Working Conditions and Responsibilities of AUDIO DESCRIBERS and MANAGERS in Theatres and Arts Venues

# AUDIO DESCRIPTION

#### INTRODUCTION

Theatre audio description (AD) in the UK has evolved haphazardly over the past 30 years, resulting in a mixed pattern of professional and volunteer provision. Because of the uncoordinated way in which theatre AD has developed, venues may have differing ideas of what constitutes the AD service they are legally required to provide.

The number of Audio Describers based in Wales is a fraction of those in England. A recent increase in trained Audio Describers has helped to improve the provision of this service. Despite the number being relatively small, these Audio Describers are now ready for work in their home venues and regions and across the country.

This document is intended to alert venues and companies to what is needed in order to provide a quality service. It also details what venues and companies can expect from their describers.

This document has been based on an existing document from The Audio Description Association (ADA) and updated by Alastair Sill for Taking Flight Theatre.

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#### WHAT IS AUDIO DESCRIPTION?

Theatre AD enables blind and partially sighted people to experience and enjoy a performance on an equal basis, with friends and family or independently. It takes the form of a live verbal commentary which provides information on the visual elements of a production as it unfolds. It describes action that is essential to an understanding of the play's story, as well as other visual information such as the style and design of a production, facial expressions and visual jokes that a blind or partially sighted member of the audience might otherwise miss.

## **CONVENTIONAL AUDIO DESCRIPTION**

The description is delivered live in the gaps between the dialogue by a describer, broadcast using infrared, radio or WiFi and picked up by the audience member wearing a special lightweight receiver.

Should a venue or company be without either system, it is possible to hire wireless systems for the required length of time. This needs to be factored into budgets at the beginning of the process.

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# INTEGRATED AUDIO DESCRIPTION

Jenni Elbourne, the artistic director of Unscene Suffolk, defines integrated AD in these terms:

"Integrated description means doing something which perhaps the whole audience might be aware of as opposed to just the blind or partially sighted headset user and also potentially integrating the description into it in a way which means that it becomes a part of the artistic product as opposed to an add-on."

Depending on the skill set / experience of the audio describer and vision of the director / creative team, the audio describer may assume the role of a character in the production. This character is crafted to become the pivotal descriptive voice in the piece. Many audio describers are trained actors and able to adopt this audio describer / character role.

Alternatively, the audio describer may work as a consultant alongside the director / creative team, to identify the moments in the play when pieces of description should be inserted and spoken by the characters.

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nru ARIENNIR GAN Y Y LOTERI LOTTERY FUNDED Ariennir gan Lywodraet Funded by Welsh Gov But in both cases, how does the team monitor the effectiveness of the description? In order for this integrated approach to work properly, it is essential to have the involvement of a blind consultant who can identify very quickly what works and what doesn't.

The use of an audio describer and blind consultant in this way has planning implications, which need to be factored in at the beginning of the process.



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# CONSIDERATIONS FOR WORKING WITH AN AUDIO DESCRIBER

Consider the appropriateness of the audio describer you are working with. It is tempting to book the first person you can find, but they might not be the right one for you. Do they have the right level of experience? Audio describing a piece of dance is very different from describing a conventional stage play.

Think about the gender of your audio describer. What is more appropriate, a male or female voice? The nature of the production might steer you in a particular direction. Like everything else, these considerations need to take place at an early stage so that the audio description avoids being an 'add on' or 'tick box' exercise.

When applying for funding, include the cost for the audio describer as a separate line in the budget. You can often apply for costs under 'access/inclusion'.

Welcome the audio describer to the space, introduce them to the cast and allow them the opportunity to ask questions, including speaking directly to

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the director, actors and back-stage crew in order to do their very best job for everyone involved.

