theatre. As a member of the local theatre troupe, Nora had written and acted previously in “maybe four short plays”.

Debbie made thirteen comments which addressed her motivation for describing and gave background information. Originally, Debbie worked as an accessibility consultant and understudy of the female lead of *Common Criminal*. When the lead actress abruptly quit one week prior to opening night, Debbie and the director met to discuss the feasibility of Debbie stepping in. Debbie had an extremely limited amount of time to memorize the geography of the stage so that she could execute the blocking in relation to this mental image. Together, Debbie and the director agreed that it would probably be best if the sighted actor who was tasked with the description stepped into the lead role instead. Debbie then became the describer, a “type of role [that] suited me, theatrically”. She was initially hesitant, explaining that “having a [sighted] person playing a blind person goes against integrity”; however, she ended up choosing to describe, noting that “you want it to be done well and I knew I could do the description with my eyes closed!”. Debbie had been working with the describer and director to edit the description script and, as such, she was able to transition into her new role easily while also helping her predecessor learn to successfully portray an individual who is blind.

#### **4.2 Understanding of AD**

Whereas Nora “knew nothing at all about it [AD] at all” prior to participation in the project, Debbie had first-hand experience using AD and was able to articulate how it affected an entertainment experience such as watching television or a film. As such, it is not surprising that Nora made five comments while Debbie made thirty.

Debbie explains how many films and television shows are difficult to understand or enjoy with limited vision:

[...] you have to fill in the gaps all the time. It's a process that you develop, so it's something that you just do after a while. There are... gaps in your watching a movie, where you may not be sure and then all of a sudden, two minutes later it clicks in, so you put it back together again. That's a common process when you watch today's movies.

Without AD, Debbie had to work to understand and enjoy a piece of entertainment media. AD provided her with a completely new perspective and attitude towards the spectatorship practices of sighted individuals and their expectations of what a movie would deliver:

Going to the movie for a sighted person is a mindless exercise. I had no idea it was that mindless. When I go to the movies, I'm always trying to figure it out, connect the dots and I'm used to it. Going to the movie with AD, it's kind of like gee, it's interesting and it's informative, but it's mindless, like just everything's there.

Whereas enjoyment and escapism seem to be the primary reasons why people watch media, Debbie's spectatorship practices required her to "connect the dots" using dialogue and additional sound stimuli as a means through which to establish what was visually occurring on screen. As such, Debbie was able to differentiate between conventional AD and that proposed by the authors. She often referenced her experience of watching theatre, television and films as well as radio to situate her understanding and experience with AD. For example, in talking about AD, she described how amphitheatres in ancient Greece were built to ensure that sound carried and that actors used costuming and props to make themselves easier to see from a distance, "a lot of the audience wouldn't be able to see the actors, especially if they were outside or they were... that's why they wore the high boots and stilts [...]". The Greeks used visual aids to make actors easier to see, but also used dialogue to communicate onstage action, similar to some AD strategies used today. However, instead of doing so to address the needs of blind and low-vision theatre-goers, they used these practices to maximize seat sales.

For *Common Criminal*, the AD was overseen by the director, which Debbie saw as an innovative means through which to incorporate accessibility:

AD, in this case, was woven into the narrative of the play and I think it's a new slant for audio describing... It's kind of added a dimension to the play as opposed to putting description on top of the play or as a retrofit.

The describer in this production had a double role: “One is the character of a dead memory and one as a real describer. So it was very interesting transition that you had to make and you did develop the character as it went along”. From her experience, Debbie explains that many new describers believe that they have to explain everything rather than what is visually important: “the intent is what you’re trying to convey, not the precision, because you’re going to take away from the show if you get too technical about the precision”. Debbie realizes that the communication of every precise onstage movement is not important, only those which are relevant to the overall enjoyment of the narrative or the play itself.

