

Who's devising your theatre experience? A director's approach to inclusive theatre for blind and low vision theatregoers

Keywords

accessible theatre; director's role; live audio description; inclusive design; devising theatre; director/describer

Abstract

In this paper we present the first documented implementation of a director-produced and delivered audio description (AD) for devising theatre. In a single live, audio-described performance of *Highway 63: The Fort Mac Show* at Theatre Passe Muraille in Toronto, Canada, the director/describer's artistically informed approach focuses on entertainment value for blind and low vision (B/LV) theatregoers. In-depth, semi-structured interviews with the director/screenwriter/describer garnered insight into a director's unique perspective on the development process for the integrated approach to AD, including her artistic choices, expectations, and delivery style, as a first time amateur director/describer. The process of developing and delivering integrated AD had a transformative effect on her as a director.

1. Introduction and literature review

Traditionally, blind or low vision (B/LV) individuals have not had full access to the enjoyment of the live theatre experience. Radio drama provides B/LV audiences with access to entertainment; however, B/LV audiences do not have equivalent access to entertainment when attending live theatre productions. In radio dramas, audio stimuli are the only means of entertainment for sighted and non-sighted audiences, whereas in live theatre a combination of multi-sensory stimuli is used to produce a formulated experience, which in turn is shaped by the immersive social environment, to which B/LV theatre goers do not have equivalent access.

Audio description (AD) is an adaptive technology that is designed to provide B/LV people with access to visual material, video, and live performances. For live theatre, it is an oral description of visual stimuli that is inserted in between dialogue elements (in the silent or non-dialogue spaces). It can be pre-recorded (Bishop, 2011) or delivered live by one or more describers during a performance, although live is the dominant method of delivery. This secondary audio track, feed, or on-stage narration can be delivered to the entire audience (open description) or only to B/LV audience members (closed description) (Fels and Naraine, 2011). Previously, AD was considered to be for people with disabilities, and as such, "its value as a potentially beneficial narrative and artistic strategy is too often ignored by the mainstream" (Udo and Fels, 2009a, 2009b). However, current research suggests translation of artistic sources can be both a reproductive and a "creative" task (Flynn, 2013 and Braun, 2008).

There are two common approaches to producing AD: (1) conventional and (2) integrated (Udo and Fels, 2009a, 2009b). Proponents of the conventional style advocate for "objectivity" in AD delivery, whereas proponents of the integrated style support subjectivity in AD and full (Whitfield and Fels, 2013; Fels and Naraine, 2011; Udo and Fels, 2009a, 2009b; Fels, Udo, Diamond et al., 2006; Fels, Udo, Ting et al., 2006) or partial integration (Igareda and Matamala, 2012) within the creative media process. The AD style used for *Highway 63* is described as an integrated, director-led (DIR) approach. Those individuals most likely to be involved with a play from its inception are the director(s) and or actors. Since most styles of theatre are DIR sequences of choreographed events designed to affect audiences (Vercauteren, 2012), directors are encouraged to develop and/or deliver an AD approach, as they have more knowledge of the play (Xue and Fels, 2011; Whitfield and Fels, 2013; Fels and Naraine, 2011; Holland, 2009).

Decisions made by theatre describers are naturally artistic and interpretive (Holland, 2009), whether or not they implement a conventional (or newsreader voice) or in-character (alternative) style of AD. Communication and direction from directors to describers enable describers to better articulate the vision and artistry within the media they are describing (Holland, 2009). It would also seem probable that a director/describer is uniquely placed to maintain coherence between the artistic choices made in the play and those in the AD.

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Most AD guidelines today are still not supported by empirical evidence (Orero, 2012; Braun, 2008) or theoretical frameworks (Vercauteren, 2012) because it has either not been gathered or is not publically available or understood. Examples include guidelines from UK-based Ofcom (2012), the American Council for the Blind (Snyder, 2010), Media Access Australia (2012), and Accessible Media Inc./Canadian Association of Broadcasters (2013). These guidelines tend to rely on anecdotal evidence and historical practices and procedures (Udo and Fels, 2009a), although very recent standards efforts such as those proposed by the International Standards Organization (ISO) and the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) are attempting to be more evidence based where the evidence exists and draw on applicable theoretical frameworks from disability studies/translation studies. Furthermore, The AD Project based in the US (American Council for the Blind, 2014) provides a listing of various standards and guidelines.

