

Describing Diversity

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An exploration of the
description of human
characteristics and
appearance within
the practice of theatre
audio description

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Preface

‘Audio Description is in a transformational space, and that transformation needs to be embraced if it genuinely wants to usher in equality and equity for all, and especially in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement and demands for decolonization.’

Arti Prashar, FRSA, Artistic Director / CEO, Spare Tyre 2006-19¹

‘Understanding, let alone describing, diversity is the hardest thing in the arts and culture.’

Dr Tehmina Goskar, Director, Curatorial Research Centre²

This report and the wider Describing Diversity project are an integral part of VocalEyes’ work in developing, sustaining and promoting the practice of audio description, which removes barriers to art of all types and forms for blind and visually impaired people. They came about as a result of the organisation identifying the need for a process of exploration of when and how we should describe the personal characteristics of the diverse range of characters that appear on stage, and in particular, the visible, physical markers of race, gender, impairment / disability, age and body shape. We also wished to explore why such characteristics should be described, so we had a basis for developing a common understanding and rationale for any proposed changes to practice.

It was also clear that the discussion needed to involve the wider community involved in audio description: blind and visually impaired users of the service, actors, other theatre professionals, and audio describers working around the UK and the world.

The project was in part the result of an acknowledgement that VocalEyes describers do not reflect the wider society, as they are predominantly, though not exclusively, White, non-disabled and cis-gendered, and often much older than the actors on stage.

Many of the describers have been working and developing their practice together, in collaboration and discussion since the late 1990s (VocalEyes was founded in 1998), with most (though not all) new describers trained by the same people within the group. This report is in part a product of VocalEyes describers’ wish to educate themselves and be open to improving and changing their practice, and learning from recent developments in language, particularly around gender and ethnic identity.

Preface

Recent years have seen significant work across the sector to make theatre more inclusive and diverse: the work being selected and presented, the actors on stage, those working in the creative and technical teams back stage, through to front of house, and, even more numerous – those audience members who are made to feel welcome and included.

In 2020 theatres and other cultural organisations have faced challenges beyond what any of us could have imagined just a year ago. With the coronavirus pandemic and the world going into lockdown, theatres closed their doors, and face closure or re-opening in a very changed world. Meanwhile, the world has also been shaken by the death of George Floyd and the global response of the Black Lives Matter movement and increasing calls for the decolonisation of institutions and long overdue changes to society. How theatres, museums and other organisations and their leaders respond will shape their future and that of the whole arts and cultural sectors.

VocalEyes' theatre audio description is largely within venues and involving larger institutions. But audio description is practised at all levels: it will survive and flourish even if there is a move away from venues – at the time of writing in August 2020, most theatre is currently either online or outdoors. It is up to us to ensure that audio description adapts and develops as theatre does. The recommendations we have devised in 2019 and 2020 will almost certainly need revising in 2021 as the new theatre emerges. In some parts of the live performance world, gentle change is already happening to what we perceive to be 'theatre'; which may involve spoken word, film, projection, new technology. If handled with care and creativity, audio description has the potential to add to the future genres of theatre/dance and live art experience. Involving diverse directors, designers, and producers will be critical to the process and understanding of audio description; and we need to hear from them about their vision, their interpretation of classical scripts, their language and style. This report calls for increased understanding and dialogue between the dynamic industries of theatre and audio description. It is only through working together that we can strive to create the equitable and inclusive audio descriptions that both audiences and theatres deserve, and that audio describers wish to deliver.

Terminology

Our investigations into language choices within audio description has shown that language is never neutral and that people's conscious and unconscious decisions about terminology use are influenced by ideological, cultural, social and historical contexts. Below we clarify the terms we have chosen to use.

Blind and visually impaired

There are a number of ways to refer to people who have a visual impairment, including 'blind people', 'blind and partially sighted people', 'people with no or low vision' and 'people living with sight loss'. In recent years, more positive or celebratory terms such as 'partially blind people', 'users of blindness' and 'people with blindness gain' have been suggested by activists and allies. Individuals have their own preferences. We have elected to use 'blind and visually impaired people' throughout to refer to anyone who would describe themselves as having non-normative vision. This is the most commonly used term in the UK context, and is often abbreviated to VIP.

Disability

Following the social model of disability, a person is disabled through the loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in the life of the community on an equal basis with others due to physical, sensory, intellectual, attitudinal or other barriers. Audio description is one of a range of means that society can use to address disability and remove barriers.