Entering into the project with little knowledge of or experience using AD, Nora believes that her knowledge of AD has “change[d] immensely... now I think it’s of great assistance... I got a better understanding, actually, for visually impaired people – what they’re missing...”. While Debbie had first-hand experience using AD, Nora was able to see how the AD that she provided positively affected her social interaction with and amongst her friends: “we were at a restaurant and she [Nora’s friend] and her visually impaired friend could chat [with] her about what [went] on, because she had heard it too”. Both of her friends made use of the AD and were thus able to discuss a common experience. To Nora, this experience showcased the importance of finding alternative strategies through which to communicate visual stimuli to blind and low-vision theatre-goers: “Especially the visually impaired, it gets them involved, so they’re more on a level with the sighted people, because they get a little more information about what’s going on”. In addition, she realized the constraints placed on a describer and how important it was to edit descriptions throughout the process: “I got a better understanding of... how to write things very shortly so... I mean instead of rambling on, because you only have a certain length of time to say it”. In our experience facilitating AD, this is one of the main obstacles describers encounter and, as Debbie notes, they must learn to communicate what is important to the play and the theatre-going experience as a whole, not parts. However, Debbie’s description script was authored by, and rehearsed under, the supervision of the director, whereas Nora wrote her own script and rehearsed it without the same amount of input or oversight from her director. Further research is required to gain insight into the advantages and challenges that arise when a describer is asked to create a description script with and without the assistance of the director.

### **4.3 Self-assessment**

Nora and Debbie assessed their participation in the project. Nora made 51 comments while Debbie made 27. The majority of these comments focused on the process of writing/editing the description script (30 of 78) and performing it live (40 of 78). Hence, we discuss self-assessment in two parts: writing/editing, and then performing. The additional comments (nine of 78) which focused on advice to other describers will be discussed in relation to these two dimensions.

#### **4.3.1 Writing/editing**

Nora and Debbie described events from the perspective of a character portrayed within the play. Whereas Debbie's script was already written for her, Nora wrote her own AD script. Nora realized that writing a play was very different from writing descriptions for one:

With writing a script, the idea just comes and it just sits in there and I think about it for a while; and then [when it] strikes me, I write something down. But with the AD, you've got to think of it as the play that's already written and you have to work from there.

Nora had to write descriptions that worked on two levels, as she was not only asked to describe onstage events but to do so in the voice of a specific character. Nora and her director decided to take a similar approach to Udo and Fels (2009a, 2009b) and wrote the descriptions in the voice of the female protagonist who *recalled* events as they occurred, rather than overtly describing them. Nora attended most rehearsals while writing and editing the script. Initially, she had trouble with the writing process, yet as she began to describe events as her character would, she overcame this barrier: "I didn't really plan it, it just came out. And it was a lot easier to do, a lot more fun to do it when you do it in character". Nora seemed to have difficulty writing when focusing solely on the creation of conventional descriptions. Writing and performing dialogue which acted as "hidden description" may have been more appealing to Nora, as it gave her a channel through which to be creative: "I sort of went into character, so that was sort of creative. Yeah, I just sorted of added a little character to the words – like a little attitude".

When asked if she would have preferred that the description was written for her, Nora realized that "it would have been a lot easier. But no, I think you learned a lot while you were doing it". As mentioned in 4.2, Nora found that the experience helped her learn "how to write

things very shortly so... because you only have a certain length of time to say it". However, she was unsure as to whether writing ADs had improved her own scriptwriting. Nora also mentioned, after talking to a visually impaired friend, that describers should realize how important it is to describe the scenery in greater detail as well as the exits and entrances of characters.

Interestingly, Nora seemed to see herself as a member of the AD team who wrote and edited the script with Udo as a co-author. She notes:

We [Nora and Udo] went to the rehearsals and sort of saw what was going on and where we could say something. Then we worked together and wrote a script as such, where we could put something. And we had to adjust as we went along, because some of them didn't fit in.

The authors, however, do not consider Udo as a co-contributor or co-author for this production but, rather, a facilitator. Nora wrote the majority of the description script by herself. At the beginning of the writing process, Udo did assist, but tended to answer Nora's queries by outlining the decisions available to her and the various strategies that other AD teams had used. Alternatively, he often redirected the question back to Nora rather than offer a solution himself.

Even though the description script for *Common Criminal* was written by the director, Debbie edited the script: first, as the accessibility consultant; and, later, as the describer. Unlike Nora, Debbie was able to use her experience as a blind woman to guide her through the editing process. She asserted that directors do not limit the output of an intention to a single means, often relying on several conventions to communicate a single idea. Hence, visual stimuli are often complemented by audio stimuli:

[Description would have been nice where] he puts his hand over hers and says "it's nice to have a friend". But on the other hand [the dialogue as well as the actor's voice communicates that he's] lonely... I think that really showed the lonely McPherson, by him saying, "it's nice to have a friend". So, no, they didn't know that [he touches her hand], but they knew the [director's] intent.

