

Talk given by Monique Raffray and Mary Lambert to members of the London Audio Description Service, 5 December 1996 (from the tape and ML's notes)

MR This is a talk that Mary Lambert and I are giving about the beginning of audio description. It may be difficult to get back into the atmosphere because now we take AD so much for granted as one of the pleasures of life, it is difficult to imagine a time when it hadn't been thought of, or it existed in any way.

So far as we are concerned, it began in 1982 when Mary read me an article from the In Touch Bulletin describing how it had started in Washington DC. We think we had also seen an article in the American Journal of Visual Impairment but are not sure. This gave me a tremendous feeling of excitement – it is difficult to think back – but it was a wonderful thing. You must imagine it was like a door opening suddenly where you thought there was no door at all. It was like the thrill, I imagine people would have had when electricity came for the first time and suddenly switched on a light, or when radio and television came – like a new invention, like a new possibility in your life which you had never thought of at all. It really was an exciting moment and I was longing to get involved with it, but of course we had to go slowly; so what happened was that Mary and I started corresponding with Cody and Margaret Pfanstiehl in America. This went on for a bit.

The next exciting thing that happened was in fact three years later in 1985, when it so happened – and there have been lots of wonderful things and coincidences which have happened in the way AD has developed but this one was - that the Pfanstiehls were coming to see his brother in Bournemouth, and Mary and I asked if we could interview them for the British Journal of Visual Impairment – which we did – over a lovely pub lunch in Bournemouth in a very relaxed atmosphere. It was extremely stimulating and made us feel keener than ever, but we had no idea at that moment of how it was going to begin in the UK.

After this I wrote an article for the British Journal of Visual Impairment (BJVI), which was a kind of summary of our interview with them; this was published in the Autumn 1985 edition of the BJVI. Mary is going to read you little bits of it from the start in Washington, and I am going to read little bits about the essential things they told us about AD – its roots really.

ML The article is called 'The play's the thing: audio description in the theatre' and as Monique said it is really based on her interview. If I read it, perhaps it sets the scene: "When the Arena Stage Theatre in Washington received a grant towards making its productions more accessible to the handicapped, they put in sound amplifying equipment for the deaf, which they thought might also be useful as a channel for providing descriptive material for the blind. With this in mind, they contacted Margaret Rockwell (visually impaired herself), the organiser of the Washington Ear, which is a radio service for the blind. As it happened, Margaret had just finished working on a project entitled Washington's Neighborhoods: A History of Change, designed for the visually impaired people who had either never seen these neighborhoods or had seen them with normal vision only many years before, so that they could not picture them or learn about them from their own observation. Setting up audio description in the theatre would be a further step in the same direction. 'In a

weak moment', Margaret agreed to take this on, little realising how much would be involved.

“One of the people she approached for help was Cody Pfanstiehl, who had for twenty-one years been public spokesman for the Metro public transportation system, frequently appearing on radio and television in this connection. Cody became Margaret's first volunteer, and then her 'ultimate volunteer' by marrying her. Together they launched and developed the Audio Description Service and their enthusiastic and illuminating account showed how much insight, energy and time are required for this work.”

MR I am now going to go on with a few more extracts from the article as I think some of the things they said we now know but are still relevant. One of the points they made was that volunteers or describers could come from any background, there was no limit – actors, artists, housewives, bus conductors, anything at all – so long as they had the qualities which they pin-pointed as imagination, judgement, a sense of timing, and the ability to express themselves fluently and concisely. Margaret made this comparison of the describer, or the description, to a camera lens. I think Diana Hull [*later senior AD trainer. ML*] afterwards wasn't altogether happy about that, but it seems to me it is a useful way to think of it - after all photographers also take photographs of something, not particularly everything – and of course the describer has to select and describe a picture, but in a selective way.

As you know, describers mustn't evaluate, and mustn't interpret, they must complement the dialogue and simply make unspoken material alive; and as Margaret said again, which I think is very good, audio description is as old as sighted people trying to tell blind people what things look like; no description can ever say I know it all and I don't need to know any more – that's the whole point. Their training – Mary will say something about that later on – incorporates comments given to them by the Director about the production of the play and about the actors who are acting in it.