Previous research relating to AD television documentary content exists (Peli and Fine, 1996; Pettitt and Sharpe et al., 1996). However, this research focuses primarily on comprehension, as opposed to newer studies that have looked at enjoyment as a factor in quality (Chmiel and Mazur, 2012; Braun and Orero, 2010; Udo and Fels, 2009a). Schmeidler and Kirchner (2001) assessed enjoyment in documentary films; however, they were limited to this one genre and directorial style.

More recently, Whitfield and Fels (2013), Igareda and Matamala, (2012), Udo and Copeland et al. (2011), and Udo and Acevedo et al. (2010) have investigated the integrated AD process for live performances. In their research, they report on the creative process involved in creative team-led AD and the impact on audiences as a result of this style of AD. They found that creative teams will take different approaches to the development and delivery style of AD depending on their vision of the show's presentation and their awareness of AD styles, and that they embrace AD once they understand how it works. They also report on audience reactions to these integrated AD approaches. Their findings suggest that audiences are engaged and entertained by the integrated approaches, especially when coupled with a physical tour (touch tour) of the set and costumes ahead of time. However, there is still fairly limited research on this style of AD, particularly compared with the large numbers of different genres of live theatre.

Lack of AD knowledge within theatre education and the broader community prevents it from appearing frequently in live theatre in Canada. Internationally, however, according to ADLAB Project (2011-2014), AD is being introduced in other live contexts such as recent sports events (including the 2012 Olympic Games in the UK and Europe). Furthermore some directors of non-commercial and commercial theatres who are aware of AD are devising AD techniques that fit within their education practices. For instance, professional theatre companies such as Graeae Theatre Company (<http://www.graeae.org/>) and Extant (<http://extant.org.uk/>) in the UK are developing and delivering workshops for directors (along with other theatre personnel) to develop more inclusive theatre directing practices. However, these do not include AD training.

Live integrated AD gives the director control over the development and execution of the AD, similar to his/her role in other aspects of audiovisual 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 creative team suggest that there is potential for directors to exert creative control over the AD. Therefore, the describer's roles and responsibilities in each production are dependent upon how involved the director would like to be or can be in the creation, development and execution of an AD strategy (Orero and Vilaró, forthcoming; Fryer and Freeman, 2013; Udo and Fels, 2009).

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

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Udo and Copeland et al. (2011) discuss a unique case study of a collaborative approach to AD for the production of *Common Criminal* by a describer who was B/LV and a director who was low vision. The AD was presented from the perspective of one of the characters, OS Memory. The describer was considered one of the cast, and instead of being removed from the production, the describer simultaneously acted as an "access strategy" and a secondary means of entertainment (Udo and Copeland et al. 2011: 68). The describer was included from the beginning of the play's production, which allowed her to participate in all aspects of the play.

Whitfield and Fels (2013) discuss a unique case study of a collaborative community theatre approach to open AD (heard by everyone) involving the actors, scriptwriters, musicians and directors in the process. The production had a narrator; however, AD was presented in character by the actors themselves, and musical motifs were incorporated into the play in order to identify characters coming onstage. The responsibility for the description in this production involved participation from the entire team, who report enjoying the experience along with the audience (Whitfield and Fels, 2013).

Xue and Fels (2011) discuss a case study of a DIR approach to AD for the short film production called *Magical Coincidence* by writer/director/describer Keith Lock, who had never tried description until this film. Keith Lock identified with Joel Snyder's (who he had heard speak while he was developing his film) approach to AD as poetry (Synder, 2014: 37). Lock wrote the AD script after he had locked the film. Then he timed and cued the script with his film and delivered the AD himself.

Collaborative theatre practices are most commonly referred to as "devised theatre" or the "devising process" (Milling and Heddon, 2005). Devising is a group process for content creation that begins without a pre-existing script (Milling and Heddon, 2005). The process develops from the personalities and skills of the individuals involved (Mermikides and Smart, 2010). It is important also for all involved to be aware of the group dynamics, and to support spontaneity (Milling and Heddon, 2005; Baldwin, 2002; Oddey, 1994). According to devising scholar Baldwin (2002), individuals within devising theatre are often familiar with each other's creative process, and all members are generally present from the beginning until the end (Baldwin, 2002). Primary research, such as personal interviews, helps the discovery process and is often used as a starting point in the same way a script is initially used at the beginning of traditional theatre practices (Milling and Heddon, 2005; Baldwin, 2002).