In this case, the playwright/director told Debbie that she wanted description users to understand that McPherson was lonely and, Debbie asserts, this was communicated in other non-visual ways, such as the actor's voice; as such, did not need to be described.

Alternatively, there were times where Debbie deemed first-person description of onstage action to be inefficient or potentially confusing for audience members. While she described most of the play as the voice of The Memory character, there were several instances where Debbie used conventional description techniques such as the third person narrator to describe onstage action. For example, when her onstage counterpart began using American Sign Language (ASL) to communicate with her attacker, Debbie told the AD audience that "the following dialogue is signed", rather than convey this information through first person narration (possibly, "I spoke to him with my hands"). Debbie explained her reasoning: "I did that because once Jeff (as McPherson) was signing and Wanda (as The Memory) signed [in response], then they had to slow down the speech rate. If you didn't know why you might not equate the language of the hands as sign language and that was the original point".

While The Memory communicated in ASL, McPherson spoke and signed his lines simultaneously. Within his dialogue, he included The Memory's dialogue by repeating her statements as questions and adding his own response ("you compare yourself to a spider with getting its legs cut off, I think ..."). Therefore, all audience members could, regardless of their vision status, understand what was being said. Even so, Debbie wanted blind and partially sighted audience members to be aware that a different form of communication was being used and that it caused the dialogue pace to slow down and often sound disjointed. In addition, by explicitly stating that sign language was being used, Debbie wanted to give the blind and low vision audience the same opportunity to fully appreciate the playwright's use of metaphor, as she states above. Deviation from the first-person narration seemed to be the appropriate means through which to ensure that the blind and low-vision audience had the information to make this connection. Whether that connection was actually made and understood was not ascertained from audience members, so it is difficult at this point to determine whether the strategy was successful. Although there is general theatre-based audience reaction data reported by Udo and Fels (2009b), further research is required to understand whether changing from first person to third person serves to clarify things or, on the contrary, create confusion and affect in a negative way audience enjoyment and understanding.

### 4.3.2 Performing

Nora compared her experience performing AD to “radio acting, because you’re not doing the action, but you get the feeling of the thing”. She mentioned that, in performing the AD, she followed her script, though she noticed that more of a character began to emerge, “just the attitude came across changed”, not the scripted dialogue. She explained that she approached the description by “trying to think about it as a character instead of somebody telling [the audience] about what a character is doing”. The creative challenge of describing through a character’s dialogue made the description “easier, because it’s like acting”. She also asserted that her description probably got better at each performance and that she got more and more into character at each performance. Nora did have the opportunity to practice her descriptions at several regular rehearsals and two AD dress rehearsals. While Debbie performed her descriptions in character during each rehearsal under the direction of the director, Nora spent her time editing the description script so that the descriptions would fit into the gaps in the actor’s dialogue. However, the pace of the actors’ dialogue varied greatly, resulting in many of the descriptions that Nora had written being omitted during some of the performances.

Udo and Fels (2009b) worked with a professional theatre group, whereas Nora and Debbie described for an amateur production in which the timing varied greatly from show to show, as actors were having trouble remembering their lines and/or the blocking during some performances. Nora omitted different descriptions each night as a result of actors skipping over and improvising dialogue. The few descriptions that were added were inserted to account for improvised events or errors that were made onstage. However, the addition of dialogue was, on the whole, infrequent, especially to recoup for errors in description. Nora seemed to have three reasons for not fixing errors: first, she often she did not realize mistakes until well into the scene; second, she feared that “you might add more confusion than if you didn’t fix it”; third, if an attempt was made to fix the error, other descriptions would have to be omitted.

Debbie used a Braille script, actor dialogue and music to time her descriptions. She did not require a monitor or additional lighting, which allowed her to describe anywhere within the theatre. Nora, however, relied on her vision to track onstage action which was displayed on a monitor and thus needed a light to read descriptions as well as a dedicated area for technical equipment (e.g. speakers and monitor). Since the audience could not see either describer,

neither fully committed their lines to memory and used their scripts throughout the description process.

