Audio Description: A Path to Literacy for All

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One of the first audio describers (c. 1981), Joel Snyder and Audio Description Associates develop audio description for media, museum tours, and performing arts worldwide. He led a staff that produced description for nationally broadcast films and network series including "Sesame Street" broadcasts and DVDs. Internationally, he has introduced description techniques in over twenty nations: he has presented papers on description in Montpellier, France; Shanghai, China; and provided description for the World Blind Union in Geneva. Visit www.audiodescribe.com for more information and work samples.

1. Introduction

What better way to begin this discussion of description than with description of a favorite cartoon:

"The Fan" by John McPherson

On a stage – at left, a woman in a flowing gown, her hands clasped in front of her, stands before a kneeling man in a doublet and feathered cap. He croons, "Why dost thy heart turn away from mine?" At right, a man at a microphone speaks: "Basically, the guy with the goofy hat is ticked because this babe has been runnin' around with the dude in the black tights." The caption reads: "Many opera companies now provide interpreters for the culturally impaired."

Description is principally an access technique designed for the benefit of people—all people, including children—who are blind or have low vision. I think of it as a literary art form, a kind of poetry—a haiku. It provides a verbal version of the visual--the visual is made verbal, and aural (he points to his ear), and oral (he points to his mouth). Using words that are succinct, vivid, and imaginative, it conveys the visual image that is not fully accessible to a segment of the population and not fully realized by the rest of us—the rest of us, sighted folks who see but who may not observe.

2. The Fundamentals

In order to understanding how description can be an effective aid to literacy, it is useful to know how describers develop their skills. In training prospective describers, I often recall my amazement when first encountering Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's brilliant detective, Sherlock Holmes. Brilliant ... and incredibly observant.

In developing AD for television, a video, for theater, for a museum, I emphasize four elements, the first of which is all about the skill that Sherlock Holmes honed:

2.1 Observation: The great philosopher Yogi Berra said it best: "You can see a lot just by looking." An effective describer must increase his level of awareness and become an active "see-er," develop his "visual literacy," notice the visual world with a heightened sense of acuity, and share those images. 19th century poet and essayist Paul Valery reminded us that “Seeing is forgetting the name of what one sees.” Names and titles often lead us to dismiss the object being viewed without truly considering it. Miss Helen Keller saw clearly that "Those who have never suffered impairment of sight or hearing seldom make the fullest use of these blessed faculties. Their eyes and ears take in all sights and sounds hazily, without concentration and with little appreciation."

2.2 Editing: Next, describers must edit or cull from what they see, selecting what is most valid, what is most important, what is most critical to an understanding and appreciation of an event. The great jurist Oliver Wendell Holmes said that “The great struggle of art is to leave out all but the essential.” In addition, choices are made based on an understanding of blindness and low vision—going from the general to the specific, use of color, and inclusion of directional information.

2.3 Language: We translate it all into words--objective, vivid, specific, imaginatively drawn words, phrases, and metaphors. For instance, is the Washington Monument 555 feet tall or is it as high as fifty elephants stacked one on top of the other? Both, of course. But which characterization conjures the most vivid mental image. How many different words can you use to describe someone moving along a sidewalk? Why say "walk" when you can more evocatively describe the action with "sashay," "stroll," "skip," "stumble," or "saunter"?

But good describers also strive for simplicity, succinctness—"less is more." In writing to a friend, the 17th century mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal noted: "I have only made this letter longer because I have not had the time to make it shorter."

At the same time, a describer must use language that helps folks see vividly—and even see beyond what's readily apparent. The great novelist and humorist Jonathan Swift knew that “Vision is the art of seeing things invisible.” Those elephants aren’t really there but it may be that suggesting them helps people imagine the height of the Washington Monument. As Mark Twain so elegantly chided: “You cannot depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus.”

Yet, it's important to maintain a degree of objectivity in most circumstances. Describers sum it up with the acronym—

"WYSIWYS": "What You See Is What You Say."

The best audio describer is sometimes referred to as a "verbal camera lens," objectively recounting visual aspects of a visual image. Qualitative judgments get in the way—they constitute a subjective interpretation on the part of the describer and are unnecessary and unwanted. Describers should let listeners conjure their own interpretations based on a commentary that is as objective as possible. So we don't say "He is furious" or "She is upset." Rather, "He's clenching his fist" or "She is crying." The idea is to let the audience make their own judgments—perhaps a listener's eyes don't work so well, but his or her brains and interpretative skills are intact. Let's not clutter our descriptions with OUR judgments or interpretations; because, after all, "We don't see things as they are; we see things as we are." [Poet Anais Nin]

2.4 Vocal Skills: Finally, in addition to building a verbal capability, the describer develops the vocal instrument through work with speech and oral interpretation fundamentals. We make meaning with our voices—one quick exercise I use involves the phrase:

"Woman without her man is a savage."

