

The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust of Australia

“Sight into Sound”

The Bob and June Prickett Churchill Fellowship to study and compare different mediums relating to audio description and gain an understanding of the impact of relevant disability access policies in USA, Canada and UK.

Report by Lisa Gibson 2002/2 Churchill Fellow

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Signed

Lisa Gibson

Dated 12 September 2003

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1 INTRODUCTION

This report provides a summary of the essential elements associated with audio description services in other parts of the world. It's the start of working towards broadening the availability and quality of audio description provided in Australia for the blind and vision impaired community.

An art in itself, audio description involves highly trained and skilled describers that translate visual elements into words. Through audio description, a concise and detailed understanding of action, gestures, facial expression, movement and costume is achieved.

A vision impaired person no longer feels they are missing out on essential details or need to rely on the person next to them to hurriedly whisper an explanation of what is happening.

The following visual mediums in the context of audio description were investigated during the Fellowship;

- Film based art (TV, video and cinema)
- Live performance art (drama theatre, ballet and opera)
- Visual art (art galleries and museums)

Personal interviews and focus groups were held in conjunction with observation of performances, recording sessions and visits to exhibitions.

The focal points of this fellowship report include:

- Audio description technique
- Training
- Equipment and technology
- Legislation

Acknowledgements

Sincere thanks to those supportive organisations, which shared their valuable time, unearthed some of the pitfalls they had encountered and equally some of the triumphs they had achieved. And to many of those who put me in contact with others in the field during the Fellowship tour.

Special thanks to “Dusty” Bob Prickett, a previous Fellow, for his foresight in providing ongoing sponsorship for such a worthwhile cause - The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust.

Through this financial assistance and the mentor programme, the Trust provided an opportunity to learn from international organisations and engage in the debate regarding the realm of audio description.

Noted thanks to Royal Blind Society and applicant referees Michael Simpson, Ivan Cribb and the Cumming family for all their assistance.

Also my thanks and friendship goes out to those who invited me into their homes whilst overseas.

There are many more people including family, friends and colleagues who worked tirelessly behind the scenes to make this Fellowship as fruitful as possible, both before and after – THANKS! I learnt so much!

2 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Fellowship Objective

To study and compare different mediums relating to audio description and gain an understanding of the impact of relevant disability access policies in USA, Canada and UK.

Major Conclusions

The writing and delivery of film based description is quite flexible, in the essence of being able to be re-written and recorded. It is also likely to have the most influence in the community.

Performance art is well established and governed by its live environment. The technique for theatre in both the UK and USA are essentially the same.

In visual art, key management principles are being successfully applied, where a budget for access measures is included in all special exhibitions. Access experts work with all departments and are part of the team, early in the planning stage.

Legislation has a positive impact on the provision of audio description. The USA example draws focus upon the need for advocacy agencies in Australia to share a united goal when lobbying for regulatory provisions.

Implementation within Australia

- To establish a formal network of description service providers, describers, users and stakeholders within Australia and hold an annual conference.
- For Australia to take a regular role in an international forum regarding the direction and future planning for audio description.
- To investigate the current status of legislation, in regard to access, for film based mediums.

Dissemination

- Publish findings, making them available to blindness and government agencies, disability arts organisations, theatre companies, museums and other venues
- Hold a lecture (or series of) with members of the arts community (theatre, museums, galleries, etc)
- Hold a series of workshops with describers during 2004

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3 PROGRAMME

Saturday 3 May – Thursday 8 May 2003 Toronto, Canada

- Galaviz and Hauber Productions
Interview John Hauber
- AudioVision Canada
Interview Marc Rosen and staff
Observation of recording session
- Joe Clark Media Access
Interview Joe Clark

Friday 9 May – Saturday 10 May 2003 Boston, USA

- WGBH
Interview Larry Goldberg, Ira Miller and staff
Observation - recording session of description

Sunday 11 May – Friday 16 May 2003 New York, USA

- Museum of Modern Art, New York
Observation - galleries including special exhibition Picasso Matisse
- The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Interview Rebecca McGinnis
Observation - visitors experiencing Egypt Touch Tour
- Lincoln Centre
Observation – audio description training course

