THE LAUGHTER LINES PROJECT

MAY-OCTOBER 2014

"Being able to laugh together is socially bonding"

The aims and objectives of the Laughter Lines project were to explore, experiment and evaluate ways of audio-describing physical comedy in the theatre to blind and partially sighted audiences, thus enabling them to be included in the bonding experience of laughter and enhancing their enjoyment of the performance.

Questions raised:
- Why is it that words fail to match the humour of the performance?
- What are the best means of bridging the gap?
- Is the selection of vocabulary as important as in straight description?
- Does the vocal performance of the describer contribute?
- How vital is timing?
- Were there any ‘rules’ for audio-description that could be broken to advantage?

The project took the form of two workshops, one held in London the other in Cambridge and an audio-described performance given subsequently. Numbers were limited, so care was taken to approach both individual and collectives of audio-describers. In many cases these categories over-lapped with most describers being allied to one or more collectives and some working independently too. Eight describers were nominated from five different sources – Mind’s Eye (North West), the National Theatre, London, the Royal Shakespeare Company, Sightlines (Midlands and SW), and VocalEyes, West End and UK-wide touring theatre. The audio-describers between them, during the last year, have given descriptions at 61 venues nationwide. Blind and partially sighted participants were invited to contribute and to evaluate, three at the first workshop and seven at the second. Actors from the Mischief Theatre Company took part in the second workshop, prior to the audio-description of their play, The Play that Goes Wrong, at Cambridge Arts Theatre. The play is a farce and almost entirely dependent on fast, physical comedy and slapstick.
**Workshop 1:**

Facilitated by Professor Sophie Scott, Professor of Psychology at UCL (who specialises in the study of laughter and how it impinges on social inclusion), the first workshop took place at the Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience, University College London. It was given by comedy writer and stand-up comic, Mark Kelly. The objective of this workshop was largely to establish the problems in describing physical comedy to a blind and partially sighted audience. Mark led discussion on the problems from both the describers’ and the audience’s points of view. He showed a selection of clips from slapstick and other physical comedy films, leading to discussion as to how these would best be described – language, timing, voice. The blind and partially sighted participants were especially articulate as to what works and what doesn’t.

The **main outcomes** of Workshop 1 were:

1. The voice is paramount. Relaying a sense of enjoyment and the mood was thought to be of great importance, though not ‘acting along with the actors’.

2. Possibly most importantly, the almost sacrosanct law that the describer in no circumstances speaks over the actors doesn’t apply. If the action is more important than the words, then the description should over-ride the script.

3. Vocabulary and timing are important of course, but brevity is paramount. Straining after ‘funny words’ mostly doesn’t work but the use of onomatopoeia does.

Evaluation of this workshop was good. The describers felt that discussion and cross-fertilisation of ideas was refreshing and the blind and partially sighted participants really enjoyed the chance to comment on their reception of this type of description and made them aware of the process that describers go through to achieve a performance. The day left all the participants eager for the second more interactive workshop in Cambridge.

**Workshop 1 - Feedback from describers:**

- Discussion around brevity, succinctness, choice of words, and sounds of words was very relevant to our work. I could happily have listened to the speakers for longer.

- We made a good start on defining the areas which are almost fiendishly difficult to describe. Both Sophie Scott and Mark Kelly were fascinating, with surprising and thoughtful information. I’d say that their definitions of comedy – its motives, idioms and application – are just as vital to the audio-description of comedy – we have to be just as short and sweet and use a sympathetic/similar voice to the comedy we’re describing. It’s all in the timing and delivery.
• There was a moment when I was describing the Tommy Cooper sketch - I had a realisation about over describing. I had set up the two men sipping tea from the same cup and putting sugar in. I was about to describe Tommy spitting it out and I didn't have time. But the sound of him doing it made Yusuf really laugh and it was obvious that that was enough. It was an important lesson about trusting what people know.

From a user of the service:

• The discussions over audio-description and comedy were interesting and I think useful for the audio-describers too. We certainly found that there are occasions when it is necessary to talk over the dialogue from the actors in order to get an understanding of the physical humour.

From Mark Kelly:

• The best comedy writing has no dead or irrelevant or misleading language – (describers take note!)

Workshop 2:

Personnel changed slightly for the second workshop, held at the Cambridge Arts Theatre and involving the Mischief Theatre Company. Two or three of the actors were expected, but in the event, the whole Company came and joined in indefatigably, showing great interest and enthusiasm. A couple of describers were unable to attend and were replaced by others from their organisation. The number of blind and partially sighted participants was augmented to seven. This meant that describers and users of the service were able to work almost on a one-to-one basis.