1.1. Role of the Director in Devising Process

In the devising process, a director's role and his or her relationships with the actors and stage crew are different from traditional Western theatre structures (Milling and Heddon, 2005 and Oddey, 1994). Directors in devising theatre act as the initial researchers and collaborators for a production, whereas in traditional theatre, directors are the final decision makers (Oddey, 1994). The director's role in devising, compared to traditional directing, changes from one of interpretation to one of conceptualization (Baldwin, 2002), although the director is still ultimately accountable for ensuring the play is coherent and entertaining (Baldwin, 2002).

1.1.1. Highway 63: The Devising Process

Highway 63, written and directed by Charlotte Corbeil-Coleman, uses a combination of "verbatim and improvisation", "real and imagined material", bringing to life small-town Fort McMurray, located in the controversial Athabasca oil sands (Ervin, 2011 and Bellows and Bohme, 1963). The narrative follows two roommates working in the oil industry and a young woman from Fort McMurray as their transient lives coincide within this transient city (Ervin, 2011). For an undescribed Youtube trailer for "Highway 63: The Fort Mac Show – Trailer", please see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vq2YbibpY7s>

In this paper we will discuss the implementation of the integrated style of AD with a first-time amateur director/describer as an alternative to a professional describer for *Highway 63*. Using a case study approach, we will present the director/describer's perspective on the development and delivery of AD and her personal transformation through her experience with the integrated AD process.

2. Methodology

In this paper we will discuss the implementation of the integrated style of AD with a first-time amateur director/describer as an alternative to a professional describer for *Highway 63*. Using a case study approach, we will present the director/describer's perspective on the development and delivery of AD and her personal transformation through her experience with the integrated AD process.

2. Methodology

A qualitative case study methodology was selected to gain insight into a director/describer's perspective on delivery of integrated AD. Merriam, (1998) states, "A qualitative case study is an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit"(p.27). The "case" is regarded as "a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries" (p.27). The case fences in what is being studied such as "a person" (p. 27). "A case might also be selected because it is intrinsically interesting; a researcher could study it to achieve as full an understanding of the phenomenon as possible" (p.28).

As recommended by Merriam (1998), semi-structured interviews were used to evaluate the integrated approach to AD and its contribution to the entertainment experience of B/LV theatre audiences for the devised theatre drama, *Highway 63*. The play was produced by a professional theatre group in Toronto, Theatre Passe Muraille. The director elected to be the describer and use a third person view.

2.1. Research Question

What was the director/describer's perspective on describing using the integrated style of AD in devising improvised theatre?

2.2. Research Participant

The director/describer participated in two short semi-structured interviews. She was a first-time describer who agreed to collaborate with Ryerson University on implementing the integrated approach to AD. She was also the playwright for *Highway 63: The Fort Mac Show*. A total of nine B/LV theatregoers attended the play, but only the director/describer data are presented in this paper. The interview protocol was approved by Ryerson University's ethics board.

2.3. Producing AD for *Highway 63: The Fort Mac Show*

Theatre Passe Muraille's artistic director wanted to collaborate with Ryerson University in producing live AD using the alternative style for one of the plays in the 2010/2011 theatre season. He approached the playwright and director of the play, *Highway 63: The Fort Mac Show*, who agreed to participate in the AD project and offered to be the describer for the play. Because this decision was made two weeks before the play opened, the time period for developing the description was short. The director was not a professional describer, but an amateur who was carrying out the task of AD as an alternative to a professional. She was provided with samples of AD from previous plays, which allowed her to learn about different description styles and proceed independently.

2.4. Technical equipment used for the AD

An FM loop system was used for the AD delivery. It consisted of a wireless system that transmits an audio feed from the describer's microphone to wireless headsets, used by individual theatregoers.

2.5. Interview questions for director/describer

The director/describer participated in two semi-structured interviews. The first interview was conducted prior to the AD performance, and the second interview was conducted three weeks after the AD performance to allow the describer to reflect on the AD process. Table 1 lists the questions used during these interviews.

3. Data Analysis

The interviews with the director/describer were analyzed using thematic analysis and coding procedure as described by Miles and Huberman (1994). The final definitions of themes used to code the data from the two interviews are shown in Table 2.