The audio describer's job is to describe what they see. However, when it comes to certain elements of the production, which require a particular type of expertise, this is not always that easy. With this in mind, when it comes to costume and set design, there needs to be an early flow of information from Designers to audio describer. This will prevent any misinterpretation and allow the audio describer to feel more confident in their description of colour and fashion etc. It's often the case that a Designer has left the project before the audio describer has begun. If an early relationship is established between all members of the creative team via email, phone calls and face to face meetings, there will be no need for the audio describer to chase after the information.

As soon as you have booked your audio describer, begin your marketing to the blind and partially sighted community. Consider the use of an audio flyer and the possibility of outreach opportunities to local groups. The audio describer is an ideal person to be involved in these marketing activities.

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The Audio Description Association (ADA) and Taking Flight recommend that venues and their describers, whether freelance or volunteer, should have a formal contract, giving both describers and venues a firm footing for their working relationship.

The ultimate aim is to facilitate the provision of high quality audio description services to blind and partially sighted theatregoers (and others who may require it), enabling them to follow a performance with the same understanding and enjoyment as sighted members of the audience.

A standard audio description service has three components:

- introduction to the show for blind and partially sighted audience members, recorded and distributed in advance and also delivered live immediately before the audio described performance,
- **touch tour** of the set, props and costumes prior to the audio described performance,
- scene-by-scene **audio description** through to the final curtain call.

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The responsibilities of the venue or company manager and the describer in providing these services are detailed in **Appendices 1 and 2**. These are based on the best of current practice and as such constitute a model to which a venue or company providing an AD service should aspire.

It is recognised, however, that because of the wide variation in operating practices and performance schedules, it is not possible for all venues to fulfil all service requirements all the time. Length of run is often the principal factor in determining what is feasible: a week may be too short for advance distribution of a recorded introduction<del>.</del>

The Guidance Notes at the end of this document contain general information relating to the engagement of describers, including guidance on rates of pay.



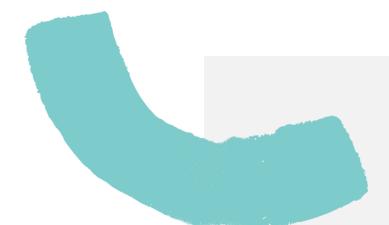
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#### **TERMS AND CONDITIONS**

This section lists the main components of an agreement for the engagement of audio describers. Clauses which may appear in the venue's or company's standard contract relating (for example) to press and publicity, confidentiality, and equality and diversity policies, are not included here.

# **Confirmation of booking**

The venue or company manager or designated individual will supply the describer with written confirmation of booking for individual productions and projects. Confirmation of booking will include details of performances, venues, dates and times, with times of pre-performance touch tours if known or to be confirmed. Dates and times for rehearsing the audio description and deadlines for the delivery of scripts and video file to the describer, may also be included.

# Fees

The agreement will include confirmation of the fee to be paid to the describer for preparation and first delivery of an introduction to the performance followed by scene-by-scene description, plus conducting a pre-performance touch tour for blind and partially sighted patrons.

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nru ARIENNIR GAN Y LOTERI LOTTERY FUNDED Ariennir gan Lywodraeth Funded by Welsh Gover The agreement will also include the fee payable to the describer for repeat performances during the current run of the production. The repeat performance fee covers any additional work undertaken by the describer in amending the existing introduction and script, for which a further viewing and rehearsal may be needed, plus delivery of the description and touch tour.

If the describer records the introduction for advance distribution on behalf of the venue or company concerned, the agreement will state the fee to be paid to the describer for doing so. Deadlines for recording the introduction may also be included in the agreement.

# **Expenses and subsistence**

Payment of travel, accommodation, and other expenses incurred by the describer is negotiable between the venue or company manager and the describer. The agreement will include details of the agreement reached regarding expenses. Payment of subsistence, where applicable, will also be confirmed in the agreement.

# Payment

Payment will be made following submission of an invoice by the describer detailing the work undertaken and fees incurred. Where expenses are

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claimed, the relevant receipts and (if required) a completed claim form will be included with the invoice. The describer will provide details of selfemployed or other tax status as required.