We continued to keep in touch with the Pfanstiehls, and decided to put in at this stage the fact that Mary made a much deeper link when she went to America herself. She is now going to say something herself about her visit to Washington in 1987.

ML I had lived in Washington DC from 1961 to 1965 and always enjoyed returning there, so it was no problem for me to make arrangements to see the Pfanstiehls during my visit in August 1987. Not only did they give me dinner in their home, which included sitting out on their patio drinking coffee and talking about audio description, but I was also shown round the offices of the Washington Ear, shown extracts from the video of 'A Cat on the Hot Tin Roof' with audio description, and given an explanation of their training arrangements. I was also given tickets to attend an audio description of 'Cats' at the National Theatre – here is the programme, just to prove I was there – and, curiously enough, but perhaps it was because I was a special visitor, the seats I had for myself and my friend were in the President's box!

I also had the opportunity to meet the describer for that evening. I spent about an hour with her before the performance. Her name was Lucy Gregory and she explained that at that time, I don't know if they still do it, all prospective describers were auditioned and evaluated before training. The audition was based on extracts from three videos

which had been viewed twice. One video was action without much talk, the second video was talk without much action; the third was sensitive material, i.e. a love scene, nudity and race relations. The describer – or the prospective describer – was recorded, then evaluated and training took place at workshops and could take two to three months. She explained that the programme and interval notes were pre-recorded with additional comments from the describer before the performance to make contact, and to check the volume control. On the night I attended the interval notes were in fact very difficult for ‘Cats’ as the audience was allowed on the stage during the interval, which didn’t give much time for the visually impaired people to get back to their seats. I must say, the whole evening was absolutely fascinating and I was totally overwhelmed by what audio description involved and what had been done.

MR While that was happening – we have to jump about with our dates a bit to try and keep some sort of pattern – there had been encouraging developments in the UK, and again I think this idea of wonderful coincidences was happening and this now came through the RNIB, so I think we can say we have been lucky all the way through in the way ‘things’ happened which pushed forward audio description; and this is what Mary is going to talk about now.

ML Just before Monique’s article was published, we had a phone call from a Mr. Chris Atrill, Senior Leisure Officer at the RNIB, who had been told about Cody and Margaret Pfanstiehl by a Mr. Eric Tucker of Coulsdon. The Pfanstiehls had told Chris that they were already in touch with us. Chris rang us and offered RNIB help, but said he would wait for the publication of our article first.

I would like to say here, and I think we both would, how much we appreciate the RNIB’s attitude the whole way along, particularly at that point because it meant that Monique’s article was actually the first article that appeared in print about audio description in the United Kingdom. He waited and then of course, the RNIB have taken it on and supported and developed audio description all the way along. It is very good that they have, and very pleasing for us that they waited.

On 10 January 1986 a formal invitation was sent by Chris Atrill to Brian Eccles, who was the General Secretary of the South Regional Association for the Blind, and our boss, to a meeting at the RNIB to discuss the possibility of establishing audio description in the United Kingdom. The invitation was passed on to Monique and me. We attended all meetings of the RNIB Working Party, which later became the RNIB Advisory Group from 24 January 1986 until the Group was finally disbanded in February 1993.

In the early days the Working Party consisted of a representative of Artsline, SHAPE, the RNIB Drama Advisory Group, and the South Regional Association for the Blind; representatives of the Arts Council, Carnegie Council, the National Theatre and the RSC were also invited and attended occasionally; and later, representatives of the Duke of York’s Theatre, Theatre Royal, Windsor, and a describers’ representative, Philippa Lane, all became members. In the Minutes of one of the meetings on 20 March 1990, and this is a quotation: “Monique stated that there was a need for the Group to formally recognise the active involvement of Mary, herself and the describers at the Duke of York’s Theatre who, to date had functioned informally as a working sub-group. This was considered a positive development and it was agreed

that Monique should head the working party responsible for supporting and monitoring describers”.