Diversity

A diverse group of people will include people with different backgrounds (educational, cultural, religious and socio-economic), sexual, gender, ethnic and other identities, political opinions, disability, heritage and life experience. The word has no meaning in relation to an individual: a person cannot be diverse or lack diversity in themselves.

Non-blind

Rather than using the term 'sighted' to refer to people who are not blind or do not have a visual impairment, we have chosen to use 'non-blind', re-centring on those people for whom audio description is primarily designed. This mirrors the UK disability community's preference for the term 'non-disabled', rather than 'able' or 'able-bodied'.

Terminology

Non-disabled

Following the social model, a person who is not disabled is non-disabled.

People of colour

People who are not White or of European parentage. Like teacher and writer Jeffrey Boakye, we recognise that umbrella terms covering a broad range of people are never perfect because they ignore the very different experiences of diverse groups of people across all parts of the world, and are ways of improving on 'non-White'. While there are many differences between and within groups of people covered by this phrase, it effectively refers to what Boakye calls 'melanin-heavy human beings', who have a shared history of experiencing European colonialism, neo-colonialism, imperialism, ethnocentrism and racism.³ In the UK, this term thus includes people of Black, African and Caribbean heritage, British South Asian heritage, British East and South East Asian heritage, Latinx and Hispanic people and people of mixed race.

White / white people

While it began as a racial classification and skin colour specifier, used mostly for people of European descent, 'Whiteness' is now also understood as socially and politically constructed, and closely related to ideology, power, advantage and privilege.

We have chosen to capitalise the words Black and White in this report when used as adjectives applied to people in order to emphasise the distinction between that usage, and when the words are used as colours or shades. A screen-reader user may not be aware of this capitalisation, which is why we decided to draw attention to it here. Kwame Anthony Appiah, professor of philosophy and law at New York University, makes the case for this practice to act as a constant reminder that Black and White are both historically created racial identities.⁴

1. Project background and objectives

Project team and contributors

The project was a collaboration between Royal Holloway, University of London, and the arts access organisation VocalEyes. The core research team was Dr. Rachel Hutchinson, post-doctoral researcher specialising in Audio Description, Professor Hannah Thompson, Professor of French and Critical Disability Studies at Royal Holloway and Matthew Cock, Chief Executive of VocalEyes.

The following descriptions of Rachel, Hannah and Matthew are based on their responses to the **character questionnaire for actors (section 3.5)**, interpreted by Dr Louise Fryer, audio describer and audio description academic, who regards herself as friends with all of them.

All three are white British and their ages range from 40 to early 50s. Matthew, the oldest of the three, is tall - 6 foot 4 - and rangy. His hair is dark brown, receding and short. It is clipped at the sides, where it is mostly grey, with darker loose curls on top. Matthew has a high forehead and is usually clean-shaven but in lockdown favours a beard. His slim face is tanned and his deep-set dark eyes are twinkly and alert. He describes his build as average, but I see him as lean perhaps because of his high levels of energy. He is non-disabled and lopes rather than walks. His clothes are smart casual with a blue jacket worn over navy chinos and a woollen scarf looped about his neck.

Hannah, at 47, describes herself as a white, partially-blind academic. Hannah is a foot shorter than Matthew, her hair is the kind of 'dirty blonde' that her kids call brown. It is thick and straight and, from a centre parting, falls to just below shoulder length. It is usually tied back in a ponytail. Hannah has a round face and a warm smile. She wears thick glasses with purple frames and says her eyes look more like cats' eyes. She never wears make-up, except for lipstick for weddings, funerals and job interviews. Not as thin as she'd like to be, she usually wears leggings and tunics or short-ish dresses or skirts with boots; she almost never wear heels.

Rachel, of a similar height to Hannah, is blind in one of her blue eyes. This is not noticeable behind her glasses which have thick black plastic frames. What she describes as her blonde(ish) hair partly covers her face as it falls from a side parting to her jaw in an unruly, wavy bob that she straightens into submission for formal occasions. Her countenance is open and friendly. Her kids tell me that Rachel's hair is golden brown grey and quite soft. Mind you, they also say that she's 7 foot 10 – which she's not. Rachel is of slim build and wears stylish clothes straightforwardly cut without frills or frippery.