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# Cancellation

In the event of a confirmed engagement being cancelled by the venue manager, within one month of the start date, the full fee is due to the describer, unless the cancellation has been brought about by *force majeur*. In this instance, the payment of a cancellation fee and the expenses already incurred by the describer will be agreed by the manager and describer.

If there are no AD users for either the touch tour or the description on the day of the performance, the full fee and agreed expenses are still payable to the describer.

#### Insurance

The manager will confirm that the venue has in place appropriate public liability and any other insurance as may be required under the law from time to time, and that this insurance covers all visitors at the venue including both the describer and the persons benefiting from the audio description service.

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# Copyright

# a) Copyright relating to the recording of the production

To protect the copyright holders involved, the describer undertakes not to copy the recording of the production; not to allow the recording to be viewed by any other individual without express authority from the manager of the venue or the production company concerned; and to sign a document confirming these conditions if required.

# b) Copyright relating to material created by the describer

The copyright of any material generated by the describer as a result of the engagement, including the introduction to the performance, the audio description script and any training material, generally resides with the describer as its creator, but the commissioning venue or company has exclusive use of the introduction and performance script during the term of the engagement. Audio description agencies may claim copyright of material produced by the freelance describers they hire out to venues. (See also Guidance Note 2).

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# Credits

The agreement will state the manner and form in which the describer will be named in the printed programme and other promotional material relating to the production.

# Dress code

The describer will comply with the dress code required by the venue. The traditional default dress for describers is 'theatre blacks' as worn by backstage staff.

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#### APPENDIX 1: RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE VENUE MANAGER

Appendices 1 and 2 list the responsibilities of the describer and venue, and set out the conditions needed for both parties to provide a satisfactory AD service. The tools and working conditions the describer requires from the venue in order to prepare and deliver a quality audio description are listed below in **Appendix 1**. The describer's responsibilities to the venue or are listed in **Appendix 2**.

# **1.1.** The describer will be provided with the following:

- a. a complete copy of the prompt script (or score) for each
   describer working on the production (See Guidance Note 3)
   copied onto single-sided A4 paper and emailed to the describer
   as a Word document;
- b. A video file of the complete performance emailed to each describer working on the production. If the production has a limited number of performances, for example one week, the recording should be made as soon as possible using a fixedangle camera giving a view of the entire stage. In the case of a short run, a recording of the dress rehearsal plus a recording of the first night, will be necessary. If the production has a longer run of two weeks or more and the audio described performance

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- c. House seats for the describers working on the production to preview the production, rehearse the audio description, and monitor each other during the audio described performances.
  For touring productions, the manager may organise tickets for the describer to preview the production at an earlier venue on the tour, in order to give maximum time to prepare, and pay additional expenses incurred by the describers in doing so;
- d. a programme and copies of relevant publicity or production material for each describer working on the production;

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- e. a soundproof room with a good view of the stage large enough to seat two describers. Soundproofing should be checked; if the viewing window leaks sound, it will be necessary to take
- f. adjacent seats off sale for described performances and rehearsals. The room should be free from ambient noise, eg. air conditioning, plumbing, and external activity. A remote location with a colour TV monitor giving a high quality image of the stage is acceptable, provided it is self-contained, soundproof and free from ambient noise.
- g. the audio describer needs to be able to hear what's going on so they can follow the performance.
- h. a microphone with an on/off facility controlled by the describer
- a table or work surface large enough to accommodate the microphone and other equipment, the describer's script and glass of water, and an anglepoise or similar reading lamp; plus two height-adjustable chairs;