MR: What about the Advisory Group? What did it do? Well, it struggled to try and recruit describers, to get in touch with theatres, to run Workshops and to begin exploring audio description in a more practical way. We held three Workshops from 1987 until 1988 – in September and November 1987, and in May 1988. They were intended to be, and were in fact, for potential describers, for receivers of the description, and for theatre management. Also involved, before we come into more detail and talk about the Workshops themselves, was the sending of packs which the Advisory Group had prepared, to theatres and any other suitable organisations. One of them was called ‘Hearing and Seeing’ – there have been several others which have changed slightly as time has gone on and more has happened; they also contacted appropriate organisations, including the Disabled Living Foundation - I am not sure which they were – and there was a lot of publicity through articles in the New Beacon – and I think Jayne said that was the way you and Philippa heard about it (Philippa Lane: It was through the New Beacon); and there were radio interviews on In Touch etc.

There was an amusing little incident about one of the earliest describers, Penny Wythes, who Jayne will remember; what was particularly interesting about her is that it was she who introduced the describers to Diana Hull and vice versa. It happened again by pure chance. Mary and I were going to some play at the Barbican – we can’t remember which play it was – and she had left me on the terrace to get a tray of food; when she came back she found Penny, whom I didn’t know, she was just a nice lady at the table, deep in a passionate conversation about audio description. It was as a result of that meeting that Penny became one of our first describers and stayed with us for a bit, and then she couldn’t go on, but she had introduced us to Diana which introduction was, of course, very important.

Now the Workshops had a variety of people who go on nattering about the theatre world and Mary is going to read the list of some of the people who attended. That’s right isn’t it?

ML Some of the names of those who attended the Workshops are still very familiar, Philippa Lane, Jayne Parkin, although according to my records she wasn’t at the first Workshop (Jayne Parkin: I wasn’t!), Penny Wythes, Andrew Phipps, (from the Duke of York’s), Toby Whale (from the National Theatre), Trevor Williamson (from the RSC), and some visually impaired people, Hilary Leacock, Ray Foster, Dylis Morgan, and Andrew Hodgson (who now works for the RNIB); and later, Atalanta Grant-Suttie, (a friend of mine whom some of you may remember), Gabriele Wight, Joanne Lukes and several describers from Windsor.

MR Some of the names which Mary has mentioned, such as Hilary Leacock, were members of the Venturers, weren’t they?

ML Yes, I think so.

MR The RNIB Drama Group for the Visually Impaired - James Lincoln was representing them at the beginning on the Advisory Group - and Dylis was involved with them as well.

The idea of the Workshops was to put audio description into practice by doing some actual description, after talks from various people about the theory. We worked on extracts from, and I am sure Jayne will remember, the film, *A Room with a View* (that was the first Workshop and Jayne wasn't there!) [*Jayne corrected her and Monique repeated correction. ML*] That was very much jumping in at the deep end because, if you have seen the film, which I am sure you must have done, there are a lot of things, as in most films, happening at once, particularly in this one at the beginning, where the hotel dining room is full of different groups all saying a few words, so the attention switches from one table to another, and it was extremely difficult to describe; and that was just one episode that was difficult. And then we worked on a one-to-one basis mostly. People whispered - we had one visually impaired person and one sighted person and we swapped partners from time to time - and they whispered to one another and then there was a discussion after the extract had been seen with questions and discussions of specific problems and of general principles.

We also had a video of a play called 'Caught in the Act' which was a rather bad video as far as I remember. And then we had the Duke of York's - was it, no, it was the RSC (Trevor Williamson) - who gave us a video of their stage version of *Cyrano de Bergerac*. From my point of view that was the moment when I really got absolutely excited about audio description. It happened to be one of the Windsor describers - who has unfortunately left England now and is not doing audio description any more - but it was a speech by *Cyrano* about his huge nose and all the handicaps it produced and all his feelings towards it. They were very eloquent words, it was a famous speech, and I thought, in a rather superior way, that I'd got the whole meaning, but as the description lighted up the different visual expressions, the different movements with his face and hands that he made, I began to feel I was seeing a new dimension - it was an exciting development of something, not that I knew I was missing, as so often happens in plays, but it was something I didn't even know I was missing - so it was a wonderful moment. I think we could say about the Workshops that they were very much a time of experiment and uncertainty, but that there was something quite vital about them. Did you find it was agony, Jayne?

