

Audio Description: A Path to Literacy for All

Joel Snyder

President and Founder, Audio Description Associates

Director, Audio Description Project, American Council of the Blind

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

Description is principally an access technique designed for the benefit of people ² all people, including children ² who are blind or have low vision. I think of it as a literary art form, a kind of poetry ² 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 ² 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-

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 great struggle of art is made based on an understanding of blindness and low vision ² 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 ² "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 ² and even see beyond what's readily apparent. The great novelist and humorist Jonathan really there but it may be that suggesting them helps people imagine the height of

Yet, it's important to maintain a degree of objectivity in most circumstances. Describers sum it up with the acronym ²

"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 way² 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 judgments² perhaps a

OLVWHQHUV H\HV GRQ W ZRUN and interpretive skills are L V R U K
 LQWDFW /HWV QRW FOXWWHU RXU GHVFULSWLRQV Z
 EHFDXVH DIWHU DOO³: H GRQ W VHH WKLQJ V [DeV ZHK H\U D
 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 voices² one quick exercise I use involves the phrase:

³: RPDQ ZLWKRXW KHU PDQ LV D VDYDJH ´

Say it aloud so that it means just the opposite:

³: RPDQ :LWKRXW KHU PDQ LV D VDYDJH ´

\$QG KHUH V D ERSA the following phrase aloud so it makes perfect sense:

3 7KDW WKDW LV LV WKDW WKDW LV QRW LV QRW ´

The correct result (with appropriate punctuation):

3 7KDW WKDW LV LV WKDW WKDW LV QRW LV QRW ´

So effective describers must 1) learn to "re-see" the world around us 2) 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

WKH NLGV ZHUH FKDWWHULQJ H[FLWHG Oplac De En Ra Xto WKH P
 factory and the film is filled with colorful images and movement gags 2 but not a lot of
 GLDORJXH 2QH FKLOG LQ WKH FDU ZKR ZDV EOLQG VD
 ERULQJ PRYLH , YH HYHU EHHQ WR ´ , adent of a audio W KLV ZD
 description for film.

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 ² 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 ² why I selected particular words to bring these im D J H V W R \ R X U P L Q G ¶ V H \ H

4. Visual Literacy: Description and Movement

Intriguingly it was description of *movement* W K D W I L U V W F D S W X U H G P \ Z L I H 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.

(V W K H U ¶ V L Q W H U H V W L Q W K L V H Q G H D Y R U Z D V I L U V W V S D 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 ² and unearned advantages ² 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; R Q H F R X K %o R ¶ # # # (b) F 3 (e)-3(tw)10(e)-3(a)6(n

rehearsals, s F U L S W L Q K D Q G W R S U D F W L F H ³ V S H D N L Q J W K H I
 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
 S D U W L F L S D Q W ³, Q H Y H U J R W R G D Q F H E H F D X V H D O O , J
 P X V L F L W ¶ V U H D O R e m i n e s c e n t o f o u r 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,

5. Conclusion

The projects detailed above ²

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.

1 R W H 7 K H D S S H D U D Q F H R I W K H F K D U D F W H U 3 0 R K D P P H G 1

>> 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]

...[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 ¶ 6 F U L S W I R U D / L Y H ' D Q F H 3 H U I R U P D Q F H V H J F

DUST

By Victoria Marks

GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR DESCRIBERS:

This dance is structured to employ many types of contrasts

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

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

6 K H S D X V H V Q H [W W R W K H S U R Q H Z R P D Q W K H Q U H D F H

[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;

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 along her 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 W X U Q V K H U E D F N W R X V «

25

« W K H Q S L Y R W V V O R Z O \ R Q R Q H I R R W W K H Q W K H R W K H U V

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

LABAN, Rudolph (1950) *The Mastery of Movement*. MacDonald and Evans Limited.

ILLUSTRATION



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