3.1. Reliability

To achieve inter-rater reliability, two researchers reviewed 12 randomly selected paragraphs from the first interview and 50 lines from the second interview with the

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3.1. Reliability

To achieve inter-rater reliability, two researchers reviewed 12 randomly selected paragraphs from the first interview and 50 lines from the second interview with the director/describer. Initially, the researchers had difficulty achieving inter-rater reliability due to ambiguity in the thematic definitions, which resulted in assumptions being made that were incorrect. Initial theme definitions were modified, discussed, and recoded. Eventually, researchers achieved an inter-rater reliability of at least 0.80 in all applicable thematic analysis. One researcher then proceeded to code the remaining interview data.

Table 1: Interview questions asked of the director/describer

Pre-description interview questions	Post-description interview questions
(1) What approach did you select for the AD?	(1) How did your perspective change through participating as a describer?
(2) How did you approach the description with regards to style, voice and audience?	(2) What choices did you make as a describer? Why?
(3) Can you comment on why you chose this approach?	(3) If you had to do it again, would you change anything?
(4) What do you think of your role as a describer?	(4) How do you feel about the process and working with the Ryerson research team? (a) What types of information did you need? (b) What do you think we could improve in future? (c) How much time did you put into it?
(5) What do you think of the process i.e. the time and effort you will need to put into describing?	(5) Do you have a different perspective on the play after describing it?
	(6) How do you feel about writing the AD script?

Table 2: Themes identified for director/describer interviews

Theme	Definition
Motivation and Background	Discuss how she became involved in the project, her previous experiences in related fields, and her enthusiasm for participating. Includes understanding of AD prior to participation in project.
Artistic Approach to AD	Comments of creative/stylistic (e.g. genre) decisions made during the creative process as well as the performance itself. This includes the modification of practices and processes (e.g. scripting decisions).
Expectations & Assessment of Performance	Assumptions about what the process entailed and assessment of her own performance. Includes advice to other describers/directors.
Relationships with others	Describer or director discusses her experience working with others (the cast, crew, director, describer, partners, and audience).

4. Results and discussion

As a first-time amateur director/describer, Charlotte's experience reveals her personal enlightenment with AD and the integrated style. In reflecting on her role, she explained how the description process led to her transformation personally and as a director/describer. Through this transformation, she became a proponent of the integrated AD style. Charlotte's personal journey through the AD process is discussed with respect to (1) the approach and process of being a director/describer, (2) learning experiences, (3) commentary on the alternative style

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4.1. The process of being a director/describer

4.1.1. *Artistic Approach to the AD*

The integrated AD style allows the director/describer the freedom to interpret and re-interpret visual stimuli to create a comparably entertaining experience with oral stimuli that sighted theatregoers attain from visual stimuli (Udo and Fels, 2009a). Thus, the director/describer determines what approach is best suited to the play. In explaining her approach prior to the live AD performance of the play, Charlotte asserted, "I think the approach I am going to take is trying to distill the best experience. . . I am not going to over-describe things, because it is so rapid."

Charlotte contended that as she was very familiar with the play, it would not be a challenge to uphold the language and the tone of the play. Moreover, because the production technique was devising theatre consisting of improvisation, she wanted to have this improvisation conveyed through her approach. She stated, "I want to have that quality in the way that I do it. . . . So it feels as if I am flying along with them. It is important that it doesn't seem scripted."

For the preamble to the play, Charlotte decided that she would develop a script. She would have liked to include her experience during the time she spent in Fort McMurray, but this was not possible given the pace of the play: "The only thing I am going to script is my preamble, because it (the play) is flying by and it is different every night." The purpose of the preamble was to provide background information about the play, as well as the characters and settings. Thus, a script was necessary to allow for the provision of consistent information crucial for B/LV theatregoers.

Decisions about point of view are fundamental to the creation of the AD script. In deciding on point of view, Charlotte thought that introducing a new character would impede clarity: "I think it would be detrimental to be a character in the play. There are too many characters and I feel it would add to the confusion. I think it is better for me to just be the director." Although Charlotte was comfortable in her role as a director/describer, she expressed some anxiety:

I am nervous about it . . . because it is a challenging thing to do. The more I think about it, the more challenging it becomes. . . . I allowed myself to really think of it as in the nature of this play and the way we jumped into this play and the way that the actors just jumped into characters every night. I want the quality of what I do to have that feeling . . . I think the nerves and energy are really good, really right.

The integrated approach to AD recognizes that the describer must make decisions on what visual information should be described, as it is not possible to describe all visual information (Udo and Fels, 2010b). Thus, Charlotte had to make difficult decisions for the AD. She explained: "We had to make hard choices for the description. It was hard to get the description because of the nature of the play. I was worried about them [the actors] being floating voices . . . not much to ground with scene."