Debbie explains that most of her descriptions occurred in between scenes which gave her a lot of uninterrupted time to describe the set, costumes and props in the upcoming scene. The scene changes were often long and the descriptions “made the scene change[s] flow quickly” while also providing relevant information for AD users. In rehearsals, Debbie was able to practice inserting her lines in between those of the actors: “I had to be careful not to step on the actors, because they might not have finished their line”. The cast and crew were able to hear Debbie describe in a loud and clear voice, which made the inclusion of descriptions easier. However, during performances, the cast and crew could only hear that Debbie was whispering, and had to rely on their memory of the rehearsal process to figure out what she was saying. Alternatively, the actors that Nora was working with did not know when Nora was describing or what she was saying, which may have left them at a disadvantage for timing compared to Debbie and the cast of *Common Criminal*.

Music was an essential part of *Common Criminal* and Debbie wanted the description and the music to complement each other: “I’m a musician as well, so I tried to time my dialogue to finish just before Shawn finished playing [his guitar] and that was important so that the flow sounded good”. However, in the first scene of the play, Debbie intentionally broke her own rule:

The music ends before the AD does and that was very interesting because you set the scene; there’s dead silence there and I’m still speaking, so I gave extra pauses to set the freaky part of the scene. But again, that worked beautifully live, because it was quiet all around you and then there’s this speaking and you can’t see the speaker, so I thought about that.

Although the audience is unable to associate a body with the voice, Debbie seemed to believe that audience members, in hearing the voice outside of the music, were more likely to see it as a character whose existence is not limited to musical interludes. In introducing her character as the first scene began, Debbie identified herself as a character who could guide AD users through the narrative, giving them a first-hand understanding of what took place. She assessed the impact of her performance on AD users:



I think that I definitely played a role in the audience's understanding and appreciation of that play. Whether it was good or not, I can't tell you that. I was really aware that I had to portray certain elements to the audience.

Rather than interpret the director's motivation and attempt to communicate her own understanding of it to AD users, Debbie developed the role under the supervision of the director. Together, they created a unique character whose narration acted as a means through which to make the event accessible while also providing AD users with an additional narrative that complemented what occurred on stage. She advises describers to

picture it from the listener's point of view, not from your own. It's a performance, so think of it as a performance, give the information. It depends on the play, if you can work it in, it's woven into the dialogue, even better, but if it isn't you're going to think about it from the guy sitting in the chair [...].

*The Tomorrow Box* and *Common Criminal* featured closed AD which meant that interested theatre-goers could listen to AD through the use of a wireless headset and receiver. However, during the final performance of *Common Criminal*, the director decided to use open AD, routing the microphone to the main soundboard rather than the wireless receivers. Theatre-goers could not, therefore, turn off the AD. Debbie discussed how this changed her performance and how she thought it changed the experience for an audience:

In the closed performance, it was like sitting beside a person and telling them what was going on very quietly, right? You're there but you're only there as a support... But in the open mike, you really were part of the show and every single person in that room heard it. So I was really... I felt exposed and yet I wasn't, if you know what I mean.

In providing open description, Debbie thought that she was part of the production, less like a person charged with providing accessibility and more like a performer. The seamless fit of the describer into the play gave everyone in the theatre access to a version of the performance that, while accessible, also provided an additional avenue through which theatre-goers could find meaning. For example, the onstage Memory used interpretive dance to communicate, leaving many audience members confused by the role and its significance. The open description gave all theatre-goers access to the disembodied voice of the Memory which helped explain her role onstage. In effect, the AD could also be seen as making the

interpretive dance accessible to sighted individuals who were unfamiliar with or were unable to decode the *correct* meaning on their own. When asked if she would have liked the entire run to have been open described, Debbie asserted: “I think it should have all been open description... [with] that play, it just worked”. However, she did have some advice to other describers: “Do not go to work the week of the performance... Take that week off, for God’s sake”.

#### **4.4 Relationship with director, cast and crew, and researchers**

The two productions differed in several important ways which, in turn, created a marked difference in how the describers approached their tasks. Nora met with the director and together they decided that she should take on the role of Alice, one of the protagonists, describing events for audience members. The director suggested that Nora write the script as though she were Alice who, twenty years later, was recalling events. Nora attended several rehearsals and began drafting a description script on her own. She presented that draft to Udo, who, as facilitator, worked with her to eliminate unnecessary description and add visual stimuli that might otherwise have been omitted. This draft was then reviewed by the director, who made small modifications to the description script. Five of the eight performances were audio described. Nora made 29 comments about working with the director, cast, crew and researchers. Debbie made twelve comments.