JAYNE PARKIN I can't remember, Monique! (Much laughter.) I was just taking in the Armitage Hall.

ML Yes, they all took place in the great big Armitage Hall at the RNIB.

JP I was only new and you were on a stage/platform and I thought 'who is that woman' and I was a bit frightened of you! But I don't remember much about it, apart from it being difficult.

ML We just didn't know where to begin.

MR We were experimental - we couldn't do anything else, but it did drop us in at the deep end and I think it was stimulating.

ML We went away bursting with enthusiasm.

MR Everyone was very keen on it. And I think what it did was to make me, anyway, and I think most visually impaired people would feel the same, that it was much better and

still is, to have some audio description than none at all, unless of course it is abominable, but in so far as it gives you some help – you don't want to be a perfectionist always, although that's the thing to aim at – but better a little than nothing. Anyway, I think we all got a great deal out of it.

The next thing on my bit of paper is that on 12 September 1987 – at the Workshop – an offer was made by the Duke of York's to consider the possibility of setting up at the Duke of York's, a pilot scheme for audio description. Now we are going on to the involvement of the Arts Council - over to Mary.

ML I would just add that Andrew Phipps had a visually impaired sister – Andrew Phipps being the person who made the offer – so he was particularly interested.

At a meeting of the RNIB Advisory Group on 22 July 1988 Trevor Williamson from the RSC introduced the idea of a seminar on audio description for theatre management, other professionals in the theatre world and some press. The suggested seminar was held at the Arts Council on 16 November 1988. The main speakers were Monique, and from the Theatre Royal, Windsor, Joanne Lukes and Mark Piper. About 30 people attended, including representatives from the RSC, Palace Theatre, London, Cardiff Sherman Theatre, Theatre Royal, Plymouth, Society of West End Theatre, and the Scottish Council on Disability.

That was 1988, three years later in June 1991 RNIB was offered a grant of £4,500 from the Arts Council for the establishment of an audio description training programme for describers. RNIB's proposal included the appointment of two describers, one from the Royal Theatre, Windsor, and one from the Duke of York's; under this programme Joanne Lukes and Diana Hull were funded to visit the United States from 27 October to 3 November 1991 [*There was also a grant of £3,000 from the Paul Hamblyn Foundation not mentioned on the tape, ref: 'The Founding Years'. MLJ.*]

MR I think some of you will have heard about the trip to America from Diana and it's a pity she isn't here to talk to us about it. We have to make a little jump now – to go back to how audio description was developing in the UK.

ML At the meeting of the RNIB Working party on 18 September 1986, Chris Atrill mentioned correspondence he had had with a Mrs Jose King over a pilot project at the Robin Hood Theatre, Averham, near Newark, Nottinghamshire – if you have a seminar in Nottingham, it might be interesting to know who is at that theatre now. Monique and I were asked to pursue this. It transpired that Mrs Jose King was the Theatre Director and licensee, her husband, Norman King, had been experimenting with a system he called 'Theatre for the Blind', and their daughter, Val, was a drama teacher. On Friday, 17 October 1986, Monique and I attended 'A Delicate Balance' at the Robin Hood Theatre, Averham, with audio description.

MR Yes, and that was a very exciting occasion because we were, I suppose, going to the first audio description in Europe – so it was said. Of course they were very heavy headsets and we had to carry boxes on our laps; but it was wonderful because Val was doing the description in a very lively way and I felt that at last this was happening – really happening – not being talked about anymore. I was registering every word

with the greatest pleasure .We felt this idea was really coming true - and then suddenly, at the conclusion of the play there was something quite unexpected. The description switched from describing the play to a personal message to Mary and me telling us that we must leave immediately if we wanted to catch the last train to London.