Friday 16 May – Sunday 25 May 2003 Washington, USA

- Kennedy Centre
Interview Betty Siegel and staff
Observation - described performance of Royal Shakespeare Company, “As You Like It”
- The Ear
Interview the Pfanstiehls, description writers, describers and staff of Kennedy Centre
Interview the Pfanstiehls, and Phil Piety
- Arena Stage
Interview Jody Barasch and describers
Observation - described performance of “An American Daughter”
- Smithsonian Institute
Interview Beth Ziebarth and describer
Observation - Bugs! IMAX movie with audio description
Observation - Docent led described tour of Janet Annenberg Hooker Hall of Geology, National Museum of Natural History

Observation - National Air and Space Museum
Observation - National Museum of American Art

- National Captioning Institute
Interview Joel Snyder
Observation - recording session of audio description
- American Council of Blind
Interview Charlie Crawford

Monday 26 May – Friday 30 May 2003 Scotland, UK

- Pitlochry Festival Theatre, Pitlochry
Interview theatre manager, describers and vision impaired patrons
Observation – described performance of “The Steamie”
- National Museums of Scotland, Edinburgh
Interview Christine Thompson
Tour - Museum of Scotland
- Audio Description Association (Scotland), Edinburgh
Focus group – describers
- Capital Theatre Group, Edinburgh
Focus group - blind and vision impaired theatre patrons
- GFT Cinema, Glasgow
Observation – described movie of Frida
Interview operations manager and sound operator
- Scottish Opera, Glasgow
Interview staff and describer, Julia Bouchard
- Theatre Royal, Glasgow
Interview staff and describers of Scottish Opera
- Scottish Ballet, Glasgow
Interview Gareth Beadie
- Festival Theatre, Edinburgh
Interview theatre manager, opera describers
Observation – touch tour of The Magic Flute
Observation – described performance of opera, The Magic Flute
- Ed Bouchard, Edinburgh
Interview Ed Bouchard - promotion of audio description

Saturday 31 May – Friday 21 June 2003 England

- ITFC Ltd, Acton
Interview Chris Higgs and staff
Observation - writing and recording session
- Digital Theater Systems (UK) Ltd
Interview David Pope
Observation - described movie of Matrix, Leicester Square
- Dolby Laboratories, Swindon
Interview Graham Edmondson
Sample demonstration
- Royal National Institute of the Blind, London
Interview staff
Observation of post production recording session
- Royal National Theatre, London
Interview Ros Hayes
Observation - described performance of Henry V, Royal National Theatre
- Audio Description Association, London
Attend AGM, interview describers
- Vocaleyes, London
Interview Clare Stewart and staff
Observation – touch tour of Caligula, Donmar Warehouse Theatre
Observation - described performance of Caligula, Donmar Warehouse Theatre
Observation - described performance of Feunteovejuna, Almeida Theatre

Appointment not made but site visits held:

- Victoria and Albert Museum, London
- National Portrait Gallery, London
- National Gallery, London
- Tate Britain, London
- Tate Modern, London
- Imperial War Museum, London
- Courtauld Institute of Art, London
- Dali Museum, London
- Blenheim Palace, Oxford

4 FELLOWSHIP FINDINGS

Many lessons have been learnt during the Fellowship, many of which will be shared directly with describers, theatres, museums and galleries around Australia and internationally. The major information points are as follows;

The style of audio description technique varies between film based art, live performance art and visual art.

4.1 Film Based Art (TV, video and cinema)

Audio description technique

The cornerstone of description is similar in all film based and performance art mediums, that is, the need to be objective and to ensure language matches tone of scene.

However, a discrete difference does appear with the aid of post production mixing. Pre-recorded film based description can speak over what is deemed “non significant” dialogue. It makes extensive use of full sentences, whereas a telegraphic method of speech is more commonly used in theatre.

“House” styles vary between film based description companies. Some consider visual congruence and playing the role of story teller as their main focus, whilst others are less animated and focus upon the story line and use of language.

In the UK, describers of TV write and record their own description, whilst for most cases in the USA there is delineation between the role of describer, as the writer, and a separate voice talent for narration.