The day was led by Bridget Crowley, one-time Head of Theatre Training at Arts Educational Schools, London, now an audio-describer at the National Theatre and for VocalEyes. The workshop was designed to follow up the outcomes of the first workshop. The Mischief Theatre Company performed very brief extracts from *The Play That Goes Wrong*. Each extract was performed twice. The describers watched the first time and on the repeat, improvised an audio-description for the blind and partially sighted participants one-to-one. The closeness and intimacy brought home to actors, audience and describers alike the difficulties encountered when describing physical comedy and stressed the need for vocal sensitivity, choice of language and timing, but primarily the former. Also firmly established was the breaking of the ‘no speaking over the actors’ rule.

Evaluation of the second workshop was uniformly positive, each group stressing how valuable it had been working closely together. Each group said how useful it had been to experience the difficulties this kind of description presents, but perhaps the most impressed by the amount of skill required were the blind and partially sighted participants who had previously not been aware of how much preparation and expertise is needed for any description, but physical comedy the most.
Workshop 2 - Feedback from describers:

- A particular strength of the day was the sense of collaboration between actors, describers and users, all with the same aim of providing the best possible finished product, which was exhilarating.

- Some users don’t hear audio clues, which I will take in consideration in the future. Users have different requirements, and require more in-depth description rather than drawing their own conclusions in conjunction with audio clues and dialogue.

- The most useful thing for me was sitting by users while we watched a sequence together, and then hearing what they wanted to know.

- Really useful to take time and discuss and break things down. Having the actors in the room was of great value. Wouldn’t it be nice to be able to be with them more often? Also listening to the opinions of the VIPs was invaluable.

From users of the service:

- We thought that it was great engaging disabled people properly and in a direct way with other professionals. We think the more blind and partially sighted that are treated as professionals as they use this service all the time is incredibly positive - actors, playwrights and audio-describers were working together.

- What was interesting and useful? Getting an insight into how an actor prepares for a performance. Playing the name, number and train game to break the ice and get used to working with one another. Working with actors and audio-describers so all would get the most out of the performance.

From an actor:

- I found it extremely enlightening. It inspired me to think about my own performance and our show from the perspective of a blind or partially sighted person and how we could adjust it to help them get the most enjoyment out of it, or how we could help the describers do the best job possible.
Members of Mischief Theatre at Workshop 2

Two members of Mischief Theatre and a representative from Kenny Wax with describer Andrew Holland in discussion with Yusuf Osman. Other blind participants, actors and describers in the background
Warming up

VocalEyes Deputy Director Toby Davey at Workshop 2
AD Performance:

The AD performance of *The Play that Goes Wrong* was performed by Mischief Theatre Company at the Cambridge Arts Theatre three days after the workshop. Unfortunately, the theatre equipment broke down in the second half and no description went out, thus emphasising one of the other great problems with audio-description – describers are always at the mercy of the venue’s equipment which is very often primitive or not well maintained and also of technicians (though not at the Cambridge Arts Theatre) who are often badly trained, very busy with other matters or unaware of the importance to what is often a small audience of good sound reception.

The positives from the performance were that both describers had found the workshops invaluable in writing and performing their scripts and perhaps most important, that the blind and partially sighted users of the service spoke of the difference in their enjoyment of the two halves. The described half they understood and felt included in the laughter and enjoyment of the sighted audience, whilst the half that wasn’t described left them frustrated and excluded.

Feedback from a user of the service:

- If we were trying to conduct an experiment into the importance of audio-description we couldn’t have fixed it better. First half, audio-description everyone could follow what was going on, laugh at the physical jokes and feel included. Second half, no audio-description, frustration, upset and exclusion.

The outcomes of Workshop 2 were:

1. The further understanding of the vocal skills needed to provide a fresh and vital audio-description threw up the need for a further workshop, which will take place in October. It will be given by Jeanette Nelson, Vocal Coach at the National Theatre.

2. The producers of *The Play that Goes Wrong* have booked an AD performance of the play at the Duchess Theatre in the West End and another at the Lowry in Manchester as a result of the workshops.

3. Details of the findings from the three workshops will be disseminated amongst other audio-describers unable to attend them.

