

Audio Description in the UK The founding years (1982-92)

By Monique Raffray and Mary Lambert

The following account traces the beginnings and early development of audio description in the theatre in the United Kingdom. It has been compiled, with the support of the Royal National Institute for the Blind, by Monique Raffray and Mary Lambert who were closely involved with audio description during the early years. The account is in two parts – Part 1: The Chronology; Part 2: The Spirit of Audio Description.

Monique Raffray (MR), who is totally blind, and Mary Lambert (ML) were employed by the South Regional Association for the Blind. In this capacity they served on the Editorial Board of the British Journal of Visual Impairment. This Journal published one of the first articles on audio description to appear in the UK (BJVI: Autumn 1985).

Part 1: The Chronology

1982

July : MR and ML read with interest an item in the BBC In Touch Bulletin: "In an experiment currently being tried out at the Arena Stage Theatre in Washington DC visually handicapped theatre-goers are provided not only with programme notes on cassette, but also with headphones carrying a live commentary on the action so that they know what is taking place on the stage between speeches". This experiment was, in fact, the beginning of audio description. It had been initiated by Margaret Rockwell (later Mrs Cody Pfanstiehl) in 1981.

1982-1984 : MR and ML correspond with Cody and Margaret Pfanstiehl about audio description.

1985

July : The Pfanstiehls are interviewed by MR and ML at a pub in Bournemouth (UK), on behalf of the BJVI.

November : A full account of this interview with the Pfanstiehls, 'The play's the thing', is published in the Autumn 1985 issue of the BJVI.
(Appendix 1)

Through a different source the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) had learned in July (1985) about the audio description service in Washington DC, but had agreed to take no action until after the publication of the BJVI article.

1986

January : RNIB invite the South Regional Association for the Blind (SRAB) to a meeting to discuss the possibility of establishing audio description in the UK. MR and ML are appointed as the SRAB representatives.

24 January: First meeting of RNIB Working Party on audio description is held at the RNIB.

This Working Party was initially chaired by Chris Attrill (RNIB Leisure Officer) and in 1987 became known as the RNIB Advisory Group. It met regularly from 1986 until it was disbanded in February 1993.

Membership: In the beginning the Working Party consisted of representatives of Artsline, SHAPE, the RNIB Drama Advisory Group, and the SRAB. Representatives of the Arts Council, Carnegie Council, the National Theatre and the RSC were also invited to the meetings and attended occasionally. Later, representatives of the Duke of York's Theatre, London, Theatre Royal, Windsor, and a describers' representative became members.

April - August : Several theatres (including the National Theatre and the RSC at the Barbican) are approached by the RNIB Working Party.

24 May : As a result of the BJVI article, 'The play's the thing', Anne Kaye, of Radio London, gets in touch with Margaret Pfanstiehl in Washington DC and broadcasts a radio interview with her.

August : RNIB is contacted by the Robin Hood Theatre, Averham, near Newark, Nottingham, about their own pilot project, 'Theatre for the Blind'.

October : As a follow-up of this contact, MR and ML attend an informally 'audio described' performance of Edward Albee's 'A Delicate Balance' at the Robin Hood Theatre, Averham.

December : The Robin Hood Theatre introduces the idea of 'Theatre for the Blind' to the Theatre Royal, Windsor, who consult the RNIB Working Party on how to set up an audio description service.

1987

- August : ML visits the Pfanstiehls in Washington DC and attends an audio described performance of 'Cats'. She discusses with the describer the audio description audition and training procedures used in Washington.
- 12 September: The RNIB Advisory Group hosts the first audio description workshop. It is attended by 7 visually impaired people and 10 sighted people, including theatre representatives. A video of the film 'A Room with a View' is used for experimental attempts at audio description.
- At this workshop, Andrew Phipps, the Manager of the Duke of York's Theatre, London, expresses positive interest in taking on a pilot project for the setting up of an audio description service.
- 29 October: At a meeting of the RNIB Advisory Group, the support of the Duke of York's Theatre is confirmed. Andrew Phipps had received definite support from the theatre's owners, Capital Radio. Closed circuit television had been proposed as there is no facility for providing a sound-proof describers' box in the theatre.
- 28 November: The second audio description workshop is held at the RNIB. The Theatre Royal, Windsor, is represented at this workshop by Joanne Lukes (JL), local Mobility Officer, Berkshire Social Services Department. The Theatre Royal had recently installed the Sennheiser infra-red system for hearing impaired people and JL asks for assistance from the Advisory Group in establishing an audio description service.
- 16 December: Chris Attrill and ML visit Theatre Royal, Windsor, to discuss practical details with the Director (Mark Piper), the General Manager and with JL. JL is to start training local volunteers for the production of 'Stepping Out', by Richard Harris, which is to run from 26 January to 13 February 1988.