It was really coming back to the real world – it was actually just before the end of the play and a most agonising moment. It was quite a shock when we were jolted back into the real world. There was an amusing comment about this little episode in a letter from Norman King to us after we had written to him. He said “I have a confession to make, I was responsible for the message you received ‘Monique and Mary, that’s it!’” When, suddenly we were taken away from the world of the play, he was standing behind us when we received the message and he says “I don’t think I have ever seen two people brought to earth with such a bump, sorry, but it worked” – and it had worked, we really had been enjoying it.

ML By coincidence, Norman King was a good friend of Mark Piper, who was Managing Director of the Theatre Royal, Windsor, and he had demonstrated the system, ‘Theatre for the Blind’ to Mark Piper. At that time, the Theatre Royal were in the process of replacing the loop for deaf people and installing in its place the Sennheiser infra-red system, paid for by the Lyons Club of Windsor. Mark Piper established contact with the RNIB and through the South Regional Association for the Blind was also introduced to the local Mobility Officer, Joanne Lukes. A group of volunteers was set up and some of these volunteers attended the RNIB Workshops in 1987. I went down with Chris Atrill to visit Windsor in December 1987 to run through some general arrangements.

MR We attended the launch on 6 February 1988, with Ray Foster, followed by a second audio described performance on 13 February with five visually impaired people from Windsor. After both performances we had long discussions with Joanne and other people about the description and the problems; these discussions were taped. We were talking about specific problems like for example – the play was ‘Stepping Out’ - there were a lot of background things, such as meetings for the dance rehearsals, all sorts of people were getting their sandwiches out, and a lot of different things which had to be put in and also, as is topical today, about how to describe the dancing – so that was quite interesting.

Joanne had a group of five particularly interested visually impaired people who came regularly to the Windsor plays and met with the describers afterwards; they also attended the Workshops. They were the people, you might say, who took part in the training and were the training group; this developed very well. In September, Mary and I went again to Windsor to see ‘The Business of Murder’ which was excellently described. The experiment had worked really.

After that there was a great deal of publicity for this Windsor experiment – achievement now – in the In Touch programme and Bulletin (June/July 1988), an article in the Stage (July 1988) entitled ‘Words speak louder than action’, Social Work Today (24.11.1988); and Mark Piper, who Mary has been talking about, wrote again for the BJVI Summer 1988 (British Journal of Visual Impairment) an article ‘Pioneer’s progress’. He said something which I think we all felt at the time – he

wondered why was it that nobody had ever thought before of such a thing as audio description. Joanne was presented with a Social Work award for her work on audio description in November 1988.

Meanwhile, things were developing at the Duke of York's. Over to you, Mary:

ML Just occasionally we got glimpses on television, Joanne was on South East Thames and I think Monique appeared at one point. Anyway, as Monique says, progress was being made at the Duke of York's. In December 1988 the first meeting about audio description was held at the Duke of York's Theatre with Monique, Marcus Weisen (RNIB), Paul Shearstone (who was working at the theatre), and Victoria Thompson from the British Theatre Association.

On 25 January 1989 the first 'unofficial' audio described performance took place, followed by a meeting of describers. The describers at that point were Penny Wythes, Diana Hull, Jayne Parkin and Philippa Lane; Monique, myself, and Marcus, Jennifer Maxwell-Packer (visually impaired) and Raina Haig (also visually impaired) were receivers and monitors. Then the describers continued to practise 'Artist Descending a Staircase'. Jayne, do you have anything to say?

JP That was peculiar in a way as it had been a radio play. I remember the last sentence very well, 'Ah, there you are'! And one of the main characters was blind or visually impaired, which was interesting.

MR This was quite by coincidence, they didn't know when they offered the describers this play – they hadn't realised at all – that one of the chief characters was blind.

JP It was a girl, and a flashback – this was the problem with it – to the First World War and 1914 to 1916, and lots of red lights which were supposed to be the pounding of the guns, and switching costumes. It was a good play.