4. A short film was made of the 2nd workshop by final year students at Roehampton University, the result of which we haven’t yet seen.
Workshop 3:

The third workshop was the outcome of the general opinion among all the participants at the earlier ones, **that vocal expression and a communication of fun and enjoyment are paramount in the description of physical comedy.** If the describer doesn’t have complete control of the voice as the main means of communicating what they are seeing and the rest of the audience enjoying, then the listener loses out and the feeling of isolation within the crowd that has been described takes over.

So the third workshop was entirely given over to the analysis of vocal performance. Jeanette Nelson, Head of Voice at the National Theatre, expressed an interest in the problem presented – how to make physical theatre funny for someone who can’t see - and consented to run the workshop after consultation with Bridget Crowley as an audio-describer and as facilitator of the previous workshops. There was again a partial change of personnel, with ten audio-describers and four blind and partially sighted people present. Jeanette Nelson’s programme for the day was designed to analyse individual voices in various situations including:

- Warm up ideas and practice
- Analysis of individual voices in free reading
- Analysis of individual vocal interpretation of pre-prepared audio-descriptions of comedy film extracts
- Discussion and questions

With great skill and sensitivity, Miss Nelson gave a positive yet penetrating analysis of each of the describer’s performances and although knowing that they had an experienced and possibly critical audience in their fellow describers, everyone acknowledged that they had felt comfortable, encouraged and much wiser after the event.

The blind and partially sighted participants joined in the vocal warm up, which they found extremely interesting as it was outside their usual experience. The whole event gave them an insight into how a describer prepares for a performance, something they said they wouldn’t normally consider – it’s either a voice they like or they don’t – and they now felt better able to be discerning in their appreciation (or otherwise) of a description.

The final workshop in the series was in many ways the most useful, though carefully and solidly built on the experiences and feed-back from the previous two. **It certainly produced a unanimous wish for other vocal workshops as a regular event.** Although audio-describers listen to themselves and each other, it’s always in performance conditions. They rarely, if ever, meet to learn new techniques, listen to an impartial but expert critique and share experiences that will enhance their physical performance in the way that the third workshop did.
Workshop 3 - Feedback from describers:

- The voice workshop was terrific. Lots of practical warm up suggestions that I will make use of, as well as specific advice for individuals that had an immediate effect on vocal quality and intelligibility. With more time, it would be great to look further at the interplay between writing and delivery, especially in relation to comedy. Feedback from the blind/partially sighted participants very useful in making the case for a more engaged style of delivery. It would be wonderful to have a series of sessions (at a few months interval) with a particular coach like Jeanette, because then people could practise, say what worked, and bring particular problems.

- I thought the final workshop in the series, in some ways was the most valuable. Just taking the time to focus on the voice and work with it gives us another important thing to think about. The afternoon was interesting and engaging and I thought Jeanette's teaching and insight were spot on.

- This was a most valuable and stimulating afternoon, which cleverly combined general as well as more personalized coaching.

Feedback from a user of the service:

- We all had to do many warm up exercises and also thinking about posture and how best to be sat when reading a script. Although some exercises may have seemed a bit strange at first after doing them and hearing how people’s delivery changed they really made sense. In some cases the delivery sounded brighter, more engaging and with a bit more warmth. I think it is that thing of having someone else listening and knowing what to do to make the voice sound better.

Overall Review

The three *Laughter Lines* workshops have proved an invaluable asset both to experienced audio-describers and their audience alike.

- The first opened up the problem of describing physical comedy to a blind and partially sighted audience, gave an opportunity for discussion of strategies and pinpointed the needs of both. Several techniques were found to be of great importance: timing, vocabulary including onomatopoeia, breaking the rule of ‘never speak over the actors’ – but paramount, the voice.

- The second gave the opportunity to work with actors on a specific production. This increased awareness of a describer’s problems for the users of the service, the describers could discuss with users the best way of communicating and, perhaps an unforeseen outcome, the actors became particularly aware of and sympathetic to an audio-describers’ aims and difficulties.
• The third was the culmination of all the findings from the first two and gave describers an opportunity to work on the voice and vocal expression, which had been found to be of over-riding importance for listeners and an aspect of description that’s often taken for granted.

The three workshops have been invaluable - opened up discussion, improved techniques and almost the most valuable and possibly for the first time, opened channels of communication between the three sets of participants – audio-describers, users of the service and actors. They have also identified a need for continued in-service training for audio-describers – a group of skilled professionals who are otherwise often isolated and left to their own devices to deliver a difficult and taxing service. We are indebted to the Arts Council for the chance to break this ground and hopefully open up opportunities for continued training in this field.

Bridget Crowley and Louise Fryer
Laughter Lines Project Managers

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