Comments regarding the relationship that existed between the authors and Nora were positive, whereas those that focus on her relationship with the director were extremely negative. As Nora thought that the director “had more respect for your [Udo’s] opinion than for mine”, she asked Udo to attend rehearsals and be in attendance when she met with the director to review the AD script. Nora did this because she found working with the director difficult, “we didn’t exactly argue... but she is very opinionated”. In these meetings, Udo facilitated the discussion in an effort to make Nora feel more comfortable to share her ideas. Nora had mentioned to the director that she was “just a beginner” and new to AD and, looking back, felt that this may have discredited the value of her thoughts and ideas. Udo thought that the ideas which Nora proposed were generally well thought out and made valuable contributions to the project; however, these contributions may have been second-guessed due not only to Nora’s inexperience with AD but that of the director as well. When asked if she would have been

able to finish the description script and perform the AD without Udo, Nora asserted that she “would have been able to complete it, but wouldn’t have enjoyed it much”.

In her comments which focused on her working relationship with the cast and crew, Nora noted that her interaction with them was limited, for the actors “didn’t exactly know what I was doing”. The cast knew the production was being made accessible through AD and that the director was involved in this process, yet, as Nora recalls, there was a lack of communication as to how this was being achieved. On a few occasions the cast audio described onstage events for members of the audience who might have had difficulty understanding what had just occurred. Nora mentions that the cast was “quite conscious of the fact that there was description going on”. For example, when one of the guide dogs in the audience ran across the stage and disrupted the dialogue, one of the actors improvised, throwing in an extra line of dialogue about “dogs having free run of the place”, which effectively acted as an ad hoc AD (Udo and Fels 2010d discuss how improvised descriptions can ensure that all members of the audience are part of the communal theatre-going experience). Nora suggested that it would be a good idea if the cast could hear the AD during one of the rehearsals “so that the actors could see what was going on”. She saw this as a means through which the AD could also be improved, for “they might be able to give feedback and give you [the describer] some good suggestions too”. Nora appreciated being included in the curtain call, going up on stage and chatting with members of the cast after the production. She was also invited to attend the cast party, though she declined.

Wanda Fitzgerald, who is a playwright and director with low vision, treated Debbie as part of the cast and wrote the description script herself. Wanda had presented *Common Criminal* as part of the Fringe Festival. When mounting it for this production, she edited the script and, in so doing, added the role of “The Memory”. The Memory character relied almost entirely on interpretative movement to communicate with the audience. Later, the director added an AD component to the role, authoring the descriptions from the perspective of The Memory, who was heard only by AD users. The director auditioned actors for the role of the audio describer, selecting an individual who, as mentioned before, eventually replaced the lead female ten days before opening night. As accessibility coordinator for the production, Debbie had been coaching the describer and was asked to step into the describer role. To sum up, unlike in the case of *The Tomorrow Box*, all of the performances were audio described and the description script was written by the playwright/director. Debbie discusses her relationship with the cast,

crew and director quite differently than Nora. She explains that, as an adviser, she was “seeing rehearsals” and offering her insight, but as an audio describer she became a member of the cast. In her role as an advisor, Debbie explains, “I wasn’t really an integral member”. As the describer, however, Debbie did not seem to feel isolated from the cast. She notes: “the describer was always a part [of the cast], whether it was Danielle [previous describer] or myself.” Preparing for the production, the director ensured that the describer was included as a member of the cast from the beginning of the rehearsal process. Debbie explains:

I think that’s just as important to choose a describer the way you’d audition for an actor and I think that’s why Wanda had a good idea to audition for the audio describer, because it’s not something everybody could do.

Whereas the director of *The Tomorrow Box* relied on others to find an appropriate person to act as the describer, Wanda, the director, opened up a casting call and auditioned approximately fifteen individuals. Udo and Fels (2010d) assert that a describer should have content knowledge of and passion for the domain that they describe. Indeed, both *Common Criminal* describers selected by the director possessed technical and/or practical knowledge from working on theatrical productions. However, directorial intent in casting a describer is not the main focus of our study, and further research should seek to establish the validity of Udo and Fels’ (2009b) assertions.