In both the USA and UK, describers of cinema work as a team, each building the description in small blocks of time, like a relay, with a single narrator voice over.

Discussion was held as to whether the accent of the describer and use of colloquial terms should match the country of origin or the international viewing audience. Many highlighted the need to educate the viewer to new terms, if the country of origin terms were used (flat vs apartment), and a contrasting accent to their unaccustomed ear.

In all countries debate surrounded the use of politically correct terminology. Whether identification should be made regarding things like - race, physical appearance, people with disabilities, etc and which terms to use. In essence even censorship finds its way into audio description in some parts of the world.

Training

A common factor across all film based companies is the emphasis on “in house” describer training, which is built upon their individual “house” style. Some companies provided training on-site whilst others conducted the course by correspondence.

Equipment and technology

TV

In the USA and Canada, the Secondary Audio Program (SAP) available on NTSC is used to carry the audio description signal. The TV medium has experienced instances where the management of technology has failed, whether by human error or by the technology itself. This could be a simple issue of forgetting to engage the relay signal for the SAP channel. Embarrassing, but fatal.

In the UK, limited trial of audio description on the digital TV network is currently underway. Some delays were experienced in developing and modifying a set top box to receive the signal.

Both the USA and UK are working on manufacturing standards of digital television sets, which will incorporate a module to receive the audio description signal.

Cinema

In both the USA and UK the cinema medium is exploring new frontiers with the use of infrared transmission systems, which are integrated with the film projection equipment. Further development in headphones needs to be a major goal – if they are to be user friendly and less cumbersome.

Legislation

USA

From 2002 the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) mandated 4 hours of TV per week were to be described. Protests led by The National Association of Broadcasters, the National Cable TV Association, Motion Picture Association of America and other groups felt the FCC overstepped their jurisdiction. At the time of the Fellowship the Video Restoration Act was being drafted.

Canada

On 2 August 2002, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) renewed CTV's and Global's licenses for a full seven years. This was the first time audio description was included as a mandatory requirement of licence renewal.

CTV and Global are required to upgrade stations to relay the SAP signal and where technically possible provide two hours a week of described programs during the first two years, leading to four hours per week in year five. At least 50% of the described programming will be original, aired between 7pm and 11pm, with the remainder consisting of program repeats.

UK

The Broadcasting Act 1996 requires broadcasters of digital terrestrial TV licences to provide at least 10% of their broadcasted programmes with description by their tenth year of licence.

Independent Television Commission (ITC) regulation requires an incremental increase in description from 2% in the first two years to 10% in year ten. As at 2003 broadcasters of digital terrestrial TV must provide at least 4% of their programmes with description.

New communications legislation in 2003 and 2004 will require audio description targets for all digital television platform operators. A new regulatory body, the Office of Communications (OFCOM), will regulate this legislation.

In all three countries the use of description is also commented upon for verbalising text based display of information eg) emergency alerts, sports scores, etc.

4.2 Live Performance Art (drama theatre, ballet and opera)

Audio description technique

Drama theatre

Describers in the USA are divided into primary and secondary roles. The primary describer narrates the entire show, whilst the secondary describer generally writes and records the pre-programme and interval notes.

Describers in the UK have a similar format to describers in Australia where a pair of describers split the broadcast of the description by Acts within the play.

Ballet

Available in the UK, the describer and dance movement analyst work together viewing the show and devising a script. The designer and artistic director approves the final description script. A describer commented upon modern ballet being more challenging to describe than traditional ballet with a strong storyline.

Description is focused upon the central action, which is important to the plot. It can't compete with the dynamic level of the orchestra and where necessary the description may need to be given in advance of the action. Music sound cues are used as prompts for description.

Touch tour workshops of the opening scene are held. In some workshops dancers hold various ballet positions (ie arabesque) to enable audience members to understand the basic physical stances involved in ballet. An onstage tour of costumes and scenery is also conducted at this time.

Opera

Available in the USA and UK audio description of opera is a mix of visual on stage elements and key messages of the surtitles. These are interspersed

between operatic vocal phrases and repeats in the music. Special attention is given to ensure the description does not compete with the enjoyment of the music or vocals.