ML And you had different actors for the first group.

MR And there was a fly.

ML And one of the characters made sculpture.

MR There was a rich variety of things to be described, which was marvellous.

JP What was funny about that play, and these things stick in your mind because you describe a lot, when we did 'Travesties', which again was by Tom Stoppard, years later, at the RSC, I noticed that he had used a line from 'Artist Descending a Staircase' and put it into 'Travesties' which I wouldn't have known, but you get to know the play fairly well.

ML Anyway, the launch of the audio described performance of 'Artist Descending a Staircase' was on 26 April 1989 followed by champagne in the bar. On 20 July 1989 Monique and I monitored the first audio description of a new play at the Duke of York's, 'Shirley Valentine', (training had taken place between March and June). This was followed by 'Dickens' Women' in July/August 1991. *[After one performance of*

this play we went behind the scenes and visited Miriam Margolyes in her dressing room, which was a very special occasion for all of us, particularly for Monique. This is not recorded on the tape. ML]

MR That was the time when I was trying to get an article about audio description in the papers. I had tried the Guardian, which didn't work, but the Independent published it. It was called 'Blind Date with Stoppard', which was quite a nice little touch. It came out on the day of the launch which was 26 April. Clearly, I was just trying to re-say some of the things I've said to potential describers earlier and so on.

One of the main points I wanted to put across was that you mustn't think that people who are blind haven't enjoyed the theatre before. Of course, people who lose their sight may find it very painful to go back but lots of people do, and I said that when you see – no, you don't see – but when you know the lights are going down, you are caught up in the audience's excitement and the audience is united together and the atmosphere seeps through, even if you can't see it, so you participate, but the point is that you can participate much more fully if you have audio description because you don't have those queries in your mind as to what happened then, at one particular point, and you don't have your boy-friend straining to explain it to you and getting dirty looks from the rest of the audience, or do it afterwards when he can't quite remember. So it was wonderful I said, and also I said nothing could replace sight, but the describer could bring to life essentially visual things which you wouldn't have known about and therefore enrich your awareness, not that 'it was there already', but it was greatly enriched. This is what we were trying to put across to the general public and it was quite a challenging thing to describe. Now to the RSC:

ML Although the RSC had been involved with the RNIB Workshops in 1987 and 1988, and a representative had attended the Arts Council Seminar in 1988, progress had been non-existent until George Robertson (a describer) was at the RSC in October 1991 and made contact with Julia Bennett, Sponsorship Officer, RSC. As a result of this contact a meeting was held at the RSC on 14 January 1992 with Julia Bennett, George Robertson, Monique and myself. In a comparatively short time (April 1992) sponsorship for audio description was obtained from Royal Insurance and the AD service was launched at the Barbican on 11 September 1992 with a description of 'Romeo and Juliet' by describers, Diana Hull and Jayne Parkin from the London Audio Description Service (LADS). We don't remember very much about that, but there was a Press Party – we don't think they paid enough attention to LADS as the RNIB rather took it over.

MR We weren't too pleased about the Press Party, it was all rather low key and we were a bit disappointed. It was really a matter of thanking Royal Insurance.

The next thing is the National Theatre. It had been interested from a long time ago, but there had been slow progress and several problems with getting AD started, partly because – and Mary reminded me – they wanted the audio description to be part of their education programme, which indeed it is.

But in June 1991 a working party was set up at the Theatre to assist the management with the establishment of audio description - Diana Hull, Philippa and I were members. *[There was an experiment with Racing Demon in 1991 and a dry run of*

The Recruiting Officer to an invited group of receivers on 11 June 1992. Not on the tape. ML]. Diana did the training and I gave the visually impaired input. We trained two groups and there are still describers around who Diana trained. The launch of audio description at the National Theatre on 3 March 1993 was ‘Trelawney of the Wells’, described by two members of the first group trained by Diana and Monique. This was followed by a Press Party. [Forty five visually impaired people attended. Not on tape. ML]. That was the beginning of the whole thing and since then, as you know, they have carried on. From the beginning the describers were actors from the National who were given some sort of salary, I think, and audio description became part of their work because of the link with the Education Programme. [Diana and Monique continue to be involved with training at the National and at the Sound Archives which was then in Exhibition Road – potential describers included Louise Fryer and Gregory York. ML]