Say it aloud so that it means just the opposite:

"Woman: Without her, man is a savage."

And here's a bonus for you—say the following phrase aloud so it makes perfect sense:

“That that is is that that is not is not.”

The correct result (with appropriate punctuation):

“That that is, is; that that is not, is not.”

So effective describers must 1) learn to "re-see" the world around us—to truly notice what is perceived with the eyes; 2) express the pertinent aspects of those images; 3) with precise and imaginative language; and 4) vocal techniques that render the visual verbal.

3. Building Literacy

Years ago, my wife, Esther Geiger, was driving some children to a drama class and the kids were chattering excitedly about the movie “Toys.” It takes place in a toy factory and the film is filled with colorful images and movement gags—but not a lot of dialogue. One child in the car, who was blind, said, “Oh I saw that. It was the most boring movie I’ve ever been to!” Indeed, this was well before the advent of audio description for film.

Esther is a CMA, a Certified Movement Analyst, a practitioner of Laban Movement Analysis developed by Rudoph Laban, along with Labanotation—the technique for notating dance—in the early 20th century. As you might imagine, movement analysis and audio description have much in common: in particular, careful observation, the need to objectify our ways of looking at what we observe, and find more ways to say what we see. Because description happens in “real time”—and especially if a program contains a lot of dialogue or other pertinent sound elements—describers must be clear and succinct. There’s not time to describe everything; they must choose what’s most important to convey the essence of the visual experience. Then

they must find words that are concise, vivid and imaginative to elicit images in their listeners' mind's eyes.

Finding words—we all deal with that, just about every moment of our waking lives. But children or people with learning disabilities have particular needs that might be addressed effectively through the use of description. [In developing a rather elaborate audio described tour for the Connecticut Children's Museum in New Haven, CT, complete with navigational/directional information and tested by people who are blind.]incomplete sentence While there I conducted a workshop in New Haven with day care workers and reading teachers on what I think represents a new application for audio description—literacy. We experimented with developing more descriptive language to use when working with kids and picture books. These books rely on pictures to tell the story. But the teacher trained in audio description techniques would never simply hold up a picture of a red ball and read the text: "See the ball." He or she might add: "The ball is red--just like a fire engine. I think that ball is as large as one of you! It's as round as the sun--a bright red circle or sphere." The teacher has introduced new vocabulary, invited comparisons, and used metaphor or simile—with toddlers! By using audio description, you make these books accessible to children who have low vision or are blind and help develop more sophisticated language skills for all kids. A picture is worth 1000 words? Maybe. But the audio describer might say that a few well-chosen words can conjure vivid and lasting images.

Several years ago I led a team of describers who provided description—for the first time—for *Sesame Street*. I was heartened by a letter I received from a blind parent of a sighted child who, for the first time, could follow along with her daughter the antics of Elmo, Bert, Ernie, and all the other denizens of *Sesame Street*. We also provided description for the Spanish version of *Sesame Street—Plaza Sesamo*—and added descriptive tracks to all newly released *Sesame Street* DVDs.

In live presentations, I often ask people to listen to an excerpt from the feature film *The Color of Paradise*, first with no picture on the screen and no description—just as someone with no vision might experience it if he or she had no access to description. Then I play the same excerpt as I described it for national broadcast: and finally, one last time with the video intact so a sighted viewer can make his or her own judgments about the effectiveness of the descriptions. APPENDIX A is an annotated script of the description for this brief excerpt. The notes will afford you some insight into our reasoning for choosing the precise language used—why I selected particular words to bring these images to your mind's eye.

4. Visual Literacy: Description and Movement

Intriguingly it was description of *movement* that first captured my wife's attention and led the two of us to collaborate on several projects that experiment with literacy. As mentioned earlier, Esther has focused on using Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) to enhance audio description. LMA offers description writers and live describers a valuable tool for observation, selection and description of important movement elements in live performance, video and film.

Esther's interest in this endeavor was first sparked watching a broadcast of the audio described version of the 1977 film *Saturday Night Fever*. A turning point in the story occurs during a dance contest, when the protagonist (played by John Travolta) discovers something about his own limitations—and unearned advantages—by watching the performances of the black and Hispanic couples that place behind him and his partner. To movement analyst eyes, it was clear that the stylistic differences between the performances served as an important device to convey character and further the plot. But what was heard in the description was only a focus on naming the moves the dancers were making; one couldn't hear as much difference between the couples as could be seen. The concern about this missed opportunity in description led us to contemplate how Laban techniques might contribute.