Supporting materials for the describers can include a sound recording of the opera, musical score, original and translated script. This culminates in a heavily worked description, which finds the perfect balance between all the components of the opera.

Training

In the USA, private companies and non-profit corporations generally provide the description training for theatres.

In the UK, the Open Network, which is linked with colleges, provides training and accreditation for new describers. The Audio Description Association is encouraging existing describers to undergo accreditation. There is some discussion as to whether this training will need to be adapted to suit other forms of performance art description.

Equipment and technology

Equipment generally falls into two categories for performance Art – infrared and FM based transmission systems, which are either portable or permanently installed. Both systems have shortfalls. For infrared - specific coverage areas and design of headsets. For FM – occurrence of static in some venues.

Different styles of headphones are used in both systems. Some of which were exceedingly uncomfortable for users to wear for 1-2 hour period of a performance. There is ongoing debate in both USA and UK, regarding equipment used.

Legislation

In the USA, The Americans with Disabilities Act gives civil rights protections to individuals with disabilities similar to those provided to individuals on the basis of race, colour, sex, national origin, age, and religion. It guarantees equal opportunity for individuals with disabilities in public accommodations, employment, transportation, State and local government services, and telecommunications. This Act indirectly promotes the use of audio description.

In the UK, the Disability Discrimination Act requires theatres to have an active obligation to make venues accessible. Generally each theatre manages their staff of volunteer describers of live performance. In certain theatres external companies are contracted to provide the technical infrastructure and expertise.

In both the USA and UK supporting information, such as program, cast list, etc is available free in Braille and large print for each production. Arena Stage in Washington has introduced an audio described subscription series for their audience.

4.3 Visual Art (art galleries and museums)

Audio description technique

The style of description used is similar in both museums and galleries. The visual description incorporates colour, size and analogies of what an object visually represents. General information on each object, such as historical, scientific, conservation techniques and contextual information is also included.

In the USA, the delivery of audio description is available in a number of different formats.

In some museums visitors book in advance, ranging from a few days to two weeks for described tours. These are personally conducted by either trained staff or volunteers and can be tailored to reflect the visitor's interest and if necessary, mobility needs. Other museums offer the above and also self guided tours of specific objects for impromptu visits.

Also available are specially devised touch tours for blind and vision impaired visitors to learn more about selected objects through touch.

An innovative approach to audio description is a 2.5hour monthly workshop. The beginning of the workshop includes description of objects followed by a discussion led by the exhibition curator. The balance of the workshop has various activities that change on a monthly basis ie) handling of objects, inclusion of tactual pictures or a related art activity.

In the UK, most museums advocate self guided tours using recorded description. Some offer description as an additional track within their regular cd based guides. Each object in the tour is marked within the gallery. Others use specific purpose recorded guides, with navigational information.

Where its difficult to touch objects (ie art galleries) description is used in conjunction with either raised line drawings or enlarged colour copies to facilitate a close up view of the artwork.

The UK has also moved towards developing workshop activities into their adult access programs. These focus on a particular work and last for approximately an hour. Visitors meet in one of the gallery's rooms and are given an A3 colour copy of the picture/object to study whilst they listen to a visual description and contextual information such as, art history, painting/sculpture style and other supporting information. Visitors then view the object within the gallery.

Training

Describers working in museums and galleries are trained either by experienced staff or by outsourced trainers. This is a similar approach seen elsewhere in other countries and is predominately motivated by individual budgets and expertise.

Equipment and technology

In the venues visited in USA, blind and vision impaired visitors were accompanied by trained staff and volunteers who provided description.

In the UK, many of the museum tours are self guided. The equipment varies from portable cassette players with linear plans to cd players and radio based wands, with random access. By using random access, visitors are free to select any exhibit, in any sequence they desire.

Legislation

Legislation in visual art is identical to that of performance art and hence, public providers must adhere to the same requirements. See Performance Art Legislation summary above.

4.4 Consumer Feedback

Film Based Art

With the dispersed group participating in the UK TV trial it wasn't possible to arrange a focus group to generate feedback on their responses to the trial.

