

‘The Importance of Being Described...Earnestly?’

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Abstract

Progress regarding access in the arts has been happening slowly yet steadily, and seems to have picked up momentum more recently. There is still a very long way to go. Access in general is becoming more prominent not only in its existing forms, provided alongside performance, but also in the increasing recognition of access as a creative opportunity. This is particularly important in terms of raising its profile in the arts and therefore wider society.

It's in exploring not only the integration of access, in our case audio description, but in how we construct a piece that's built around it, employing it in the same way as any other artistic tool in the creative process. "The Importance of Being Described...Earnestly?" is a play that's constructed around audio description, which provides a more fully-rounded impression of what's happening and, moreover, offers the audience a choice of interpretation.

Introduction

Sami Thorpe and Chloë Clarke have founded Elbow Room Theatre Company, Cardiff's only disabled-led company dedicated to new writing that has creative access at its heart.

"The Importance of Being Described...Earnestly?" Is our first Unlimited-commissioned project that focuses on audio description that's delivered live by all characters, and is currently in its second stage of research and development.

We'll be hosting a sharing of the piece on Thursday December 7th at 2pm, Wales Millennium Centre, Cardiff. Please get in touch if you'd like to attend.

Elbow Room Theatre Company is an emerging new company based in South Wales, born out of wanting more choice in inclusive and accessible theatre.

As people, we want to see a better representation of society on the stage and this means theatre needs to employ diverse actors, as well as reflecting diversity throughout the creative team.

We want to go and see theatre that has clearly considered access from the start, and instead of making a wish list for others to fulfil, we have decided to make our own Elbow Room.

Project background and aims

“The Importance of Being Described...Earnestly?” is a 60-minute comedy featuring a hapless fictional theatre company in their earnest attempt to put on an inclusive performance. Audio description drives the piece and is delivered live by all characters, often leading to heated disagreements, and the audience is just as much a part of the action as the performers.

The idea for this show came about because I (Chloë), as a visually impaired performer and theatre-goer, became frustrated by the lack of creativity and the singular nature of interpretation that ‘traditional’ audio description provides. This project is by no means an attempt to replace or undermine existing forms of AD, it’s simply an attempt to explore an alternative in a collaborative way.

First commissioned by Unlimited Impact in 2016, we had an incredibly positive response from audiences that attended our first sharing, leading to a second commission by Unlimited this year to further develop the piece with an aim for it to tour next autumn.

The main aims for this piece are as follows:

To address the issue of venues not programming audio described performances and to raise the awareness of sighted and visually impaired audiences that audio description is available and effective.

To explore replacing objectivity in description with super-subjective views delivered from multiple perspectives, thereby offering a choice of interpretation.

To enhance the play as a whole by using ‘access by stealth’ as well as contrasting this with other forms of description.

Those in the audience who don’t rely on AD will enjoy the comedic effect of it, those who do will receive all the same information, even if it’s in a different way.

The use of AD to drive the action and deliver subtext in a way that isn’t confusing or overbearing. One of the reasons that many believe AD impedes their artistic vision is because, by nature, for sighted people it is showing AND telling. We need to find a style that proves this doesn’t have to be the case.

Experimental results

We have discovered through our research and development so far that this polyphonic style of description - multiple layers happening at once and delivered live - can be hugely effective, but is tricky to balance. We also found that attempting to achieve this in an improvised setting was nigh on impossible - things simply move too fast. We attempted to slow the process down by way of freezing the action.

[SEE CLIP - ‘Describing Improvisation’ *The Audio describer briefly freezes the action in order to describe it, and occasionally imposes an interpretation.*]

This is a highly explicit device that would need to be made as a stylistic decision during the R&D process. Just one of many styles to choose from. There’s no

reason in a piece like this that we couldn't use a variety of styles, except that were very conscious, from the last round, that conventions must be established carefully. What also became apparent was that the actors then had a choice - did they let the description of their actions explicitly affect their behaviour?

We realised very early on that the most effective style of AD was going to be character driven and this developed into using this to drive the story forward, often by way of dragging the subtext above ground. Characters can't hide how they feel very easily when everything they do is described. We played with using the audio describer to provoke their reactions.

[SEE CLIP 'Provocation' *The characters react to how they're being described, highly subjectively.*]

This often became very heated indeed, leading to clips not suitable for broadcast (at this stage).

With total freedom of all characters to describe everything, the question came about of who was describing what, and whom, when? In some cases self-description came out in the form of an inner monologue. We then toyed with taking over each others' inner monologues, contrasting it with straight description of the other's action.

[SEE CLIP Describing Action vs. Inner Monologue *Two actors describe another two in their actions. This is directly contrasted with the same actors voicing the inner monologues of the same other two, with the same action taking place.*]

How we stage the piece has become increasingly important. Setting it in the round has provided us with the opportunity to engage the whole audience at all times. It's a more democratic and equal way of using the space, especially as this is a piece that very much involves the audience. It was important for us to explore moving the action around the audience so that the experience shifts for everyone in the same way. It's also important for us to play with an audience's comfort levels in this way and explore the response to always facing inwards - visually impaired or sighted, this gives a quite intimate, more collective sense of the space, while also occasionally becoming slightly disconcerting.

Of course, we are also very well aware that with regard to AD less is often more. Overcrowding the senses is often hugely counterproductive. We've been conscious not to verbally overload, using alternatives to speech wherever we find them.

We decided not to use music as a background at any point and have picked our moments for music or sound effects carefully. Foley sound effects are to be created in the space by the actors and audience. We will also be focusing more on the creation of multi sensory elements to enhance the experience and, in many cases, the comedy.

We received feedback after the first round of R&D that we hadn't relied heavily enough on the expertise of a professional audio describer. It was rightly pointed out that, although we'd effectively explored using AD creatively to enhance the enjoyment of the whole audience, the reality was that the sighted audience perhaps benefitted even more from this style than the visually impaired as some vital description was missed. Therefore, this current stage of R&D is focused on integrating a script designed by a professional audio describer as well as having their input in the space throughout the process, along with my own feedback and that of other visually impaired test audiences and consultants.

Lastly, we wanted to draw from personal life experience to create a lot of humour around the notion of accessible or inclusive performance. This is not a piece that takes itself too seriously as I decided early on that humour would be the best vehicle for introducing this style of access to a wider audience. It's also important to address issues around disability and access in a way that makes it accessible to those who aren't familiar with it. In doing this, hopefully those who have shared the kind of experiences we'll be drawing from will enjoy the familiar and feel more engaged in the show.

[SEE CLIP 'Name Game' *Characters are asked to say their names before they speak so VIPs know who they are. This leads to much confusion.*]

Conclusion

Overall, the main discovery we've made to date is the need to work collaboratively. Audio description, in all its forms, has a place across the arts, both as access and in order to promote understanding and awareness and raise the profile of visual impairment. The need to explore using it as a creative tool has arisen to combat the attitude some have that AD inhibits the creative process. It's necessary to encourage a general attitudinal shift in order to tear down a lot of the barriers that stop AD becoming more prevalent and more widely available. It's also a natural thing to take an idea further, to explore its development and test its limits. This is best done in collaboration with the many individuals who have a vast insight into audio description and access, and who share this passion.

In allowing others to see that AD can be a creative opportunity, not an imposition, we can raise its profile and provide more access and, most importantly, provide a range of access styles that suit a wider variety of people.

We will be sharing the results of this current round of R&D at the **Weston Studio, Wales Millennium Centre, Cardiff** on **Thursday December 7th at 2pm**. Tickets are free but limited, so please get in touch with us directly or book through the website, elbowroomtheatre.com.