1988

- 6 February :MR, ML and Ray Foster (a member of the National Association of Drama with the Visually Handicapped) attend the Theatre Royal, Windsor, to see the first play to be audio described in the UK, 'Stepping Out'. They meet the describers afterwards for a detailed feedback discussion. An article by Mark Piper, 'Sight and Sound', is published in the theatre's magazine, 'Curtain Up'. This article tells the story of how audio description had come to Windsor, via the Robin Hood Theatre, Averham.
- 13 February:Five visually impaired people from Windsor attend the next audio described performance of 'Stepping Out', having agreed to form part of a 'training' team by contributing to regular feedback sessions. 'Training' at Windsor continues during February, March and April, with support from the RNIB Advisory Group.
- 14 May : Third audio description workshop at RNIB. 10 potential describers and 10 'receivers' attend. A video of an RSC production of 'Cyrano de Bergerac' is used for audio description practice.
- June : An updated version of Mark Piper's article 'Sight and Sound' is published in the Summer 1988 BJVI with a new title, 'Audio Description: Pioneer's Progress'. (Appendix 2)
- June : A report of audio description at Windsor is broadcast on the BBC In Touch programme and is published in the In Touch Bulletin.
- July
- 14 July : An article about audio description at Windsor is published in 'The Stage' - 'Words speak louder than actions'.
- 12 September:MR and ML go to the Theatre Royal, Windsor, to see an audio described performance of 'The Business of Murder' by Richard Harris. Audio description is now excellent.
- 16 November:A half-day seminar for theatre managers, organised by the RNIB and hosted by the Arts Council of Great Britain takes place at 105 Piccadilly, London. Approximately 30 people attend, including representatives from the RSC, Duke of York's Theatre, Cardiff Sherman Theatre, Theatre Royal, Plymouth and The Society of West End Theatre.

MR speaks about the many advantages which audio description can offer the visually impaired theatre-goer; Mark Piper and Joanne Lukes outline the way in which audio description is being put into practice at the Theatre Royal, Windsor. During discussion it is stated that volunteer and professional (paid) services need not be incompatible and that these two options should be studied carefully as audio description develops.

The first information pack on audio description, compiled by the RNIB Advisory Group, is distributed at the seminar and sent to those who had been unable to attend.

24 November: Joanne Lukes receives a 'Social Work Today' special category award "for her outstanding contribution to social work". There is brief coverage of this by S.E.Thames TV.

1989

25 January: A performance of Tom Stoppard's 'Artist Descending a Staircase' is audio described as a trial run at the Duke of York's Theatre. This is followed by a meeting of describers and receivers/monitors.

February and March : Further audio description practice and discussions take place.

26 April : Official launch of audio description at the Duke of York's Theatre, 'Artist Descending a Staircase', followed by champagne in the bar!

MR's article 'Blind date with Stoppard' is published in The Independent. (Appendix 3)

29 April : Letter in The Independent from John Tydeman, Head of Drama, BBC Radio, with reference to MR's article.

2 May : MR and Diana Hull (describer) appear briefly on S.E.News (BBC1).

3 May : To promote awareness, theatre managers are invited to the Duke of York's Theatre for an audio described performance of 'Artist Descending a Staircase' arranged on their behalf.

- 31 May : Final audio described performance of 'Artist Descending a Staircase'.
- 23 June : MR and ML host an informal meeting of current describers at the South Regional Association for the Blind, 55 Eton Avenue, London, to review problems of audio description for 'Artist ... and how they had been overcome.
- 7 July : At an RNIB Advisory Group meeting Chris Attrill states that RNIB Leisure Services "had received approval for releasing sufficient funds to support audio description development in the immediate future". Proposals for 'employing' a freelance development worker, Paul Shearstone, are discussed; these proposals include office accommodation at the Duke of York's Theatre.

At the same meeting Victoria Thompson (formerly of the British Theatre Association) is asked to make detailed suggestions for improving the Information Pack to increase its appeal for potential sponsors and the theatre profession.

- 27 October: Paul Shearstone's resignation on account of ill health is reported at an RNIB Advisory Group meeting. It is agreed that the appointment of a part-time development worker has become even more urgent.