Since that time, Esther has offered workshops for describers, introducing them to LMA concepts that can help them find broader ways of looking at movement and more expressive words to say what they see. Describers are already practiced observers, and they understand how to look for essence and pattern. Beyond that, what the LMA approach offers them is an expanded range of seeing and a more specific vocabulary for describing movement. In a recent workshop, Esther talked with describers about the difference between just saying what someone is doing, and describing how they do it. Workshop participants observed clips of people walking, where just hearing "walk" doesn't give nearly as much information as seeing the image. For example, watching Charlie Chaplin in *City Lights*, it was agreed that his body organization and movement phrasing are essential elements of his signature character. In *My Fair Lady* it's Audrey Hepburn's postural attitude and movement qualities, as much as her costume and speech, that demonstrate how Eliza Doolittle has changed after being groomed by Professor Higgins. In other examples, the focus was on gait patterns, spatial interactions and other movement ideas that inform characters' walks.

Describing a play or a movie is a challenge: conveying the visual elements clearly, while still allowing the audience to hear dialogue and sound effects. When first tackling description for a dance performance, the challenge seemed unmeetable: dance is just too visual! The insights that allowed a "way in" to this challenge came from a blind audience member and from Laban training.

This special project was a collaboration between Audio Description Associates (ADA) and the Axis Dance Company, based in Oakland, California. Axis pioneered "physically integrated dance".

Axis Dance, committed to inclusion and accessibility, asked ADA to provide live description for a performance presented by the Flynn Theatre in Burlington, Vermont. ADA was to write a script based on videotapes of the choreography, and participate in training workshops for the live describers. The describers would attend

rehearsals, script in hand, to practice “speaking the motif” as the dancing occurred and then describe the performance live for blind and low-vision audience members. For most of these patrons, this would be the first time they had attended a live dance performance.

At a pre-performance workshop organized by Axis, we heard from one blind participant, “I never go to dance because all I get is the music, and if I don’t like the music, it’s really boring!” (How reminiscent of our young friend from years ago, who was so bored by the movie that the sighted kids had found exciting.) When asked what he would need to hear in the description in order not to be bored, he replied, “the story”. One of the describers responded in dismay, “But it’s modern dance; it’s abstract. There is no story!” Indeed, Laban wrote that “Pure dancing has no describable story. It is frequently impossible to outline the content of a dance in words, although one can always describe the movement.” [Introduction to the second edition of *The Mastery of Movement*, p. 4] And here we were hoping to somehow describe the movement in a way that would give the listener access to the content!

But Laban himself showed how; just a few pages earlier he’d written, “…the artist playing the role of Eve can pluck the apple in more than one way, with movements of varying expression. She can pluck the apple greedily and rapidly or languidly and sensuously… Many other forms of action are possible, and each of these will be characterized by a different kind of movement… In defining the kind of movement as greedy, as sensuous, or detached, one does not define merely what one has actually seen. What the spectator has seen may have been only a peculiar, quick jerk or a slow gliding of the arm. The impression of greed or sensuousness is the spectator’s personal interpretation of Eve’s state of mind…” [p.1] Here Laban is alluding to the interactive nature of the “current between stage and audience”. He also suggests an important principle of Audio Description techniques, noted above: “WYSIWYS: what you see is what you say.” In other words, it’s important to describe accurately and vividly, but to allow the listener to create meaning. Audio describers try to be objective, by using words that are specific and imaginative, without being interpretive

(Eve snatches the apple “with a quick jerk of the arm” not “with a look of greedy guilt”.)

LMA vocabulary provided the words to describe the movements happening in each Axis Dance piece. In addition, LMA offered a vantage from which to find the “story” of each piece of choreography, whether or not there was a narrative plot.