In the first described performance, Charlotte felt that she "over-explained." For the second described performance, she felt that it was "more important to know who was speaking than to know where people were geographically."

The director has creative control over the entertainment experience of the production (Fels and Naraine, 2011; Udo and Fels, 2009a). Thus, in developing the AD, the director/describer can extend such creative control to ensure that the visual stimuli of the production are presented to enhance the entertainment value for B/LV audiences. Charlotte's creativity was evident in her approach to the live AD:

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It was like going for a dance in a poetic sense. I had to trust my feelings. Describing moments would have no meaning . . . I had to describe dance as emotion. I had to allow for more emotional interpretation, rather than literal, e.g. her hand [goes here]. The same for the dream scene . . . telling what images were being conjured. I had to affect my voice too . . . kind of dark and spooky.

As a first time describer with limited time to develop AD, Charlotte's artistic approach to the AD achieved the authentic intent of the integrated style, which was to allow B/LV audiences to have a comparable entertainment experience to sighted theatre-goers. She recognized that it was important for her approach to encompass the improvisational style that is inherent to the devising theatre genre. Her decision about point of view for the AD, that is, not to be a character in the play, allowed her the freedom to develop multi-level perspectives for the AD that were not limited by a specific character's point of view. Her initial anxiety was warranted, given the time constraints and being a first time describer. As she pointed out, "the nerves and energy was really good and really right," because she wanted to convey the improvised experience to B/LV theatre-goers. Although Charlotte was faced with making tough decisions about what should be included in the AD, her access strategy involved creative interpretation to convey the emotions and excitement of the play, which is crucial to the integrated style.

4.1.2. *The AD script*

Developing a script for the AD was not a high priority for Charlotte. As director and playwright, her familiarity with the play allowed her to remain flexible to include improvisation for the AD. Charlotte contended that the nature of the play allowed her to describe naturally: "I instinctively know what words to use because I was involved with the play." She advocated that flexibility was required when using a script. "Don't get caught up in reading a script. Be flexible in delivery." Nevertheless, she stressed the importance of writing a script in preparation for the AD:

I think you should write a script for peace of mind and taking the time to think how to describe. It takes a couple of hours to write a script. It helps with preparing for harder parts. I didn't use a lot of what I wrote, but it calmed me down . . . because I was really nervous.

4.1.3. *Challenges with the improvised approach*

In producing the integrated AD style, the describer has the freedom to determine the creation and delivery of the AD, as well as how it best fits the play (Udo and Fels, 2009, 2009a). Charlotte was challenged due to the fast pace of the production. She stated, "I have instructed the actors to go so quickly that it is going to make my job very hard." A further challenge was how to maintain balance while keeping the integrity of the play. Given that confusion and controversy encompass the themes of the play, initially her decisions for developing the AD were:

I am really going to try and place everybody as quickly as possible so that they can just hear the scene. I am going to try and do that at the top because a lot of scenes don't have that much action . . . it is just in their monologues that they are speaking.

Charlotte wanted the B/LV audience to have an authentic experience of the show. Her challenge was letting the audience know which character was speaking and what the specific setting was, while at the same time creating an atmosphere of "dropping in." A further challenge was that the actors were playing multiple roles. She stated, "The muddle of voices is also part of the show."

Being a describer for devising improvised theatre would be a challenge for any describer. Charlotte was able to overcome these challenges, not only because she was familiar with the play, but also because she wanted the AD to convey similar levels of complexities and intrigue that a sighted audience would obtain visually.

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4.1.4. *Challenges with time constraints*

Charlotte reported that the time constraints and her involvement in rehearsals, as well as being a self-employed writer, prevented her from doing more intense preparations for the AD that she would have liked: "I wished that I had more time to prep. It is really important to me so I wanted to give it as much time as I can."

Despite the time constraints, Charlotte indicated that the time required for creating AD was reasonable and would fit within the expected workload of the play. She thought it would be possible to describe future plays. She affirmed, "Yes, I would do it again, definitely. Hopefully, I would know more once I have done it." Even as a first time describer, she affirmed that developing AD can fit within the expected workload of production rehearsals. Thus, theatre companies should do advance planning when considering productions with AD to allow the director/describer to allocate the time needed for developing AD.