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The research team consulted with an Advisory Board, whose members included David Bellwood, Access Manager, Shakespeare's Globe; Marina Elvira, Programme Officer and Michael Kenyon, Theatre Programme Manager, VocalEyes; Ian Manborde, Equality and Diversity Organiser, Equity; Phil McCormack, Head of Participation, Donmar Warehouse; Arti Prashar, Artistic Director and CEO, Spare Tyre; Neena Shea, Creative Diversity Project Coordinator, National Theatre and Rebecca Tarry, Participation and Access Administrator, Donmar Warehouse.

Also involved were VocalEyes staff members and the freelance professionals who create audio description for around 180-200 productions for VocalEyes each year, and countless others independently. VocalEyes' audio describers have made careful efforts over the years to be sensitive to the way people want to be described, and the contributions and extensive notes that they made during the Zoom workshops form the heart of the recommendations and next steps in **section 3**.

This report would not have been possible without their continued eagerness to engage both with the questions and themes explored and with the wider audio description and theatre communities. Our thanks to them for their invaluable contributions. The VocalEyes staff and describers involved were: Jess Beal, Nadine Beasley, Jane Brambley, Koko Brown, Roz Chalmers, Alison Clarke, Bridget Crowley, Kelli Des Jarlais, Laura Edmans, Kerry Elkins, Willie Elliott, Jane Ensell, Lonny Evans, Timna Fibert, Anna Fineman, Louise Fryer, Sarah Grange, Julia Grundy, Bex Harvey, Trish Hodson, Andrew Holland, Anne Hornsby, Veronika Hyks, Ruth James, Sophia Knox-Miller, Di Langford, Clare LeMay, Eleanor Margolies, Tony McBride, Jo Myers, Andrew Piper, Emily Pollet, Michael Skellern, Kirstin Smith, Jenny Stewart-Cosgrove, Kate Taylor-Davies and Miranda Yates.

The authors are also incredibly grateful to the 219 individuals who took the online questionnaire, and the 22 who took part in the in-depth interviews. Their responses, presented in **section 2**, make up a significant part of this report and underpin the recommendations we make for future practice.

With thanks to David Bellwood, Andrew Holland, Michael Kenyon and Kirstin Smith for their help in writing the background context sections of the report.

We would also like to thank Dr Louise Fryer, Dr Tehmina Goskar, Director of the Curatorial Research Centre, Andrew Holland, and the members of Equity's equalities committees (Deaf and Disabled Members, LGBT+, Race Equality and Women's Committees) for reviewing a draft, and their useful feedback.

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1. Project findings and objectives

1.1 What is audio description in the theatre?

Historically, playwrights and theatre makers have created theatre based on the assumption that the theatre-goers do not have sensory impairments. There is the notion (supported by common parlance) that audiences go to ‘see’ a play, giving rise to an apparent contradiction, as an audience is literally a group who primarily listens (‘audience’ from Latin ‘audire’ ‘hear’). In Elizabethan times, it was in fact more common to say that a person ‘heard’ a play, rather than ‘saw’ one but contemporary theatrical productions are almost always designed for a non-blind audience.⁵ Audio description has emerged in the late twentieth century as a necessary ‘additional’ service for those blind and visually impaired people who cannot access the performance’s visual features.⁶

Audio description enables a blind or visually impaired person to experience and enjoy a performance on an equal basis. It takes the form of a verbal commentary which provides information on any visual elements of the unfolding production that are not made completely clear by dialogue or ambient sound.

Traditionally, description is usually delivered live in the gaps between the dialogue by one or two specialist audio describers (depending on the complexity and length of the show), and is broadcast to a lightweight wireless headset worn by the audience member.

The description, usually written by the describer who delivers it, details action that is essential to an understanding of the play’s story; this might include facial expressions, the identity of characters who enter or leave the stage, actions and reactions, embraces, fights, dancing, visual jokes, anything that a blind or visually impaired member of the audience might otherwise miss.

Other visual information such as the style and design of a production - including the appearance and costumes of the characters, the set and props - are also described, and provided as a pre-recorded **Audio Introduction** of about 10-15 minutes. Audio Introductions are currently unique to theatre audio description, and are rarely a feature of film AD. They are usually disseminated to the AD users a week before the performance on audio CD and/or online, and are repeated by the describers live through the headsets shortly before the start of the performance – giving the listeners a chance to refresh their memory, and allowing the describers to inform them of any last-minute changes to cast, set or other aspects of the production. This live version also means that blind and visually impaired people who ‘walk up’ to a performance, without booking in advance, are not disadvantaged in terms of access provision.