There is also discussion about the use of the term 'audio vision' rather than 'audio description'. (In February 1990 this suggestion is dropped as by then the term 'audio description' had become well established in the UK).

1990

- 20 January: The first minuted meeting/workshop of the Audio Description London Group is held at 55 Eton Avenue.
- 20 March : At a meeting of the RNIB Advisory Group Chris Attrill reports that after all it had not been possible to include funding for the post of a development worker in the RNIB's budget for 1990/91; and that the audio description development project had been put forward by the RNIB for external sponsorship.

At the same meeting it is agreed that Monique Raffray should head the sub-group which had been responsible for co-ordinating the work of the describers and had been functioning informally as the Audio Description London Group.

24 September: Publication of revised theatre information pack, 'Hearing is seeing'. This is distributed with an RNIB Press Release. (Appendix 4)

As a result of RNIB lobbying, the 1990 Broadcasting Act includes a specific reference to blind and partially sighted people. For the first time in broadcasting legislation, the Government requires that applicants for the new broadcasting licences must indicate what they intend to do to promote the understanding and enjoyment of blind and partially sighted people. This commitment would not have been possible had there not been audio description in the theatre already.

1991

- 20 June : At one of its regular meetings, the Audio Description London Group is referred to as the London Audio Description Service (LADS) for the first time, with Monique Raffray as Chairman.
- 26 June : A letter is sent to all members of 'The London Audio Description Group' informing them that "RNIB has recently been offered a grant of £4,500 from the Arts Council for the establishment of an audio description training programme for describers (letter from Marcus Weisen, RNIB Leisure Officer, dated 26.6.91).

As a result of this grant, and of a grant of £3000 from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, Joanne Lukes, from the Theatre Royal, Windsor, and Diana Hull, from the London Audio Description Service go on a study visit to Boston and Washington DC for 7 days (27 October - 3 November 1991). The purpose of the study visit was to enable them to gather information about all aspects of audio description in theatre and television and to observe practice. In particular, techniques and training methods for describers were to be studied with a view to the establishment of a training programme in the UK.

The visit was divided between the WGBH Television Studios in Boston (where Descriptive Video Service - DVS - had been launched nationally in January 1990 with Laurie Everett as its Head) and the studios of the Washington Ear, where discussions were held with Cody and Margaret Pfanstiehl (the pioneers of audio description in the theatre in the USA).

18 September: Audio description is launched at the West Yorkshire Playhouse, Leeds; MR and ML attend in a supportive capacity.

11 October :At a meeting of LADS it is noted that the National Theatre has contacted Marcus Weisen with a view to starting audio description in January 1992.

15 November:At the next meeting of LADS George Robertson (a member of LADS) reports that he has been in touch with Julia Bennett, Sponsorship Officer, RSC, who is interested in setting up an audio description service in London and Stratford.

1992

30 January: George Robertson is appointed by the RNIB as Co-ordinator, to promote audio description "amongst London Theatres and organisations for visually impaired people". (Letter from Marcus Weisen to George Robertson 30.1.92).

20 March : It is noted that the Sennheiser equipment has now been fully installed at the National Theatre and that there are 30 headsets.

9 April : Sponsorship for audio description for the RSC is confirmed by Royal Insurance.

6 June : Diana Hull and Philippa Lane describe a matinee performance of 'The Recruiting Officer' at the National Theatre as a demonstration for the theatre staff. This is followed by a discussion involving the describers, theatre staff and a selected group of visually impaired people.

25 June : First training sessions conducted by Diana Hull, and
9 July : with MR as visually impaired helper, held for current and prospective LADS describers at the National Sound Archives, Exhibition Road, 5-8pm.

12 July : These training sessions are continued at 55 Eton Avenue, 10am-4pm.

16 July : Final training session at the National Sound Archives, 5-8pm.

9 September:Launch of RNIB's first audio described video, 'Hear my Song' (in conjunction with CIC Video), at the Video Showcase, Barbican Centre.

11 September:Audio description is launched by the RSC at the Barbican with an evening performance of 'Romeo and Juliet'. The describers are Diana Hull and Jayne Parkin (experienced LADS describers).

A brief article about the launch appears in the Evening Standard; it is also mentioned on the BBC2 programme 'From the Edge' at 5pm on 15 September.

mid September :The RNIB magazine 'Update' states that "the following theatres are now providing audio description: Chichester Festival Theatre; Churchill Theatre, Bromley; Citizens Theatre, Glasgow; Derby Playhouse; Duke of York's Theatre, London; Octagon Theatre, Bolton; Sherman Theatre, Cardiff; The RSC at the Barbican; Theatre Royal, Windsor; and West Yorkshire Playhouse, Leeds.