Regardless of who was the describer, Debbie remarks that the Wanda, the director, required them to attend every rehearsal, and that “all of our rehearsals included the description, live”. During rehearsals, Wanda used open description to acquaint the cast and crew and rehearse scenes to ensure that the quality of the AD matched the production. Debbie believes that Wanda used open description during rehearsals to ensure that everyone understood the role of the describer. She recalls: “if I jumped a line or came in too soon, I said ‘no wait, they’re not finish yet’ or [Wanda would say] wait for The Memory’... so it was part of the play”. Debbie asserts the importance of being seen as an equal and included within the creative team. She says:

The biggest thing I’ve learned is how everybody... [is] an integral member of the cast, every single person contributes to the cast. If you’re not all in sync, the whole cast is sunk. I had no idea that it was that powerful.

The director and describer's inclusion of the description as an integral part of the rehearsal process and performance was not lost on the cast, who made several suggestions as to how the AD experience could be improved. For example, Debbie was concerned that if non-AD users could hear her it might "have been really awkward. I was worried about that. Are [AD users] going to be able to hear me, but not the audience?". In response, Shawn, the guitarist/narrator, suggested to the director that in his pre-show introduction he could explain how the AD might affect the performance. According to Debbie, "[one] thing that Shawn did, very smartly I think, is say, 'if you hear a voice speaking it's our describer', so that gets out of the way right away". Clearly, Shawn's contribution eased Debbie's concern about interfering with non-AD audiences. No complaints were received by the research team or the house staff. The creative team's inclusion of the describer within the process extended to an onstage presence during the curtain call and well as credit within the program distributed before the show. Debbie was invited to and attended the cast party.

However, Debbie notes that this feeling of being part of the cast abruptly ended during "the actual days of the performance... because during the performances they couldn't hear me anymore". The cast could hear Debbie whisper and, therefore, knew when she was speaking but not necessarily what she was saying; she felt isolated from them and no longer part of their performance: "I wasn't part of it to the same extent except during rehearsals and yet they knew that when I was to speak to come in and so forth, so it was different in that way". During the last performance where the description was heard by everyone (cast and audience), Debbie noted the change in dynamic and how it affected the performance: "they were all delighted. In the intermission, [they said] this is really good, they were all so pleased with my delivery and that was a nice thing to know; that I had their support". Whereas Debbie was unable to gain feedback from her fellow actors prior to the open described performance, the other actors were able to share and receive opinions as to the success of each performance. The rehearsal process had been so inclusive of Debbie that when it came time to perform separately, the experience seemed disjointed. However, she appreciated that the researchers were on hand before, during and after the performance to ensure that everything ran smoothly: "I was glad you guys were there to make sure that I was where I should be and knew what I had to do. Because when the actual performance was on, the cast were concerned about their parts". Further research could consider how this process can be modified to ensure that the

describer does not feel isolated during the actual production, a point made by both Nora and Debbie.

## **5. Concluding remarks**

Audio description for live theatre is becoming increasingly popular and seen as an essential part of a theatre-going experience in certain countries. As it is still so new, there is very little research and reporting available as to how to approach the tasks involved. For a blind audience, the role of the describer is critical and requires considerable thought and integration with the live theatre event. In this paper, two describers report two different approaches to description. The advantages and challenges of these approaches are highlighted. Both describers were knowledgeable about AD and had an understanding of its importance for a blind audience. One describer was blind and had first-hand knowledge of the impact description had on blind and partially sighted audiences.

Although the audio descriptions of two plays were approached differently by the creative teams and the describers, there were a number of similar experiences and preferences. One describer was completely integrated into the play; the part was auditioned, the script written by the director, and the describer was seen as a character in the show. The second describer took on a character in the show but had to develop her own description and had little integration with the production of the show itself. Common aspects expressed by both describers related to the need for directorial supervision and to being integrated in the production in order to ensure that the description reflected the style and vision of the production. Both describers saw themselves as a creative partner or performer in, and not separate from, the show. They also wanted the blind and partially sighted audience to have an entertaining and enjoyable experience. Both agreed that the best way to do this was to take on a character in the show and to describe from that character's point of view.

Creative challenges involved developing the AD script to fit with the play and the description strategy. One describer had to use a third person description on occasion because what needed to be described did not match the character portrayal she was using. While a creative approach to AD may be more time consuming than a more conventional description, both describers believed the experience was fun, interesting, thought-provoking and fulfilling. Being considered as members of the production even if only to an extent allowed them to

express their own creativity, much like any actor would. To conclude, we suggest that AD for live theatre be fully integrated into the production process, and that describers be considered part of the creative team.