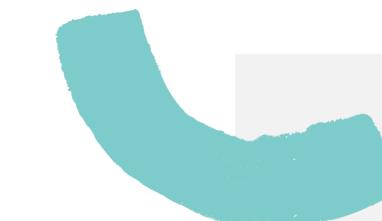
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- j. a user's headset and receiver to carry out a pre-performance sound check and monitor reception in the auditorium during audio described rehearsals and performances;
- k. access to technical support with setup and maintenance of audio description equipment, and backup for the describers during sound checks, rehearsals and live performances. If the describer is providing the equipment, a theatre technician may be needed to assist with the get in;
- access to relevant theatre staff, eg. the venue's access officer and company or stage managers, regarding touch tours arrangements or script updates, and researching set and costume details or pronunciation of cast names.
- m. door codes, swipe cards or other means of access to allow the describer to move freely between areas of the building as needed for delivery of the service:
- n. guidance on the venue's security procedures, health, safety and other policies, including risk assessments, with which the describer must comply.



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- **1.2.** The venue will also ensure that:
  - a) relevant departments and personnel liaise with the describer regarding booking information, provision of scripts and recording of the performance, advance provision of the recorded introduction, organisation of the touch tour, technical requirements and checks of the infra-red/radio system, the microphone and headsets on the day of the performance;
  - b) relevant departments and personnel liaise with the describer regarding security and risk assessment procedures, also any company policies and procedures which may affect the preparation and content of the audio introduction and describer's script;
  - c) all relevant staff and company members are aware that a performance is being audio described. A simple and easy way of highlighting an audio described performance is a radio announcement over the Front of House tannoy system.
  - d) theatre staff on duty on the day of the audio described performance have adequate training in customer care and emergency procedures for visually impaired patrons;



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- e) a recording of the audio introduction will be made available in advance to partially sighted patrons who book via phone, email or the venue's website. The recording may include access information, headset instructions and other information specific to blind and partially sighted visitors;
- f) It is recommended that braille and large print cast lists are available on request for partially sighted patrons who book. Character audio introductions offer another way of engaging with audience members before they watch a performance. These simple yet creative introductions are a collaborative effort between audio describer, cast members and, where possible, the Sound Technician. A character's self description offers a useful insight into the sound of their voice, their personality and physical appearance. Another strong recommendation is the offer of a tactile set box, to help establish the geography of the stage and world of the play.
- g) consumer feedback on audio described performances, touch tours, and ancillary access provision, is obtained by means of feedback questionnaires, chaired focus groups or regular consumer panels;

**Commented [1]:** Visually impaired replaced with partially sighted

**Commented [2]:** Visually impaired replaced with partially sighted

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- h) formal or informal consumer feedback relating specifically to the description is forwarded to the describer;
- i) marketing information is available via channels and in formats appropriate to visually impaired patrons, and the website meets accessibility criteria.



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# APPENDIX 2: RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE DESCRIBER

The describer undertakes to:

- a) liaise with the manager to agree the performance dates, times, fees and other information included in the confirmation of booking and the contract;
- b) prepare an introduction to the audio described performance.
- c) prepare a description of the performance.
- d) create an audio description script that can be read by a fellow describer in an emergency;
- e) deliver the introduction to the performance 10/15 minutes before curtain up, followed by scene-by-scene description to the final curtain call.
- f) if no patrons have booked for the audio described performance, begin and continue delivery of the introduction and description until such time as an authorised member of staff confirms there are no listeners and the audio description can be dropped;

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- g. in conjunction with stage management and other theatre personnel, conduct a touch tour of the set, costumes and props before the audio described performance;
- h. carry out a supplementary sound check of the audio description system prior to rehearsals and delivery of an audio described performance, in time for technical staff to rectify reported faults;
- if working with a co-describer, monitor audio description reception in the auditorium during rehearsals and live performances, and give feedback on script accuracy and audibility, also to provide any troubleshooting and emergency cover and required if problems occur before or during delivery;
- j. provide briefing and support on the day of the audio described performance to FOH and other theatre staff as required;
- contribute to feedback exercises, and service planning and promotion as required, and at the venue's expense;
- comply with the venue's security procedures, health and safety, risk assessment and other procedures and practices as advised;



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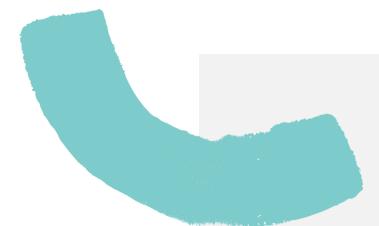
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- m. take into account any company policies or practices directly affecting preparation and content of the audio introduction and describer's script, eg. submission of the draft introduction for the producer's comments;
- n. liaise with relevant members of the production company and theatre staff to achieve the above objectives.



