

Comments and Ideas

AUDIO DESCRIPTION: PIONEER'S PROGRESS

In Autumn 1985 the BJVI (Vol.III No.3) published an article 'The play's the thing' describing the beginnings and development of audio description in the theatre as practised in Washington DC under the direction of Margaret and Cody Pfanstiehl. In 1986 the RNIB set up a working party (now known as the Audio Description Advisory Group) to promote audio description in the UK (BJVI Vol.IV No.2, Summer 1986). At the Theatre Royal, Windsor, audio description is now happening. In the following article Mark Piper, Director of the Theatre, tells the story.

October 1986 saw the beginning of an unusual correspondence between a playwright and myself. Norman King* had had two of his plays performed at Windsor. (*The Shadow of Doubt* in 1956 and *Spin of the Wheel* in 1964), but the subject that his initial letter broached was another aspect of theatre altogether, and one that was quite new to me. For reasons of simplicity, he described it merely as 'Theatre For The Blind', and was referring to a method of enabling visually handicapped theatregoers to get the most out of their theatre visits, and this by means of a continuous description of the action on stage, to be relayed through individual head-sets to those needing it. He told me that it had been pioneered in America but, as far as he knew, in this country was being done only in a small theatre with which he had family ties, the Robin Hood Theatre in Averham. There they operate principally on an amateur basis, and he said that his fondness for the Theatre Royal, Windsor, made him hope that if any such scheme was to be developed in professional theatre in Britain, this theatre might be the one to start it.

The system that he explained struck me as disarmingly simple, and in November of that year Hugh Goldie (formerly director of productions here and still on our Board of Directors) and I drove up to Nottinghamshire and saw Norman demonstrate it, once in the delightful Robin Hood Theatre itself and once, more surprisingly but equally effectively, in a Methodist church in Newark (the scientific principle remained the same, even if we had shifted our spiritual ground). Both Hugh and I were quickly convinced of the potential value of such an innovation, even to the point of wondering why we hadn't all thought of it before. We returned to Windsor and I set about looking into it.

It so happened that, at the time, our induction loop system for the hard of hearing was 'on the blink' and in need of replacement. It seemed a golden opportunity to combine the answer to the needs of those finding it hard to

hear plays with an answer to the needs of those finding it hard to see them. A company called Sennheiser seemed to have come up with the best equipment, transmitting the sound via small 'radiators' placed on either side of the proscenium arch and using infra-red. This system includes individual head-sets, some of which are stereophonic and can therefore be switched to a channel transmitting audio description. Since the Lions Club of Windsor had generously provided the loop system, I felt it only fair to give them first refusal on the Sennheiser. And they enthusiastically agreed to pay for this.

So the new system was installed before Christmas 1987. But it is one thing to install a system, and another to find the people to operate it. Over some months we were in close contact with the RNIB, the South Regional Association for the Blind and our local Social Services Department. All were most co-operative. So far, so good. But, of course, the really hard work lay with those undertaking to provide the audio description. Joanne Lukes at the Social Services Department undertook to learn this new skill herself and involve a few other volunteers — thus a small band of four volunteer 'describers' cut their teeth on *Stepping Out* (January/February 1988). This proved to be a happy choice for the first attempt, since there was just the right balance of dialogue and action (that is to say, not too little and not too much for the describer to help her audience to 'see'), and the added bonus of a bit of music and dancing which could be talked over without losing any dialogue.

But, as with most experiments, what seemed straightforward in theory brought with it a collection of unforeseen problems and technical hitches. These range from cramped conditions in our projection room which, during the *Stepping Out* sequences that required a follow-spot operator, became very awkward, to more uncontrollable phenomena such as sudden interference on the audio description frequency from taxi firms and foreign radio stations. All problems have, we think, now been satisfactorily ironed out and we have come to provide the following service.

For every final Saturday matinee, those wishing to avail themselves of the facility have only to ring the Box Office and, when booking seats, ask also that a stereo head-set be reserved for them. For half an hour before the performance anyone tuning into the audio description channel can hear recorded music (played on a tape recorder generously provided by the RNIB). Apart from providing something pleasant to listen to, this also gives the listener time to check the head-set for volume. A few minutes before the performance the music is replaced by the describer's introductory comments, which will be a thorough description of the set and characters.

The describer needs to have seen the play at least twice before preparing the individual notes and commentary for the script for her own act or scenes. (No single describer has yet undertaken to describe a play in its entirety.) So it is a hard job for the describer, and I salute the hard work and enthusiasm of the small but growing number of those that have undertaken to do it.

Perhaps the most gratifying of all have been the letters that both Joanne Lukes and I have received from visually impaired customers who had given up coming to the theatre but who came to give the system a try. Their gratitude and delight at being able to join the rest of the audience in 'seeing' the show is a great reward for the work that has gone into getting the project off the ground.

(from 'Curtain Up', The Magazine Programme of the Theatre Royal, Windsor)

* We are sad to record the death of Norman King in January 1988, just before the beginning of audio description in Windsor.