In summary, Charlotte's familiarity with the play allowed her to convey the qualities of the improvised style and the language and tone of the play through the AD. Although she was faced with difficult choices about what should be described, she directed her efforts at describing spontaneously in tandem with the improvised nature of the play. Her primary objective was to convey similar complexities of the play that sighted audiences would gain visually. Her experience as the playwright and director enhanced her ability to accomplish this goal.

4.2. **Describer's learning experience and reflections**

Theatre Passe Muraille agreed to have one afternoon and evening performance audio described one week before the end of its three-week run. This meant that Charlotte had limited time to prepare and practice her AD. The Ryerson research team provided Charlotte with notes from the first performance, with suggestions and considerations for the second performance. Charlotte thought that this feedback was extremely valuable to her: "Some things that broke through for me e.g. researcher's notes."

Charlotte's challenges with time constraints show that there is a need to have more structured time allocated to producing live AD. In the same way as dress rehearsals are required prior to opening night, dress rehearsals are also required prior to a live AD performance. In addition, having an observer provide feedback from a dress rehearsal of AD would be a useful part of the integrated AD development and delivery. Insufficient time to prepare for a live AD performance can impede the development and delivery of the live AD.

4.2.1. *Being a director/describer*

Upon reflecting on being a describer, Charlotte indicated that it was much "harder than I thought, especially for the afternoon performance." She would have liked more time to practice, but had no advance opportunities to practice the AD prior to the two performances: "I had to do a lot of prep, but couldn't practice." Thus, the afternoon performance was her first real-time experience with AD. She reflected, "Hard not to talk over people but then I got into it and wanted to talk a lot. Towards the end, I was really into the dream and the dance." For the second performance, she was more at ease, "I really enjoyed it." Her experience of having to use the first live AD performance as the only time to practice illustrates the need for dress rehearsals to test the AD.

Charlotte contended that being a describer involved a great deal of acting as well as being fully engaged in the play. She thought that "Voice has to take on emotional state of where the characters are at. I wasn't sure about that, it was hard to get for me." Piety (2004) contends that language and tone of voice are used in AD to give B/LV audiences important visual information to enhance the entertainment value of the play. Charlotte's challenge in attempting to convey the emotional interpretations of each character's journey shows that she understood Piety's assertion about AD.

In the post play interview, Charlotte was asked if she had to be a director/describer again, would she do it differently. Her main concerns were the lack of time. "I wanted a bit more time to figure out the points I wanted to describe." She was familiar with the play, and was able to work quickly to develop the AD and run through the AD herself. However, "A dry run did not prepare me for having a microphone and an audience. Also, the nature of the play . . . ran so

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She also indicated that she now had a different perspective on the play after describing it: "Having to figure out the dance, made me realize what the dance was all about. I learned a lot about the rise and fall of the play because I was forced to attend to it. It was strange to be alone with the audience." Charlotte thought that her experience as a describer allowed her to "gain respect for the actors. I had a chance to act in this play earlier. That was insanely terrifying. I would describe the play again in a heartbeat, but won't act in it."

In the post play interview, Charlotte was asked to reflect on her role: "I felt responsible for the play through description. It was my job to guide people to get the whole picture and my version of the play. I felt special." She reflected on the atmosphere in the audience during the performances: "I liked having the guide dogs in the audience. It felt special . . . good energy. A lot of people talked to me about having the dogs there on description night." Charlotte's perceptions of her role as a describer show that she was not only fully engaged in the authentic implementation of the integrated style, but also she was transformed by this experience. She contended:

The play was the right choice. It was a great opportunity for a director . . . a really valuable way of looking at your work. It makes you accountable . . . having to be vulnerable. It is good for directors to be reminded of what is involved in going in front of an audience to tell a story.

Having to assume the role as describer had a profound effect on Charlotte. She approached her role not merely as the describer, but as a storyteller who has the freedom to interpret and reinterpret visual stimuli as oral stimuli. Thus, as a director/describer, she felt transformed through her experience with developing and delivering integrated AD to a B/LV audience.

4.2.2. The program preamble

Charlotte indicated that the program preamble should be more formalized to ensure that people are aware of it occurring. "I didn't know how much people were listening or knowing before the play began." Upon reflection, she asserted that although it was "good to start the show with the program description (preamble), it was difficult to convey all the points in the short time allocated. It was hard to tell if B/LV audience was tuning in (to the program notes). I did describe the set and what actors were wearing. But I could not tell whether people heard that at the beginning." Thus, Charlotte thought that it would be "better to start with a synopsis at the beginning" because the distraction from the noise of people getting to their seats disrupts description.