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#### **GUIDANCE NOTES**

# Note 1. Fees

The 'basic package' provided by the theatre describer has three elements: preparation of an introduction to the show, to be recorded for advance distribution if required and delivered live immediately prior to the performance; scene-by-scene description or the performance; and a preshow touch tour of the set, costumes and props for blind and partially sighted patrons. The touch tour is usually included in the quoted fee but may be priced separately. Recording the introduction for the venue to distribute in advance attracts an additional fee. The fee quoted is usually flat rate, irrespective of length or complexity of performance, although adjustments may be agreed for exceptionally short or long shows. Expenses are negotiable between the describer and the venue or company concerned.

Most theatres pay a 'one off' commissioning fee for the first performance with a smaller fee for any repeat performances during the run. As a guideline, the average fee for a first performance in the UK (excluding Scotland) is currently £600, divided equally\* between the describers working on the show if more than one describer is involved. Fees for repeat performances also vary in relation to the original fee, but tend to be at

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least 50% of the original. For recording the introduction, fees range from £50-£75.

\*The describers may agree informally between themselves to split the fee unequally, to reflect how they decided to divide the workload (if different from the usual 50/50 split), and whether any under-studying was involved. In this case, they will inform the manager of their joint decision and invoice accordingly.

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# Note 2. Fees for use of describers' scripts ('script sharing')

Script sharing is typically an informal arrangement between individual describers who negotiate use of, and payment for, scripts of previously described touring shows, transfers or revivals. A suggested fee for 'one off' use of a script is £100-£150.

Alternatively, describers may base the fee they charge on the repeat performance fee they would notionally have been paid had they been engaged to deliver the script.

A team of two or more describers engaged for a touring or long-running show may develop a communal script which they jointly own, in which case it will be necessary to negotiate terms with all the describers involved in creating the communal script.

The introduction to the show is often included in a script share at no extra cost. Many introductions are freely available to the public, as downloads from the originating venue's website and recordings circulated to blind and partially sighted patrons in advance. By agreeing to supply their introductions for this purpose, describers are in effect ceding their copyright. They should, however, receive due acknowledgment from any venue and/or describer who subsequently makes use of their work. All other use of material generated by describers, whether by venues or other describers, should be negotiated with the creator.

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#### Note 3. Recommended number of describers per production

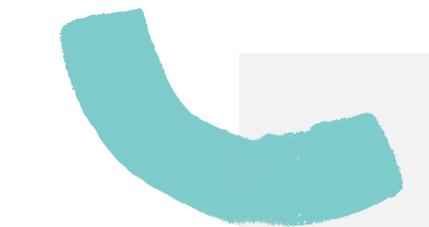
Using two describers ensures the quality of the description. It makes an invaluable contribution to the editorial process and also has a number of practical advantages, not least the fact that a second describer is automatically available to rehearse and monitor the description and act as an understudy if required.

For touring and long-running productions, a team of three describers familiar with the show and the script, working in pairs on a mix 'n' match basis, will provide extra cover and greater flexibility with regard to dates and times of audio described performances.

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#### Note 4. Insurance

The Audio Description Association recommends that freelance audio describers should take out membership of Equity, the UK trade union for professional performers and creative practitioners.

Full Equity members are automatically covered for up to £10 million in Public Liability Insurance, and Equity members are automatically covered for accident and backstage insurance. For further information about membership benefits, including free legal advice and support, see the Equity website at: <u>www.equity.org.uk</u>

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