Performance Art

In Scotland a theatre group of vision impaired users has grown from approximately 14 to a membership of 85. They provide regular feedback to theatre staff on front of house issues. This group, in collaboration with, Audio Description Association (Scotland) conducts audits on theatre describers. Feedback is provided via theatre.

It is interesting to note their audience attendance at productions mirrors the general public attendance.

Whilst popular family productions appeal to members of the VI community, their return attendance pattern differed. Unlike the general public, if they had attended the show once, they would feel no need to return the next season.

Visual Art

In both the USA and UK whilst the number of vision impaired visitors attending the tours were small, as expected, they were positive about the work being undertaken by museums and galleries. Many enjoyed their experience and were considering returning for future visits. Workshops seem to be a common point of praise.

5 MAJOR CONCLUSIONS

Film Based Art

The writing and delivery of film based description is quite flexible, in the essence of being able to be re-written and recorded. It is also likely to have the most influence in the community due to the public popularity of film based mediums - TV, cinema and video. And in relative terms development and production costs can be minimal.

There appears to be a short to medium term opportunity for increased availability of audio description through this medium.

Live Performance Art

This medium is well established and governed by its live environment. The technique for theatre in both the UK and USA are essentially the same. The elements that need to be considered for the delivery of description varies between each of the forms of performance art.

Visual Art

Museums are including access, through audio description, into general museum programmes and are also moving toward providing tailor made programs to meet additional needs and interests.

It is interesting to note key management principles are being successfully applied where a budget for access measures is included in all special exhibitions, access experts work with all departments and are part of the team, early in the planning stage.

Legislation

Legislation has a positive impact on the provision of audio description. The USA example draws focus upon the need for advocacy agencies in Australia to share a united goal to prevent fractured viewpoints diluting the desired outcomes when lobbying for regulatory provisions.

The pitfalls and achievements in Canada, USA and UK should be used as a base for the formulation of Australian standards.

Throughout Canada, USA and UK the deaf community has achieved a higher percentage of captioning of film based and signing of visual art than the blind and vision impaired community has for audio description.

6 RECOMMENDATIONS

There are a number of methods, approaches and policies suitable for Australia that are used overseas, which can be implemented now and further developed over time to suit our culture and own direction in accessibility.

Focus government awareness

Wider community awareness of the social benefit in providing audio description and secondly the broader issue of equal opportunity and accessibility for all.

Increase in coverage by the general media of provision of the service, as it exists now.

Raise quality of technique

Continue to foster international links established during this visit. Australia should become an active participant in the global debate on audio description.

With the continuing growth of audio description in Australia it is of paramount importance that all agencies providing the service continue to work together, and through discussion and debate provide a stronger direction for audio description in Australia.

7 IMPLEMENTATION

For Australia

- To establish a formal network of description service providers, describers, users and stakeholders within Australia.
- To hold an annual conference to share, discuss and develop the different facets of audio description with practitioners, stakeholders and users.
- To work towards inviting international speakers to the annual conference.
- For Australia to take a regular role in an international forum regarding the direction and future planning for audio description.
- To investigate the current status of legislation, in regard to access, for film based mediums.
- To establish accredited training guidelines and an accreditation process for audio description as a whole within Australia.
- Incorporate voice training into the training programme to enhance the delivery of the description.
- To reconfirm the importance of good descriptive language skills and the need for supporting reference materials.
- To educate first time audience members to new art forms through raised line drawings, touch tours of objects/stance and workshops.

8 DISSEMINATION

- Publish findings, making them available to blindness and government agencies, disability arts organisations, members of the arts community (theatre, museums, galleries, etc)
- Hold a lecture (or series of) with members of the arts community to disseminate the latest information available on description.
- Attend functions and write articles to generate public interest and change
- Hold a lecture with describers, publicising the broad findings of the research undertaken.
- Hold a series of workshops with describers during 2004 teaching the micro techniques collected from interviews, observations, etc.

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“In Discussion”

Outside, on the tile and brick pavement, a smiling woman with long dark hair, sits on a timber garden bench between two bronze male figures wearing suits. Her left hand, rests atop of the bald headed man’s hand. He, dressed in waistcoat and bowtie, leans towards her whilst his left hand keeps hold of his characteristic cigar. The other male figure looks on.