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Also preceding the start of the performance is the **Touch Tour**, which gives blind and visually impaired participants an opportunity to meet members of the cast before the show. During this tour and description of the set, audience members can learn to recognise the actors' voices and explore the props and costumes.

Together the Audio Introduction and Touch Tour give the describer time to give a rich and considered description and experience of the visual world of the production: there is often little time to go into detail during the performance, where they are limited to gaps in dialogue and by the importance of letting the performance itself dominate the audience's experience.

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The early history of Theatre AD in the UK

The three-part model (Audio Introduction, Touch Tour and live description) is core to how the traditional mode of theatre audio description has evolved since the late 1980s and 1990s in the UK.

In London, Theatre AD was started by a group initially called the Audio Description London Group and then the London Audio Description Service (LADS), who described productions at the Theatre Royal Windsor (1988) and Duke of York's (1989). Other UK theatres began to offer AD around the same time. These include the Octagon, Bolton (1988) and West Yorkshire Playhouse (1991). Professional AD was offered at the National Theatre from 1993, following a training course that set up a team of NT describers, using members of the acting company as well as freelancers with a connection to the theatre.

VocalEyes was set up following a recommendation in the project report, *Setting the Scene* (1997) commissioned by Arts Council England to 'establish the need' for AD, written by Andrew Holland, one of the NT describers. The project involved extensive consultation with blind and visually impaired people throughout the UK. On the back of this, the aim of VocalEyes as an organisation was to address the whole theatre-going experience, including marketing, staff training, user consultation, front-of-house access, guiding and technical provision - as well as the quality of the audio description itself.

One of the things discussed by the (potential) service-users during the *Setting the Scene* project, and strongly recommended in the report, was the value of 'stage tours', now known as Touch Tours. Another recommendation in the report was the recording of introductory notes (Audio Introductions) to be sent out in advance and including some form of access information about the venue.⁷

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Describing the cast and characters as part of the Audio Introduction

There are two aspects of description of interest within the Audio Introduction:

1. A description of the cast as a whole, as far as it is possible to do so in a way that provides an equivalent to the way that non-blind people 'take in' a group of people at a glance as they enter a room, or the curtain rises.
2. Description of individual characters through their personal characteristics and movements.

As part of the Describing Diversity project, we reviewed the text of 26 Audio Introductions selected from VocalEyes' archive, covering a variety of genres including musicals, comedies, Shakespeare, pantomime and drama. Analysis revealed several trends across the descriptions that revealed unconscious biases, imbalances and avoidance of describing physical characteristics.

Race

In general, there were inconsistent approaches, particularly regarding whether to explicitly name or infer race through description of characteristics.

- In plays with no non-white characters, skin colour was not mentioned either as a general overview or in reference to individual characters. This contrasts with references to a play with 'an all-Black cast'. Whiteness thus appears to have been presented as the default.
- Even in plays with both Black and White actors, Whiteness was not systematically mentioned or suggested, whereas Blackness almost always was: Whiteness was flagged when it was juxtaposed with other character's Blackness, or the play was overtly race-related.
- Where Whiteness was evoked, it was mainly done implicitly, through references to colouring: blonde, ginger hair, ivory skin, blue eyes. Blackness was either unambiguously stated, or suggested by description of usually both skin colour and hair colour and style.
- On occasion, ethnic origin or nationality was used to suggest skin colour (Belgian, Asian, Latin-American). Religious and/or cultural costumes, props or attitudes were also used to connote non-white skin colour.
- White skin was described using a rich and varied range of adjectives; Black skin and hair were described using a much more limited lexical range.

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Gender

- Adjectives with specifically gendered (and therefore arguably sexist) connotations were sometimes used to reinforce a character's gender identity, including when actors were playing characters of a different gender. For example, while 'puny' and 'petite' both refer to people with a small stature, 'puny' is more commonly associated with maleness, and 'petite' with femaleness. If 'petite' is used to refer to a character or actor identified as male, it might be interpreted as suggesting, - possibly in a derogatory way - feminine behaviours not related to body size.
- Women's bodies were described in more richness and at more length than those of men. It is likely that this is in part a legacy of language and literary tradition.

Disability

Descriptions of disability sometimes used language with negative connotations to describe disabled characters, focusing on departure from the norm, and the 'overcoming' of an impairment to perform movements or tasks.

