**Making the Arts Accessible - Transcription**

Episode 1

Vicky Ackroyd, audio describer and disability awareness trainer.

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In this episode I talked to Vicky Ackroyd in January 2022. We cover audio description – what it is and how it’s changing, relaxed performances and the importance of learning from them, and also her work with Mind The Gap which works with disabled artists and pushes for greater representation of disabled artists in the mainstream. We also hear from her the perils of taking dogs onto the stage for touch tours, and how audio description can be such a lifeline for people who love the arts who are losing or have lost their sight. I hope you enjoy it.

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*AG: So in this episode of Making the Arts Accessible, I’m talking to Vicky Ackroyd about her work. Vicky describes herself as an access champion, which she undoubtedly is. She is a disability awareness and equality trainer, and she audio describes for various theatres in the north of England. So welcome Vicky, and thank you very much for talking to me.*

VA: Thank you for inviting me.

*AG: So Vicky, can you first tell us a bit about audio description if that's okay. So could you summarise in brief what is audio description, particularly for live performances?*

VA: Well it’s essentially a translation of a visual event into an aural event. So somebody with a visual impairment gets information about what is on stage in terms of all the visual aspects; the sets, the scenery, the costumes, the characters, the actors playing those characters. And they get that information generally through a headset worn stethoscope style, generally speaking, which is worn during the show. So somebody - an audio describer like me - would be in a box somewhere at the back, either watching the show through a window or watching the show on a screen, and I would then be relating things that are happening visually, through that headset.

*AG: Brilliant. And with live performances there are also things like, say, an introduction and a touch tour - do you want to just explain them as well because they are fairly common these days.*

VA: Absolutely. Yes. They are really useful ways to set the scene so that you know what you're going in to and what to expect. It’s unfortunate that we’re not able to do as many touch tours at the moment because of COVID, but they are a way to have a feel of some of the props, perhaps the weight of a really elaborate costume - maybe it's loaded with jewels. So it's lovely to be able to feel that, so that somebody with a visual impairment can really get a sense of the costumes and perhaps the opulence.

Or perhaps something that's just funny and a bit quirky, or to get a sense of the size of things. For example in panto, quite a lot of things are oversized, so it's quite fun to be able to have a feel of the giant’s head, for example, or a plate of sausages. Those sorts of things. So yes, touch tours are where audience members can have a feel of the props and often get onto the stage as well. So we can have a walk round and get a sense of the dimensions of the space as well. I have to say people who don't have a visual impairment really enjoy those as well. It's a great offer.

*AG: It's lovely isn’t it. And it’s like you're giving people that extra knowledge of the production because they're going to miss out on the visual aspects, however good the audio description is.*

VC: Yes, it's making sure that people have a really rich experience at the theatre, even if they can’t participate in a particular element of it - they still have a really thorough knowledge and idea of what's going on.

*AG: And can you tell me how you got into it, Vicky?*

VC: Well, I got made redundant! So it was about twelve years ago now. And I got made redundant and was just looking through papers and jobs etcetera, and I saw an advert for Vocaleyes which is the leading audio description organisation based in London, and they were doing a project called See A Voice, which was about getting audio description out into the regions. And I just got really lucky.

So I got some training for free which was amazing - really thorough, very helpful. And then I started audio describing immediately after that at Harrogate Theatre and Leeds Playhouse. And I’ve continued with them ever since which has been fantastic.

*AG: Amazing. That’s really fortunate, isn't it?* *But it already suited you too – didn’t you used to work in radio as well?*

VC: Yes. I'm theatre trained, in stage management. But then I was with the BBC for ten years in radio. So it kind of fitted all the all the stuff that I enjoy and that I felt I could do. Yeah. So it was a perfect fit, and I have to say that I hadn't really heard about audio description before that. But what a fantastic thing to do. I absolutely love it. I mean, I do a variety of things in terms of my career, they call it a portfolio now! So my portfolio of work is quite varied, but the audio description is kind of central. And I work with companies supporting them to make their work accessible and inclusive which is brilliant.

*AG: So can you summarise what you think are the hallmarks of really good audio description? I mean, I'm going to talk to people who are users of audio description but from you as a delivery artist, how do you know when it's worked well or what's your advice?*

Well, I think it needs to support the dialogue and match the show that you're audio describing. You wouldn’t describe panto for example, and Chekov in the same way. The traditional way of audio description is that we're not supposed to interpret, and we're supposed to be not a personality - just deliver the information. But that's kind of shifting now, which I think is a good thing. These are really interesting times for audio description.

But I think the main thing is to match the show so that when you pop in with a visual detail that you want to share, you’re not taking the audience member out of the world of play. You’re keeping them in there and you're making sure that the two things don’t collide, that they run alongside each other really nicely rather than jarring. So I think that's the main thing, that I try and do certainly.