24 September:At a meeting of LADS an outline of the proposed training arrangements at the National Theatre is discussed. Audio description will form part of the National Theatre Education Programme and describers will be National Theatre actors who, in the first place, will be trained by Diana Hull.

21 October: At the next meeting of LADS, MR (as a member of the RNIB Audio Description Training Group - now AUDEST) reports on plans by the RNIB to set up a recognised training course for audio description. (AUDEST - Audio Description Training in the Theatre).

26 November:At a meeting of LADS Diana Hull reports that she, with MR as visually impaired monitor, has just completed the first training seminar at the National Theatre. There were 7 actors as trainees, plus Edward Kemp (Staff Director) and Jane Hepper (Director of Education) as observers.

1993

3 March : Launch of audio description at the National Theatre at an evening performance of 'Trelawney of the Wells' (by Arthur Wing Pinero). 45 visually impaired people attend.

This completes our report of the first ten years of audio description. Since 1992/3 there have been extensive developments. The first National Conference on Audio Description was held at the Nottingham Playhouse on 19 March 1997, and over forty theatres in the UK are now providing and audio description service.

Monique Raffray and
Mary Lambert

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Appendices

- 1: The play's the thing, BJVI Autumn 1985
- 2: Audio description: pioneer's progress, BJVI Summer 1988
- 3: Blind date with Stoppard: The Independent, 26 April 1989
- 4: Hearing is seeing: RNIB September 1990

For further particulars about this report, Monique Raffray and Mary Lambert can be contacted c/o 21 Pangbourne Avenue, London W10 6DJ.

General information about audio description is available from Marcus Weisen, Arts Officer, RNIB, 224 Great Portland Street, London W1N 6AA.

Part 2: THE SPIRIT OF AUDIO DESCRIPTION

by Monique Raffray

Available in more and more theatres, audio description is now becoming comparatively well known. At the beginning it was an exciting adventure - an unexpected breakthrough in communication.

When, in 1981, Mary Lambert read me an article about audio description in America, I felt I was entering a new dimension. Where there had been a blank wall, there was now a door. Something I had not envisaged, even as a possibility, was actually happening.

Although blind from infancy, I have always been a passionate theatre-goer, hoping that somehow I reached the heart of almost all the plays I saw through total concentration on every nuance and tone in the dialogue, every sound from the stage and even every silence. I realised that I was missing a good deal but this seemed to be a limitation that could not be avoided. Of course audio description would not provide the experience that comes from seeing a play with one's own eyes, but at least it could fill some gaps. To a certain extent the describers could translate into words the scenery, costumes, facial expressions and movements; they might explain other important things not revealed by the dialogue - a sudden laugh, scream or a change of mood. It would be easier for visually impaired theatre-goers to enter more fully into audience reactions and they would have fewer questions to ask their friends after the performance. A fascinating prospect - but how was all this to be achieved?

Strong conviction, sustained energy and plenty of patience were required by all those involved in the attempt - it was a voyage of discovery. The theatres willing to take on this new idea had to cope with problems of technology, administration and funding. The visually impaired monitors and the potential describers who complemented one another had to determine what would be appropriate ideally and what would be possible in practice. There were lively and sometimes heated discussions about which details the describers must undoubtedly include and which might have to be left out. Everyone agreed that the role of the describers was to supplement the dialogue not to intrude on it; not to say more than their listeners could absorb, or less than they needed to know. Often it was easier to draw up basic rules than to decide on legitimate exceptions.

Audio description has been compared to a verbal camera lens but like photographers, describers have to make difficult choices. Problems can never be settled once and for all; it will always be a case of finding solutions based on agreed principles applied in different ways.

Accepted training methods and programmes for audio description in the theatre are now being developed and consolidated. This is as it should be, but whatever else may change, close co-operation between theatres, visually impaired people and describers is essential. There must be a partnership to which each group make a significant contribution.

If theatres are to promote audio description effectively they need to understand its workings and be able to judge when advantages outweigh obstacles. Between visually impaired theatre-goers and describers there should be ongoing dialogue, with ample and regular opportunities for discussing possible techniques and trying out new approaches. All three groups must learn from one another.

Commercial success may come, but enthusiasm, imagination and commitment must always remain the touchstones and spirit of audio description.

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