Age

In the main, characters are described using age ranges of decades (in their 70s, in her 20s, mid-40s etc.). However, more euphemistic and on occasion gendered descriptions were used: 'elderly spinsters', 'mature', 'older'.

In general, there were several occasions when conjunctions between elements of description betrayed or reinforced value judgements, framing characteristics as indications of departures from the norm, whether in relation to gender, physical impairment or age. While arguably this is simply giving the listener a memorable trait for the character, these might also act as descriptive micro-aggressions, depending on the context of the description:

'**despite** her burgeoning beauty, she has a brusque tomboy-ish quality about her.'

'...**although** she often adds pink shirts and a long gold necklace as touches of femininity'

'He stands with his right foot firmly planted, **but** the left foot lifted, so that the ball of the foot pushes into the ground, heel raised....'

'...**though** his hands move very efficiently as he operates a Braille machine'

'Ray is also in her early 40s **but** dresses much more colourfully'

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Integrated / Creative Audio Description

AD can be a service that provides equity within traditional theatre forms, but as a tool and element of an inclusive approach, it can be used to create new, more socially just forms of theatre.

In traditional theatre forms, the access 'barrier' is intrinsic to the form or design of the experience, and you cannot remove the barriers without changing the experience significantly: the inherent conservatism and respect for canon in the main has resisted that. However, in recent times, many disability arts companies (such as Graeae, Extant and UnScene Suffolk) and initiatives (such as Ramps on the Moon) have rethought theatre, taking an inclusive approach, where access tools are used within the creative mix – actors and characters sign from the stage and describe their own, or others' actions.

In these new forms of theatre, description and multi-sensory meaning are embedded (for example, dancers striking the floor to indicate their position and movement), changing theatre from a spectacle that excludes blind and visually impaired people, to a more truly inclusive experience.

While traditional AD provides **equity**, where as far as possible everyone gets the supports that they need to experience the play, inclusive theatre (that also involves BSL, captioning and other aspects to ensure access and inclusion) provides **justice**, where the cause of the inequity has been addressed within the design of the experience, removing the systemic barriers completely.

Louise Fryer and Amelia Cavallo's report *Is it Working? Integrated Access Inquiry 2017-18*, commissioned by Extant Theatre Company, explored the success of these integrated, inclusive or creative ways of ensuring access and inclusion.

The 'purest' form of inclusive theatre provides **equality** of provision, where everyone gets and benefits from the same support: i.e. blind or not, you will hear the audio description. In traditional theatre settings, non-blind people rarely listen to AD, though when they do, they often state how interesting they found the experience, but theatres do not promote AD or make it widely available to the non-blind audience. In a museum context, recent research demonstrates that AD as a tool can increase engagement and memorability for non-blind users.⁸ No studies currently exist on whether this would be the same for non-blind theatre-goers, but work in museums suggests that this would indeed be the case.

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The process of creating a Theatre Audio Description

While different describers take different approaches, the process used by VocalEyes is that the describer(s) for a production will attend a performance to make notes, before preparing the script of the Audio Introduction and the ‘through description’ of the performance, usually with the help of a copy of the script and programme and a recent single-camera video recording of the production. Describers will also be given brief access to the set to help script the Audio Introduction and prepare the touch tour. Ideally, they will also have contact with stage management, front of house and box office staff to organise elements of the touch tour and the audio description in advance.

Once they have written their script and the Audio Introduction – either alone or in collaboration with a second describer – they will deliver a ‘Dry Run’ a day or two before the planned audio-described performance, effectively delivering the AD to an audience of one: either their paired describer, or if they are describing solo, to another describer acting as reviewer. The describers / reviewer give feedback on elements of the description and its timing that they feel need improvement. The Audio Introduction is also reviewed and edited before being recorded. VocalEyes appoints one of its pool of describers as the editor for all its Audio Introductions for a 1 to 2-year period.

There follows the audio-described performance itself, when the Touch Tour, Audio Introduction and live description are delivered to the audience of blind and visually impaired patrons and their friends and family, should they also choose to listen.

Who is the describer and what is their role?

Theatre audio describers in the UK range from volunteers working exclusively for their local theatre, to professional freelancers working for a range of major theatres across the UK. VocalEyes, the largest organisation providing theatre audio description services, uses a pool of around 40 freelance describers, many of whom also describe at other client venues independently.