*AG: Yes, I love that. And there are lots of interesting progressions going on now like that, like the Leeds Playhouse for example, starting with Road.*

VC: Yes indeed. I worked on that with Ben Wilson, who is a blind theatre-maker. They had a 1970s telephone box on the side of the stage. And the characters - very definitely, the characters, not the actors - popped into the telephone box to do the audio description. So they would bring personality, they'd bring some cheeky stuff, some rude stuff, some silly stuff, and some poignant description as well.

It was great to work with them in different ways and The Playhouse are continuing to move that forward and really integrate audio description into the show so that you don't need that separate track. Because just the whole process of wearing a headset separates you from your party, your family, your friends or whoever you’re there with. So actually being able to do that, there's a flexibility in there. It’s tricky to do that with established pieces of work but definitely still possible. I’ve worked on a show *There Are No Beginnings*, where we had Charley Miles, the writer. She was in rehearsals and was so generous. She would change bits of dialogue so that it could support audio description which was phenomenal, and very generous. You can't do that with someone who’s dead, clearly..

*AG: [laughs]*

VA: But there are still ways to do that.

*AG: Yes, And I think what you've highlighted there as well is that when people find out more about audio description, say the actors, the directors, they’re normally fascinated, to find out about this new layer that there is a creative possibility with. So I've always found that they’re really open to, you know, perhaps self describing, using these forms from Vocaleyes where you describe yourself as a person. So the audio describer then describes the actual actors on the stage. Making visible pictures for the blind person in the audience to see what the actors look like rather than us guessing. They've always been really excited about finding out about it, and then they’re really keen to get involved.*

VA: Absolutely. And I think rather than audio description being an access tool although that is its primary function of course, I think directors are getting excited about the possibility of the creative layer that can be added on giving theatregoers a really exciting, interesting experience. One that might be different from a sighted audience members experience, but nonetheless, just as fabulous and rich.

*AG: Exactly, I totally agree with you on that.*

*So moving on from your expertise in the audio description world, you also work as a disability awareness trainer so I wondered if you could talk to us a little bit about that. I know lots of theatres are doing relaxed performances so how can we make sure that they are really accessible so audience members with disabilities come along. What are your thoughts on that and what we can do best?*

VA: I think relaxed performances are a great start in terms of making sure that theatre is accessible. We don't necessarily only think of theatre as a place to go for a special occasion, wear a nice dress or suit or whatever, and you sit quietly in the dark, and don't say anything until or make any sound until you applaud. We can experience theatre in so many ways and we’re being encouraged to experience it in different ways as well, with interactive shows, et cetera. But I think there are different ways that we can experience theatre and audiences should be encouraged to just come.

We don't have to have only one way of being an audience member. And actually if people shuffle, or if they have to move around or make spontaneous noise - all of that should be okay all of the time.

*AG: Yes, indeed.*

VA: I've actually had many discussions about this whole thing about relaxed performances and maybe rather than having relaxed performances as the sort of separate additional thing, perhaps we have the ‘uptight’ performance. Where no-one says a word, you sit still, you're quiet, you behave, and you only applaud at the appropriate time. So that there might still be a place for those people who tut!

Actually I took my granddaughter to a show the other day. A children’s show, I won’t say where! And she was a bit tired so she was sort of moving around a bit and climbing over chairs and looking behind her, looking in front of her. But I stress, this was a children’s show. Well, the people behind started tutting. And I just thought, well, you can pack it in! That’s not on. She should be able to enjoy it in her own way, and she was enjoying it.

I think there's training to be done with audiences. I don’t think the problem is with theatre makers. They’re trying to collaborate with audiences who perhaps just don’t want to experience theatre in different ways.

*AG: Yes! I think what you’ve touched on is that it's a good first step. So for instance, if a theatre or theatre company hasn’t done any relaxed performances, then do one and then the training that all of your front of house staff will do, and all that awareness of when you have that relaxed performance and you see the joy, the relaxed kind of attitude and see everyone enjoying it more, then all of those things will gradually creep through to all of your performances.*

VA: Yes. I remember I went to see the relaxed performance of *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* a few years ago at Leeds Playhouse. And I don't think I've ever been in a more joyful environment. Joy was unfiltered here, and every time the theme tune came on, everybody was shouting and singing and clapping. It was quite magical and I was very much involved. I wasn't kind of separate going, ‘Ooh isn’t that lovely’. It was it just infectious. It was wonderful, absolutely wonderful. But I think why can’t all shows be like that?

There are certain rules for relaxed performances; you turn the sound down slightly, turned the lights up slightly, it's okay to move around, everybody acknowledges that if someone is going to get up and come out, and come back in again, et cetera. But actually, these things could be accommodated in every performance and should.

