

Audio Description as part of the Creative Process

In Contemporary Performance

ANNE HORNSBY

Director, Mind's Eye Description Services Ltd, UK
e-mail: mindseyedescription@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper will discuss two case studies from recent Mind's Eye projects. In both, the artistic director wanted the audio describer to be involved early in the creative process, rather than for the audio description to be tacked on at the end. The directors were keen to explore audio description as part of the sound-score of the piece.

For *Omnibus*, performed in Galeri, a modern Library in Canaerfon, a Vertical Dance piece was audio described in both English and Welsh, and then recorded in both languages to be transmitted to the whole audience, integrated with the specially-composed music.

For *Re-Visioning a Ritual*, performed in the classical Portico Library in Manchester, the audio description was delivered live, forming a part of the performance, delivered to the whole audience and integrated with the commissioned text of a poem.

1 Introduction

In both audio-described performance scenarios, I was approached directly by the person who was directing the piece of work. The directors were keen to offer access for blind and partially-sighted people, to their events. Equally importantly, they additionally wanted to explore the creative and artistic impact for the sighted audience on the experience of hearing the visual aspects described, whilst watching those elements unfold.

2 Related Work

I have worked in audio description for 29 years. Most of my work is for live theatre shows where the description is an ancillary service created to fit in to available gaps in the dialogue and soundscape, and delivered discreetly only to blind and partially sighted listeners through head-sets.

I also describe in galleries and museums on a regular basis and these described tours are usually delivered live, only occasionally recorded. The live description is thus heard by the companions of the blind visitors as well as by other people in the gallery who choose to

listen in. The tours are delivered collaboratively with curators and/or learning and education staff. Interestingly, the sighted attenders frequently comment on how illuminating they find the descriptions, which draw their eye to certain features, causing them to engage more fully with the art-works or objects, - to look longer and focus more.

Other related work includes a promenade performance around a series of installations and mini theatre-pieces performed at the Anglican Cathedral in Liverpool. Visitors were taken in small groups of 2 or 3 along a selected route around the Cathedral, where a series of happenings or installations were positioned. The description was experienced by the blind visitors, and by their companions.

Similarly, an outdoor promenade piece for English National Ballet at Lidos in London took the attendees on a journey (in the rain, sadly) around various locations where a narrative was unfolding. A story was told to the audience members, who were in small groups, through head-phones. The audio description was delivered live to those attending, but this necessitated their stopping and starting the narrative through the head-phones.

In all of these cases, description was primarily provided as a means of access, which the sighted audience were able to listen to too.

3 Methodology

For *Omnibus* I had several email and telephone conversations with director Kate Lawrence, before the dancers began rehearsals and before Kate choreographed the movement. Kate is a freelance dance practitioner, and a Lecturer in Theatre and Performance at the School of Creative Arts and Media, Bangor University. Her website is: www.verticaldancekatelawrence.com

Both the director and myself were ambitious that the description, the movement, and the music should be integrated and would harmonise with each other.

Kate sent through her ideas, and a selection of descriptive words summing up the characters who would be within the story/performance. These were sent to me at the same time as to the composer.

The composer sent me through his ideas for the musical narratives and themes for the piece, again before rehearsals began.

Areas of discussion between the creative team, included issues of timing, choice of language, and, the ever-tricky question of interpretation.

As this was a dance piece with no dialogue, how much should the description tell a story, or how much should it just plant seeds to grow in the minds and imagination of the audience?

How much should it allow the music space?

It was always conceived that the description would be delivered in two languages. This had obvious implications in that each phrase of description would be repeated – spoken first in Welsh and then in English. The director therefore incorporated many repeated movements within the choreography to embrace this “double description”.

We worked together on identifying priorities, so that it was clear which movements were more essential in terms of being described. We also explored how sentences could be pared down as movements were repeated several times.

The director then worked with the dancers to develop the piece, which told the story of a young girl called Sophie, encountering various characters from Roald Dahl stories. This was inspired by work Kate had done with local schoolchildren.