Calderazzo (2010) argues that for B/LV audiences, the program notes are important not only as an introduction and background to the play, but also to obtain crucial information about the characters and settings, which must be memorized. "Blind audience members must constantly refer to the concepts of set and character appearance they have created and stored in their memories based upon pre-show description in order to contextualize the action occurring onstage. They cannot "review" this information visually during the production, as can their sighted counterparts (Calderazzo, 2010: 173). To make theatre more accessible to B/LV audience, an electronic version, which may include an audio clip of pre-recorded description, of the program notes could be distributed to them in advance of the performance.

4.2.3. Using an AD script

In reflecting upon developing a script, Charlotte thought that it was important that a describer writes his/her own script. However, she was only able to use the script as a guide "because of how quickly everything was moving. I didn't use it at all for the dream or dance." Knowing where to insert description, she asserted, "was the most nerve-wracking part. If I had to

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Charlotte’s flexible approach to using a script illustrates that there is an advantage to having a director be the describer. Her familiarity with the play meant that she could decide when to disregard the script. Decisions about what to describe and how much detail is necessary to represent the visual stimuli are often difficult, and even more complex with improvised theatre. Charlotte realized that with experience, she could trust her own instincts to be creative in representing visual stimuli.

In summary, Charlotte’s experience as a describer shows that it is important to allocate time to develop description. The describer needs time to experiment with different interpretive styles and to write a script. For first-time describers, time is required to learn and practice how to describe using the integrated style. Despite the lack of time and no opportunity to practice, Charlotte learned quickly and was able to overcome these challenges through her own determination to make the play an entertaining experience for B/LV audiences.

4.3. **Proponent of the integrated style**

4.3.1. *Advantages of the director as the describer*

Fundamental to the success of the integrated AD style is having the director involved in the AD. This could mean that the director would assume the role of describer, but it could also mean that the director exerts creative control over or involvement in the description, including style, script, and delivery. Charlotte’s experience in *Highway 63* exemplifies the need and potential for director involvement in producing AD: “The director holds everyone’s perspectives; another person may not describe (in a way) that is thought out or allow for spontaneity. I don’t really look at the script, ever. It is just a blueprint. Having (a third party) describer following a script would have been difficult due to the improvisational nature of play.”

Having had an opportunity to be a director/describer using the integrated AD style, Charlotte recommended that directors undertake the role as describer: “I think it is really worth it. I think it is a great thing for a director to think about just in terms of that B/LV audience too. I think it is so important”. Calderazzo (2010: 172) concurs with Charlotte’s view that the describer’s role is to make theatre a “more effective cultural experience” for B/LV audiences.

Charlotte’s experience with applying the integrated style has piqued her interest in describing other plays. “I can see myself doing other plays. I would have a good eye for that AD.” However, she pointed out that, “it is easier and harder with your own play . . . I take some things for granted”. Her familiarity with the play sometimes made her overlook specific visual information that required detailed description: “I have a clear picture in my head of what the (actors) are doing, but once I tune myself into that AD, it really helps because I know what they are doing.” Piety (2004: 31) argues that describers have a challenging task of inserting description within limited spaces between the dialogue. They also face time constraints in “choosing which representations to make and how to make them”. Given that Charlotte was a first-time describer, more time was needed for her to gain insights on how to represent visual stimuli as oral stimuli.

Charlotte further contends that *Highway 63* poses a unique challenge, as it is meant to be intriguing for the sighted audience: “With this play, I can’t see a stranger coming in . . . I could . . . but it would be really, really hard . . . it would be really challenging because the whole audience doesn’t really know all the time what is going on.” Thus, Charlotte argued that it was essential for her as the director to be the describer in this particular play. She also believed that a third party may question the director’s decisions and choices around specific scenes, and this would then influence how the describer presented the information to the audience:

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The integrity of the choices that we have made and I have made . . . whereas an outsider would go, “why didn’t you do this?” That could feed into how they are thinking of describing it . . . their personal feelings about certain scenes. I know why we made all the choices we made, so that is important for me in describing it . . . where there is that competence behind it.

Charlotte further contended that being the director/describer for *Highway 63* enhanced the AD because as the director and playwright she had “intimacy with the play.” She affirmed:

It was nice that I was the director . . . I really thought that I had a deeper connection with the play. I know the actors really well and could play off them.