*AG: And people shouldn't be relegated to only choosing the one relaxed performance on a date that doesn't suit them. And that kind thing.*

VA: Yes. Well, going back to audio description, that's why it's exciting that audio description is being integrated so that every show is available rather than just a Tuesday matinee, and if you can't make it, then sorry, you can’t see the show.

I think people are really making big efforts to make work accessible so that everybody can enjoy it.

*AG: Yes, exactly. And the director and the performance they want to reach the biggest audience possible, don't they? So they are always behind it.*

VA: You know, I think we're getting there slowly. People are changing. And there’s the purple pound - people with disabilities have money to spend. So you know, let's help them spend it in theatre!

*AG: Yes, and everyone who works in theatre is passionate about the arts. So it's even more important that people with a disability or with anything that makes their lives more difficult, can enjoy it.*

VA: Absolutely.

*AG: And then Vicky, I know as well that you've worked with Mind The Gap [theatre company] about working to improve opportunities for performers with disabilities or people who want to work in the arts. Can you tell us more about that?*

VA: Absolutely. Yes. It's so important to have representation across the board - that's on stage and on screen. I don't know whether you've watched Jack Thorne – he’s a TV writer - his MacTaggart lecture. I'll send you a link. It's absolutely phenomenal. He lambasts the TV world in terms of lack of representation. And theatre is not a great deal better. I think things are improving, but there’s obviously a long way to go. So in terms of just making sure that if you don't see yourself on a screen or on a stage, you don't think that opportunity is for you. ‘Oh, that's not for me then’. It's just wrong. It's fundamentally wrong.

So Mind The Gap are really working hard to support representation and support other organisations to bring in people with learning disabilities into the more mainstream theatre and TV shows. For instance Liam Bairstow, who is on Coronation Street - he's a Mind The Gap actor, and others. So it’s just making sure that they get the opportunities and people are visible, showing the good work that they can do and stereotype smashing.

*AG: Yes. And I'm sure you've got some links and things that we can put in the bottom of this where people can look up advice?*

VA: Yes, absolutely. Places like Disability Arts Online. It’s a terrific network of disabled artists sharing really helpful information as well. So there's a link to that to I'll send it to you.

*AG: Fantastic. And then just to finish off, I like to ask people, can you tell us your most memorable experience that relates to accessing the arts in some way?*

VA: Well, I’ll start with a very silly one. I was working on *Sweeney Todd*, and we were on the touch tour and a couple had bought their guide dog with them. But they’d also brought their retired guide dog, of course I have to state it *wasn't* working. So anyway, that dog found the pies and started eating them all. So we got into terrible trouble with stage management, they were saying ‘We’ll have to defrost more!’. So that was just quite an entertaining one.

*AG: Oh what, so they use real pies?*

VA: Yes, they were eating them in this show! But the dog went and found them where they’d set them all up, so they were all in one place! So you know, just these unexpected things can happen.

But I suppose one that was really recent, this was with Opera North, was a young woman who is losing her sight, so she is in a process which must be very challenging. And her interest was dance. And I was describing a dance piece. And she listened into the audio description, I think possibly not sure what she was going to be listening in to, or whether it would be useful. Her mum listened in as well, and they both found that it was a really helpful experience. Interestingly her mum also found it useful and she was able to see the dancing. And I just think that was a really interesting note to think that audio description isn't necessarily only for visually impaired people: it can add extra detail, extra information, you can share knowledge about the director's vision, or in this case the choreographers’ ideas.

So I thought that was a really moving one actually because she was in that transition from being a sighted person to becoming a visually impaired person, but she was still able to connect with something that she loved creatively. So for me, that for me was one of the best experiences I’ve had.

*AG: Yeah, I completely agree. And I know that they are all fired up now to find everything they can with audio description before her sight gets worse. So thank you for that. And thanks for sharing.*

*Well, Vicky, honestly, thank you so much for everything you have talked about here. It's so useful and so interesting and I will share links to all the things we been talking about. So thank you so much.*

VA: You’re very welcome, thank you for having me.

[music]

Extra: ‘God, we got absolutely bollocked as well. Stage management was so cross with us, like ‘This is really going to be problematic!’ And I was just ‘I don’t know what to say to you.. [laughter].

[music]

**Links:**

Jack Thorne, McTaggart Lecture – the BAFTA winning screenwriter highlights the treatment of people with disabilities within the TV / Screen Industry

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oxUZPMBRIPU>

Vocaleyes – a charity supporting blind and partially sighted people to access arts and heritage in the UK.

<https://vocaleyes.co.uk/>

Mind The Gap – the UK’s leading Learning Disability Performance and Live Arts company.

<https://www.mind-the-gap.org.uk/>

Disability Arts Online – sharing Disability Arts and Culture with the World.

<https://disabilityarts.online/>

Vicky’s Disability and Equality Training Company

<https://totallyinclusivepeople.com/>