

# The play's the thing

## Audio description in the theatre: Margaret and Cody Pfanstiehl

*When visually impaired people visit the theatre they usually rely on whispered comments from their sighted friends for information about the visual aspects of the play they are seeing. This can be an enjoyable form of sharing but it can also be something of a strain for both parties: the commentator is not quite free to concentrate completely on the performance, while not quite managing to give a full picture of what is happening on stage. These problems are now being overcome at several theatres in Washington DC, USA, thanks to the Audio Description Service launched there in 1981. Its co-founders, Margaret Rockwell and Cody Pfanstiehl, were interviewed by the BJVI when visiting Britain last July. The Audio Description Service has received wide acclaim in America and is, as far as is known, the only service of its kind in the world. Margaret and Cody spoke of its beginnings and of how it works at present, and touched on possible future developments.*

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 reading 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 have 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. One of its most important aspects is the recruiting and training of volunteers. There is no telling from where or from what backgrounds they may come. One of the best is a geologist engineer. Many are would-be or professional writers, actors or workers in radio or television. Not everyone who is well read is a good describer, though this helps: there must also be a certain innate knack for what is required.

Among the qualities required are imagination and judgement, a good sense of timing and ability to express oneself fluently and concisely.

Describers must not allow their own reactions to the play to dominate; but at the same time they must enter into its emotional atmosphere: it would not quite do to have a flat monotonous voice remarking "they have just set the building on fire" or "he has kissed her"! Commentators should not evaluate or interpret, but rather be like the faithful lens of a camera: not "he is angry" or "she is sad" but "he is scowling" or "she is crying"; not "she seems a good hostess" but "she is greeting her guests" or "she is pouring out the tea". When there is a large cast it is helpful to give a quick indication of who is speaking, well into the play, except where the voices are distinctive and easy to recognise. Pauses must be used to mention exits and entrances that are not obvious, or any other significant details. If comic "sight-gags" are explained just a little in advance, the laughter can be joined in when it comes. Similarly, the mood of the moment or sense of tension can be shared if silences are explained: for instance, someone is stealing across the room with a dagger while the heroine is writing at her desk. Often there will not be time to bring in everything, and the commentator will have to decide which points can be left out and which must be included because of their significance later in the plot or because of what they reveal about a character or a theme. The clothes the characters are wearing may matter a good deal or not much; their positions and movements on the stage will vary in importance; the actual distance and amount of eye contact between two people will be an element in the full meaning of what they are saying. Describers may have to be reminded that when these are of interest, colours and facial features and expressions must not be left out, because most visually impaired people have some residual vision and visual memories; the totally blind who have only intellectual concepts of the visual are a minority.

To achieve the challenging tasks asked of them, describers must of course know well the plays they are going to describe. They must therefore see them at least twice before attend-



ing the performance they will be presenting. Before this, their training may have involved listening to a production on audio cassette only, and *then* seeing it on video. This enables them to have some idea of what the visually impaired person is missing when he has to depend exclusively on listening to the dialogue. (Shutting your eyes for a part of a performance will of course have something of the same effect.) There are also training workshops in which a video is played to a group who practise describing it and then criticise one another's comments constructively.

The training of volunteers can take as little as two or three months if they have the right aptitude. However, as is the case with any art form (and good audio description certainly is one), no volunteer can ever say "I know how to do it; and I don't need to know anything more".

Because each performance differs in timing and detail, describing must always be done 'live' but this does not apply to the programme notes. These are prepared by the alternate volunteer assigned to the play and produced in The Washington Ear studios. The script includes information supplied by the theatre such as the correct identification and nomenclature for costumes, stage furnishings, sets and characters. The back-up volunteer includes information from the Playbill programme about the producers and actors and adds personal observations. Like the describer, the back-up volunteer sees the production in advance of the Audio Description presentation.

In the theatre the visually impaired person can listen to the tape about 10 minutes before the performance begins. The theatre also co-operates by giving free tickets to the describers for several performances, with a few complimentary tickets as encouragement.

If a play runs for a month or six weeks the Audio Description Service is available for one evening performance and one matinee; the number increasing if the run is longer. A small ear-piece connected to a receiver about the size of a cigarette box is all the equipment the visually impaired person requires; he can sit anywhere in the auditorium, hearing the play like everyone else and the audio description as an extra. The theatres which carry audio description equipment have ten sets and can borrow from one another. Although it is preferable to notify the theatre in advance if one wishes to use the equipment, ushers are able to point out

its availability to a visually impaired person in the audience who may not know of its existence. But in fact, efficient publicity is essential for the success of audio description. There is no "neat" way of reaching the visually impaired merely through the organisations concerned with them; there must be notices in the theatre programmes and in the theatres themselves; and, as for any other service, extensive advertising in the press.

Audio description has proved to be well worth all the effort involved, as the numerous appreciations received from visually impaired theatre-goers have shown. It has brought to their experience of theatre a new and exciting dimension. The good describer acts as a complement to the dialogue, making non-spoken material accessible as it is when one is reading a book.

The general slump in the theatre has slowed down the development of the Audio Description Service through lack of funding, but it is nevertheless beginning to spread beyond Washington (where it is now used in seven theatres). Margaret and Cody would like to see the service developed in other countries also and would be glad to give practical help with any attempt to introduce the service in Britain. The project should, they think, be grafted on to an existing organisation which would give it structure. It should preferably be attached to a particular theatre company, which might take an ongoing interest in the work. Professional actors who have read for tape services for the handicapped might also be sufficiently motivated to give their assistance.

Margaret and Cody have also been organising audio description for some television programmes and for films in museums. Technical problems make it unlikely that the service could be used for commercial films in the immediate future, but there are hopes of a break-through with reference to television. The Pfanstiehl's are co-operating with a TV station in Boston which may be able to provide audio description in two years time.

Audio description, Margaret pointed out, "is as old as sighted people trying to tell blind people what things look like. But doing it in a prepared scheduled way is of course quite another matter".

*Further particulars about the Audio Description Service are available from the BJVI Editorial address: 55 Eton Avenue, London NW3 3ET.*