In contrast, Charlotte argued, “actors (as describers) would have done a different job because they are inside the play. If (one of the actors) were to do this, for example, it would be focused on his/her character’s journey.” This would not necessarily have been detrimental to the description—it would just provide a different point of view. What is important to recognize, as audiences and describers, is that description is ultimately a creative exercise. What is described and how it is delivered will change depending on what point of view is taken and who makes the decisions; there is no objective point of view. Modern theatre sees the possibility of different roles for directors besides the leadership and supervising of the production and actors, including acting themselves, playwright, set builder (Chandler, 2008; Knopf, 2006). Hence, it is not unrealistic for a director to consider taking on the role of audio describer for his/her play.

4.3.2. *Comfort level of actors*

A further advantage of having the director being the describer is that the actors have established a prior rapport with the director. They are likely to be more comfortable with her being the describer than if she were a third party. In devising theatre, the director and actors are all inspired by the collective vision of the “production concept” (Mason 2007 and Kershaw 2003).

Charlotte explained that the actors are comfortable with her and would not be distracted by her voice: “Actors will be nervous. I talked to them a bit about it. I think that they are more nervous that other people are going to be able to hear me talking; that is what they are nervous about.”

Charlotte indicated that the other actors thought that an AD play was “kind of cool”. Nevertheless, they “were more nervous. They liked structure; they could hear me and they loved that it was me (doing the describing); they weren’t distracted. They felt that if it was anyone else doing the description, they would not have liked that.”

Moreover, one of the actors “thought it was amazing and having the guide dogs at the play was amazing. It changed his performance during the matinee, as he felt connected with the audience. He felt that people were listening in a different way.”

Charlotte’s personal testimony of being an amateur director/describer using the integrated AD style supports the concept advocated in the literature that the director is one of the best persons to be a describer (Holland, 2009; Mason, 2007 and Knopf, 2006) as he/she is familiar with the play and the artistic choices made, and dramatic interpretation required to enhance its entertainment value. Knopf (2006: 16) affirmed: “If we view one of the primary jobs of the director as creating a world, then the director can be seen as the creator of this world . . .” As emphasized in the literature, AD is not merely an access strategy, but is a form of art in itself as the approach to the AD must fit with the artistic elements of the play (Udo and Fels 2009a: 5). Thus, the intent of the integrated style of AD is to permit cultural inclusion of B/LV individuals.

In summary, the integrated style seems to be effective with the director as describer because the director can exert creative control over the development and delivery of the AD.

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In summary, the integrated style seems to be effective with the director as describer because the director can exert creative control over the development and delivery of the AD. Charlotte explained that *Highway 63* was unique, as devising theatre, because it was meant to be somewhat perplexing for the audience. She contended that it would have been difficult for a third party describer to deliver the AD given the improvised nature of the play. She thought that having her voice as part of the “collective” enhanced the entertainment value of the AD. As a describer, she was personally satisfied due to her intimacy with the play. As the director, Charlotte was able to present a particular point of view that was different from those of the actors. She believed that the actors were comfortable with her voice and were not distracted, and this was one advantage for a director/describer. Charlotte felt she was transformed by her experience as a describer, and was willing to describe future plays. She believes that directors should be encouraged to be describers, as they would find it personally rewarding and it would contribute to the entertainment value of the AD.

5. Conclusion

Highway 63 was a documented implementation of “integrated AD”, where the director performed as an amateur describer as an alternative to a professional describer. Having *Highway 63* audio described by the director garnered insight into the possibility of having a director’s unique perspective on the development process for integrated AD in a live “devising theatre” performance. A case study approach was used to obtain the director’s reflections and the process involved in developing and delivering the AD. In her role as director/describer, Charlotte thought she was able to convey the qualities of the devised theatre style through the language and tone of the AD. However, she often found it challenging to represent the spontaneity of the improvised approach in the AD as well as deciding what to describe. A further challenge involved time constraints for developing the script and practicing describing. Despite these significant challenges, Charlotte had intimate knowledge of the play and felt that she presented a point of view that was different from that of one of the actors or a third party. Having her voice as describer as part of the “collective” in this devised theatre example seemed to contribute to the entertainment value of the play in her view. Charlotte’s commitment as a proponent of integrated AD bodes well for the possibility that directors can be involved in AD.

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