ML But when did LADS start? According to my records there was a meeting/shared supper for current describers on 23 June 1989 at the South Regional Association for the Blind which was to review the problems of describing Artist Descending a Staircase and how they had been overcome. I have no notes or Minutes of this meeting – just a note that it took place. A second meeting/workshop of the Audio Description Group was on 20 June 1990 and a third meeting on 16 March 1991. At the fourth meeting on 25 April 1991 Monique was appointed the Chairman, Jayne the Honorary Secretary, myself as the Honorary Treasurer, Diana Hull, Voice Production and Training, Philippa Lane responsible for contact with theatres and Sally Ree, who some of you may remember was in a wheelchair, was involved with access at theatres.

The first meeting at which the Group is called the London Audio Description Service is 20 June 1991, and on 5 February 1993 the Minutes are headed London Audio Description Service (LADS). By this time, February 1993, audio description had started at the West Yorkshire Playhouse on 18 September 1991, with help from Monique and others, and by 1992 it was in operation at the Chichester Festival Theatre; Citizens Theatre, Glasgow; Derby Playhouse; the Octagon Theatre, Bolton; and the Palace Theatre Centre, Westcliffe (near Southend), where Monique and I went to see it. Monique – over to you:

MR The story of LADS is another story we felt, as we are really doing the archives and the beginning bit, but I think what we’ve got to remember is how much the whole concept of audio description has now spread, not only to theatres – more and more to theatres – but also to cinema and to television and also in videos. It is simply very important that we should go on keeping the freshness of it in our minds as it grows and all sorts of new possibilities come into the market and into our minds. We have to think how important it is that it should be something flexible, something full of new revelations and something about which we have no pre-conceived ideas – we just go along with it and let it develop in all sorts of ways, and keep very open-minded. It seems to me that it must remain all the time a partnership between the describers, the receivers and the theatres. They have all got to work together in one energetic and enthusiastic group. May I just end by saying, as a VIP (visually impaired person), thank you very much to the describers, to the theatres and to everybody for making this wonderful new thing possible.

MARY PLACKETT: Well, thank you, Monique – and thank you both – I think your presentation has demonstrated the team work that has made you such a driving force for audio description in the UK. It is very impressive. I remember when we mooted this, Mary, you said that there was a point when we had the theatres and no describers; I think we have now come the full circle in that LADS has the describers and we will get the theatres. So, thank you again, and thank you very much, Monique, for being so inspiring about what audio description means to you which, I think, has given us the conviction to carry on with what does, at times, become a chore.

ML I have got, if you want them, copies of the article, ‘The Play’s the Thing’, also, Mark Piper’s article, and Monique’s Independent article.

Tape transcribed and edited by Mary Lambert, May 2020

I have added additional information about the situation at the Duke of York’s Theatre and the National Theatre which is not on the tape, and slightly edited what is recorded as I have these details in my notes of our talk, and I think they are of historical importance. ML

References

The play’s the thing: audio description in the theatre: Margaret and Cody Pfanstiehl. *British Journal of Visual Impairment*, Autumn 1985, pp. 91-92.

The seminal account of the introduction of audio description at Arena Stage theatre, Washington DC in 1981, based on an interview with Cody and Margaret Pfanstiehl by Monique Raffray.

Audio description: pioneer’s progress, by Mark Piper. *British Journal of Visual Impairment*, Summer 1988, pp. 75-76. (Reprinted from *Curtain Up*, the magazine of the Theatre Royal, Windsor.)

The history of the first audio described performance at Theatre Royal, Windsor, written by the theatre’s Director.

Note: These articles can be downloaded from ADLIB, the Audio Description Association’s free virtual library, available at: www.audiodescription.co.uk