The role of an audio describer is to enable a blind or visually impaired person to experience and enjoy a theatre performance on an equal basis to a non-blind theatre-goer. Describers have to pitch their description to support a diverse group of people with a range of visual impairments and histories (covering, for example someone aged 30, born with no sight and someone in their 80s who has begun losing their sight in the past three years). Theatre-goers also bring their own cultural and life experience. A describer - similarly a product of their own

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background – is not in a position to tailor individual descriptions for each AD user; they have to make multiple decisions on the importance of different elements, what to include, how to present it, and what to omit. An example relevant to the project is the description of hair texture, a culturally significant feature for many Black people. The level of detail provided would likely depend in part on the skill and cultural awareness of the describer; a Black describer might want to include this information; a White or Asian describer might not feel qualified to comment. Some actors will care about how their hair texture is described, others will not. Equally, the description might be significant or important to some listeners, but not others.

As will be discussed in **section 2**, the key is **relevance**: describers make their decisions based on what they feel is relevant, in the context of the play, and many other aspects.

The onus is clearly on the describer to make that call. Since the early days of description in the UK, audio describers have insisted on the importance of retaining their ‘independent’ status: mostly to ensure that everyone is aware that their primary purpose is to fulfil the needs of the blind and visually impaired audience member. Knowing what a director intends has always been important to describers, and is embedded in the ethos of VocalEyes, but their responsibility to the needs of the blind and visually impaired audience remains paramount.

Assistive service, extension of the show, or art in its own right?

Audio description is clearly a combination of things – a straightforward assistive service, an extension of the creative work that is the ‘source’ production, and a creative or artistic work in its own right. There are differences in opinions on what it generally is, and should be, and evidently tensions emerge between these different elements in different contexts.

Our survey asked respondents their opinion. Some of the responses:

‘Depends on the AD. If it’s in a headset, and fitting more of the traditional methods, I find it to be more of an assistive service. Same with how AD tends to function with TV and film. At its best for me, AD is integrated and used as a creative tool.’ (AD user)

‘I think AD is about ensuring a visually impaired audience gets the same opportunity as a sighted audience to fully enjoy and experience a production. You need to do more than just describe what’s happening in front of you. I think the describer should strive to understand the character, the production and the director’s vision and that is what enables you to

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choose what's relevant and what isn't. It's part of the creative experience as you need to understand enough about that world to be able to enter whatever world is happening on stage and almost interpret a lot of the visual elements rather than just describe them.' (Theatre professional)

'AD is a combination of assistance, creation, and extending the show. Obviously the main function is assistance - or we would not be needed at all. BUT I have received feedback from patrons that my description enhanced their understanding and that it created a firm image in their minds. I have heard (in training) descriptions that brought me to tears with the marvellous enhancement of what is happening. So we are a PART of the CREATIVE experience along with the patron and the staging and actors.' (Audio describer)

Most of the responses interpreted the concept of 'an extension of the creative act' in relation to how the AD has been produced (i.e. with involvement from the creative team). But it is also worth thinking about this question differently, in relation to how audio description is received. When talking to service users, VocalEyes is often told that when done well, live audio description becomes inextricable from a person's experience of the creative production as a whole: the AD has removed any barriers to their understanding and experience, becoming unobtrusive, transparent and in effect, forgotten. As one audio description user explains, AD is at its best 'when the describers are invisible, when I'm not consciously aware of the vital contribution they're making to my theatrical experience.'⁹ As an art form, it's as much one of story-telling as it is a magician's disappearing act.

Say what you see, or use privileged information?

The idea of the independence of the audio describer leads to the question of whether they should limit themselves to the position of a 'well-informed non-blind audience member' (i.e. only using what they see on stage or can learn from the programme, press releases and website), or whether they should seek and provide 'privileged' information gleaned from the director and other members of the creative team.

The former position is behind the principle of 'I describe what I see' / 'What you see is what you say' espoused by many describers (particularly in the US), with the implication that using privileged information means that they are straying from description into 'education' or 'interpretation', something that is beyond a describer's responsibility.¹⁰ In relation to describing human characteristics, this would mean avoiding naming ethnic origins, nationalities, political identities, and

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restricting themselves to references to skin and hair colour or texture that might indicate or suggest them.

In reality, rather than being a binary choice, in practice it is more of a spectrum, with describers taking different positions from one production to the next, depending on the production, cast, theatres or producers. Describers will also vary in their own interpretation and indeed to what extent they regard themselves as interpreting. Indeed, we also have to recognise that two non-blind people attending the same performance will not necessarily see or recall the same things.