The draft description was written from rehearsal footage and then refined through further discussion with the director. The final text was translated into Welsh. Some sections of the description were changed because of the nature of aerial dance – for example, it would not always be possible to catch an object, which was thrown, or to time a descent exactly.

The recording raised further issues of timing – some things just take longer to say in Welsh, - and of course the recording was designed to fit with the music, which played throughout.

Because the description was recorded, the dancers' movements at the performances, were dictated, in some sense by the audio description. Usually we are reacting to the performers, but here they were reacting to the description.

Omnibus was performed twice at Galeri to capacity audiences. A partially sighted attendee came to the first performance and enjoyed it so much she stayed for the second showing. The sighted audiences also gave positive feedback on their experiences of hearing the description whilst watching the performance.

For *Revisioning a Ritual*, the director, Louise Adkins, was particularly interested in the creative use of language. She worked with a poet, Nikolai Duffy, who developed a poem, which was to be spoken and integrated with, the description,

Louise is a Senior Lecturer at Manchester School of Art and holder of the Amanda Burton Scholarship at the University of Leeds.

Again I had several meetings – email, telephone and face to face, with the director and also with the creative writer. We discussed how the different elements of the performance - all inspired by the religious sect: The Shakers - would come together

The many threads included the improvised choreography of the two young actors, developed through rehearsals; the description of their actual movements; the description, which Louise was interested in exploring, of movements from different rehearsal times; the creative writing and the use of silence.

The describer was invited to be present at several rehearsals where the director gave the actors different scenarios to improvise with. They worked with different styles and intensities of movement. Improvised description of some of these movements was recorded along with film footage of the actors. The description was then transcribed and the script was shared with the director and the writer - being both a response to, and in turn feeding into, their work. The director selected which sections of “past” description should be included, where she wanted the sections of poetry, where the description should be “live”, and where there should be moments of silence.

The describer was to voice the actual description, plus the description of previous moments in rehearsal, and the creative writing text, - all of which combined to create an evolving and multi-layered sound-scape.

There was discussion around the tone of delivery – the director was keen for the voice to sound less involved than that which might usually be used for performance. There were also questions of interpretation, again.

There were questions over whether the describer should indicate vocally and through body language, when the poem was being spoken, when the description was in the present and when it was a description of a previous rehearsal or performance.

We discussed whether the description should be a disembodied voice, or delivered in the room, and whether the describer should move around or stay in one place and whether or not she should interact with the performers. We discussed whether the description should include aspects of the surroundings and physical appearance of the actors, as with traditional theatre description.

The piece had no dialogue or music. The aural accompaniment to the choreography developed into a rich mix of spoken text, interspersed with silence. At these moments, the physical sounds of the actors breathing, panting, grunting, sighing, and shaking could be heard.

Revisioning a Ritual was performed four times during one evening at The Portico in Manchester to capacity audiences, none of whom declared themselves to be visually impaired.

A performance was filmed and the resulting text transcribed. The spoken text was transcribed into a booklet, with no distinction between the poetry, the description in the present and the description of the past.

4 Experimental Results

In both projects, the process fed into developments as we went along.

The initial discussions, the feedback from the directors from the draft, and evolving descriptions, shaped the final descriptions and the work itself.

Practical matters for *Omnibus* included issues around technology, around recordings and editing, the mixing of the levels of the voices and the music and the transmission of this in the space.

For *Re-visioning a Ritual*, the rehearsal process fed constantly into the audio-description development, keeping it fluid, right up until the performances.

5 Conclusion

Both projects were exciting and interesting to be involved with. This is one of the first times I have worked with directors who were interested in the description being heard by the whole audience, - considering the audio description as an art form in its own right, which adds a level of enhanced interpretation for the sighted as well as the blind and partially sighted audience.

This allowed for a richer and deeper level of involvement and creativity. The sighted members of the audience found that the audio description enhanced their experience, adding another layer to the performances.

This is an area which I would be interested in developing further, and I am currently involved with Louise Adkins in a further project, entitled *Smoke and Mirrors*, to be performed at The Tetley in November.