Watching each Axis piece on video in developing the Audio Description script, the focus was on finding the “story” it tells: what main idea does the dancing communicate to the viewer/what is the essence of the dance? What information would be most important to allow a blind audience member to “view” the performance as fully as possible, to help him follow the meaning of the choreography? The LMA framework provided a lens for seeing essence and meaning. Since there’s not time while it’s happening on stage to describe everything about a dance piece, the describer needs to choose which elements comprise the structure and themes of the choreography, and what words would most succinctly convey those ideas. For example, one piece seemed mostly “about” spatial patterns and sequences of group clustering and scattering; the dancers’ specific movements seemed less important, and their individual characteristics (gender, hair color, body shape, etc.) seemed not to matter at all. In another piece, where each dancer played a unique character, those particulars, along with body attitude, were meaningful factors. Appendix B to this paper is a portion of the describers’ script for one of the Axis Dance pieces: “Dust”, choreographed by Victoria Marks. The script is designed to be spoken while the movement occurs; viewing a tape of the piece, you would notice that much has been left unsaid in order to focus on communicating mood, theme and choreographic structure, while leaving aural space for the impact of the musical score. I invite you to test the description by having it read aloud to you. To what extent does hearing the dance allow you to see?

5. Conclusion

The projects detailed above—both training audio describers and writing description—are beginning explorations in the application of LMA to description and an exploration of how description can build literacies: verbal, visual and movement. It's clear that describers and all lovers of language have much to share, and a lot to learn together about observation, clarity, efficiency of description—and how the use of descriptive language can build more sophisticated literacy for all.

I welcome inquiries from readers of this paper concerning potential research studies in this area. Compared to subtitling or captioning, there's much research to be done with respect to Audio Description. I look forward to hearing from you.

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APPENDIX A

ANNOTATED* AUDIO DESCRIPTION SCRIPT FOR *THE COLOR OF PARADISE

Cues in CAPS; descriptions preceded by ">>."

Annotations are at the end of the script, keyed to numerals within description text.

Note: The appearance of the character "Mohammed" is described earlier in the film.

>> Mohammed kneels and taps his hands through the thick ground cover of brown >>**1.** curled leaves.

...[CHIRPING/RUSTLING :02]

>> A scrawny nestling struggles on the ground near Mohammed's hand.

...[GASP/CHIRPING :02] **2.**

>> His palm hovers above the baby bird. He lays his hand lightly over the tiny creature. Smiling, Mohammed curls his fingers around the chick and scoops **3.** it into his hands. He stands and strokes its nearly featherless head with a fingertip.

...[CHIRPING/RUSTLE :01]

>> Mohammed starts as the bird nips his finger. He taps **4.** his finger on the chick's gaping beak. He tilts **4.** his head back, then drops it forward. Mohammed tips **4.** the chick into his front shirt pocket. Wrapping his legs and arms around a tree trunk,

Mohammed climbs.

...[HEAVY BREATHING/CLIMBING :11]

>> He latches onto a tangle of thin, upper branches. His legs flail for a foothold. Mohammed stretches an arm between a fork in the trunk of the tree and wedges in his head and shoulder. His shoes slip on the rough bark.

Note: Throughout this excerpt, for the most part, descriptions are written to be read "in real time," i.e., as the action being described occurs on screen. However, in many films descriptions may precede the action on occasion. This is a useful convention – it accommodates timing required in films with a great deal of dialogue and allows description users the opportunity to know "what happened" moments before the action occurs.

...[SCRAPING :03]

>> He wraps his legs around the lower trunk, then uses his arms to pull himself higher. He rises into thicker foliage and holds onto tangles of smaller branches. Gaining his footing, Mohammed stands upright and cocks his head to one side.

...[CHIRPING/FLUTTER]

>> An adult bird flies from a nearby branch. **5.** Mohammed extends an open hand. He touches a branch and runs his fingers over wide, green leaves.

...[RUSTLING :03]

>> He pats his hand down the length of the branch. His fingers trace the smooth bark of the upper branches, search the network of connecting tree limbs, and discover their joints.

...[RUSTLE :02]

>> Above his head, Mohammed's fingers find a dense mass of woven twigs--a bird's nest.

...[CHIRPING :03]

>> Smiling, he removes the chick from his shirt pocket and drops it gently into the nest beside another fledgling.

...[CHIRPING :03]

>> He rubs the top of the chick's head with his index **6.** finger. Mohammed wiggles his finger like a worm **7.** and taps a chick's open beak. Smiling, he slowly lowers his hand.

NOTES

1 – Color has been shown to be important to people with low vision, even people who are congenitally blind.

2 – Timing is critical in the crafting of description. We weave descriptive language around a film's sound elements

3 – Vivid verbs help conjure images in the mind's eye.

4 – Description, like much poetry, is written to be heard. Alliteration adds variety and helps to maintain interest.

5 – What to include? This image is important – the adult bird returns in the next scene.

6 – Be specific-- precision creates images!

7 – Similes paint pictures!

APPENDIX B

Audio Describers' Script for a Live Dance Performance (segment)

DUST

By Victoria Marks

GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR DESCRIBERS:

This dance is structured to employ many types of contrasts. Examples include….