Audio Description as Translation

Theatre AD can be thought of as an example of intermodal translation, i.e. between the multi-dimensional objects, events and actors on stage, into two pieces of spoken word: a preface and a synchronous narrative that makes sense only when interwoven with the ‘source’ production. (Of course, this is sometimes the second stage in a translation process that begins when the director ‘translates’ a script into a staged play). Certainly, discussing AD in terms of translation theory and practice might provide describers with a framework for explaining their ‘translation’ choices.

Translators recognise that no two translators will produce the same translation of a text (something that is particularly true of literary translation). In their translation from source text (in our case, the play) to target text (the AD), the describer / translator needs to take into account their source and target audiences (and the differences between them, particularly regarding audience expectations, needs and cultural differences), as well as the text’s genre, function and cultural specificities. The describer / translator also needs to decide whether to prioritise the target audience (i.e. by bringing the play to the audience), or the source text (bringing the audience to the play) in their translation, and what kind of strategy to adopt when translating.

In literary translation, a translator’s decisions are often included in a translator’s preface or notes that aim to justify and explain their position; their general approach and the choices they have made. These supporting documents serve to remind the audience that all translation is subjective and dependent on a translator’s ideology, knowledge, experience and cultural capital, and that it can thus be understood as a creative act of re-writing.

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1.2 The Describing Diversity project

Background

Once a performance begins, there is usually little time between elements of dialogue to do more than describe action and key information essential to following the plot. The description of characters within AD predominantly takes place within the Audio Introduction, as described in 1.1 above.

Generally, though with a few exceptions, theatres and producers do not listen to descriptions, request sign-off of scripts or seek input into how audio description is written. There is a notable difference between theatres and museums in this regard: when commissioning audio description, museum clients will always review scripts before sign-off and acceptance. Generally, theatre clients do not get involved unless they receive a complaint.

For VocalEyes-described productions, the Audio Introductions are sent on CDs to AD users before the show, and thus can be listened to before the Touch Tour. On one occasion, it was reported to VocalEyes that when meeting an actor at a tour, an audio description user made what might have been taken as a pejorative comment about the actor's size, by speaking out loud a thought (something like 'Ah, so you are the curvy one') that reflected their process of matching a character's description in the Audio Introduction with the actor they were encountering. While at the time, the actor did not take offence, the theatre asked VocalEyes to consider how they could avoid this happening again, as they had a duty of care to those working at their venue.

There is no evidence that this type of exchange has happened frequently, or that characters' descriptions are often insensitive, but at the time, it did highlight two things for VocalEyes. Firstly, that descriptions cannot help but refer - or be taken to refer - to an actor's physical appearance while they are primarily intended to refer to the character's appearance. Secondly, that actors are not generally aware of how they or their characters are being described and are not generally consulted on or informed about the production of the Audio Introduction.

To address the first of these, for a period VocalEyes included a standard sentence within each Audio Introduction, requesting that audience members do not refer to actors using character descriptions if they meet them. The initial wording was:

'If you attend the Touch Tour, you may meet some of the cast members. The describers provide a description of the characters, rather than of the actors who play them. We ask that you be aware of this distinction and are

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respectful to the cast. Repeating, out of context, parts of a character's description to the person playing that role may not be appropriate and could be upsetting to them.'

And after several edits, the wording eventually became:

'As part of this introduction we describe the show's characters. To avoid causing unintentional offence, please do not describe an actor using their character description if you meet them at the touch tour.'

VocalEyes' discomfort at putting the onus on to the service user was another factor that led us to explore a more systemic solution, namely, the involvement of actors themselves within their description. See **section 2.2**.

When and why do we need to describe personal characteristics?

The reasons why we need to describe are based on relevance; simply, description is necessary when it is relevant to and necessary for understanding or enjoyment. In our research, we conceptualised two spheres of relevance, explored in more depth in **section 2.1**.

The world of the play

In practical terms, people with low vision need and benefit from descriptive support to help them differentiate between actors on stage – elements like height, body shape, skin and hair colours, and even movement, all assist in this. Characteristics can also be important to the story and the context of the play's setting. Many blind or visually impaired people also create and develop mental images based on description – adding a richness to their experience that non-blind theatre-goers experience in equivalent, but different ways.