Visual contrasts: light/dark, warm tones/cool tones, patterns/full light, one or two dancers/large group.

Sound contrasts: nature sounds/music, quietness (serene sounds)/active (agitated) sounds.

Choreographic idea contrasts: stillness/mobility, passive/active, initiator/follower, intensity (seriousness)/lighthearted busyness, isolation/interaction.

Note that the activeness/passivity, stillness/mobility of each dancer at any given choreographic moment is not based on who's in a wheelchair/"disabled" or not. Sometimes the choreographer purposely turns that around.

DESCRIPTION

1

A small pool of light reveals a woman lying still, face down. From left, a second woman drives her motorized wheelchair into the light.

2

She pauses next to the prone woman, then reaches down to lift the woman's shoulder and change her pose.

3

The woman in the wheelchair continues to pose the other, moving one body part at a time. The woman on the floor moves only as she is molded, holding each new shape.

[SLIGHT PAUSE]

The mov-er steers her wheelchair to gently nudge the mov-ee onto her back.

4

The passive dancer on the floor is softly pulled and pushed, her head lifted, her back lightly touched, to bring her to sitting. The wheelchair presses into her from behind; she slides to a crouch, then a squat. In stages, her partner stands her up. The standing woman now turns her head—on her own—toward the wheelchair dancer. Light fades to black.

5

Light comes up. The standing woman faces a new dancer. She who was passive is now the initiator. One press of her forefinger against the other's breastbone sets off a cascade of movements. The first backs away and watches as the new dancer flails and dangles, drops to her knees, her elbow, then splays onto her back. Lights fade out.

6

The circle of light comes up. A new dancer stands beside the splayed woman, slicing the air with sharp arcing arm movements. The splayed woman lifts her head, as the other gazes upward. Light fades to black.

[PAUSE, MUSIC CHANGES]

7

Full stage lights up. From left, a man and woman, in time to the music, prance and dip forward. They are met, from right, by a dancer motoring her wheelchair on, dragging another who hangs on to its back. Now dancers converge and scatter busily all over the stage—two drive wheelchairs, five are on foot. Greetings, hugs, taps, re-groupings. Dancers wave, bump, tease, chase, shove, lean, flop onto and roll or climb over each other, scurrying and whizzing playfully from place to place.

8

Now, as lights begin to dim, the dancers spread across the stage and slow to stillness, pausing in tableau. Lighting creates an uneven geometry of shadows slashing across the floor.

In unison, the dancers begin to turn slowly in place. Now all are seen in right profile.

9

Now their backs all face us.

10

[CHIMES]

11

The dancers continue their slow-motion rotation.

12

Now all are in left profile

13

At left, suddenly a wheelchair dancer sweeps her arm up and circles her chair to the right. At this cue, a man at right spins, then reaches out to draw her to him. While some continue their slow, in-place rotation, others break rank and repeat some of the earlier greeting, reaching, running, and pushing. Each always returns to a still patch of light and rejoins the ongoing group rotation.

14

Small groups step forward, then back into place. Now all pause, in tableau again, their backs to us.

15

In unison, all look over their right shoulder then turn toward us.

16

They are still.

17

The two at right turn away.

18

The two at center turn away.

19

The remaining three turn away.

20

Steadily, evenly, all rotate to their left, to face the far left corner.

21-22

Abruptly breaking the spell, a woman dashes from right to left, slicing through the group. She flings herself to the ground, then scrambles up and races back as the others pull away from her and stride off left. She repeats the run and slide, left alone on stage. The lights have brightened and the floor pattern disappears. The lone dancer runs off as others return alongher same diagonal path (from far left to close right). They are tugging, shoving, catching and lifting each other. Some push, roll and dart past others to advance along the diagonal and scatter offstage right.

23

Now all but two have exited. They pause, stare at each other, and one runs off right, leaving the other standing alone.

24

Body erect, she gradually turns her back to us…

25

…then pivots slowly on one foot then the other to complete her rotation.

26

Now she looks at us, then walks forward, gazing across the audience.

27

The light brightens on her as she bends forward, hands to her right knee, and unfastens her prosthetic lower leg. She sets it upright in front of her. It stands alone as she kneels behind.

28

Crouching, she slides left on her knees.

29

She glances at us, leans forward to peer at the leg, reaching out slowly with her index finger to poke the leg and tip it over. As she sits up, another dancer, in a separate pool of light to the left, reaches upward, arching her back, then crumples to the floor, face down.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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ILLUSTRATION