The world at large

Casting will have been done with deliberation – actors' bodies carry meaning, sometimes reinforcing assumptions and stereotypes and sometimes actively working against them. Casting is a political act, reflecting decisions made not only about the society presented by the play, but also society today. A blind person of colour in the audience, listening to the audio description, may want to know that there is a person, or people of colour on stage: whether it is to know if there is someone on stage who shares aspects of their own identity or life experience, or in a more general way that the theatre is presenting and promoting diversity. A blind person has a right to know that on that stage, in that moment in time, in that city there is a cast that reflects and represents the breadth and diversity of the society

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that they live in. Equally, they have a right to know if the theatre is failing on those fronts.

In **section 2**, we also explore the concept of ‘colour-blindness’ a phrase used as a metaphor and ideology in both theatre and wider society.

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1.3 Who we consulted

The research consisted of three phases: an online survey, semi-structured interviews in person and over the telephone/Skype, and two workshops, held using Zoom and Google Docs.

Phase A: Online survey (June to August 2019)

The survey was completed by 219 respondents: 71 blind and visually impaired people (32%), 68 theatre professionals (31%) and 80 audio describers (37%). Participants were recruited via the VocalEyes website, email newsletter and social media and through snowball sampling (whereby research participants were encouraged to share the survey link with others who may be interested in completing it). All participants gave informed consent before taking part in the survey. Participants chose between responding anonymously or providing their contact details. Respondents were also asked a series of questions about themselves (age, gender, country of origin, ethnicity, sexuality); responses to these are presented in **Appendix 1**.

The survey consisted of a combination of free text (qualitative) questions and fixed response (quantitative) questions. The free text open questions asked respondents for their insight and experiences relating to the audio description of specific characteristics, as well as broader issues such as integrated casting, the role of AD and its language. The fixed response questions generated descriptive statistics for each of the three groups, enabling us to compare views on various aspects of describing diversity. This helped to refine and guide the questions for the in-depth interviews.

Phase B: In-depth interviews (January to March 2020)

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 participants: eight blind or visually impaired AD users, seven theatre professionals and seven audio describers. Some participants had expertise across more than one field, for example, they were a theatre professional who also used AD, thus able to provide multiple perspectives.

Participants were recruited via purposeful sampling, whereby those who were invited to interview were known to be knowledgeable about or have a special interest in the topic under discussion; we also focused on people from minority groups. Some participants were survey respondents who had expressed willingness

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to discuss further. Others were known by the researchers to be people with particular interest / experience, or were recommended by the advisory board.

Within the theatre professionals group, we spoke to people with a variety of roles, including a casting director, two actors, an academic specialising in theatre and disability and three theatre-makers.

After obtaining participants' informed consent, the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and the transcriptions sent to participants for them to check and add to if they so wished. The final transcriptions were analysed using thematic analysis.¹¹ The data were coded, and the codes were collated into themes, which were then reviewed and defined.

Phase C: Collaborative workshops (April 2020)

Two workshops were run with the project team and around 40 VocalEyes audio describers and members of staff:

Workshop 1 facilitated a discussion about the project and the findings. Audio describers then split into groups and collaborated on potential strategies and recommendations.

Workshop 2 brought the groups back together a week later for a discussion of the strategies, which were then refined further.

During and in between the workshops, participants worked on a set of collaborative documents online, which responded to the project's findings with further insight and practical steps that could be implemented in the future.

2 Project findings

2. Project findings

2.1 When and why do we need to describe personal characteristics?

Describing personal characteristics, or choosing not to, has implications in two distinct areas: the world of the play, and the world at large. In other words, what impact might the description of characteristics have on an individual's experience of a particular production of a particular play? And what impact might it have within society, in a wider social, political and cultural arena?

The world of the play: practicalities and relevance

Within the world of the play, description of personal characteristics has some simple, practical benefits for the AD user, helping them to follow the action and identify characters on stage. For example, description of body shape may help people with some vision to distinguish between characters. Being precise about characteristics can save AD users considerable cognitive effort: 'it's about finding those things that would seem incongruous, or be confusing, or make people puzzle when they don't need to' (audio describer). AD users reported instances where the description skirted around a subject, only for them to be left guessing:

'what I noticed with the thing I saw in January was that they more described the outfits that the character was wearing. So I gleaned from that – or I think I gleaned from that, that the person was a trans character, but maybe not! I don't know now... now I'm wondering!'

Description of personal characteristics can therefore help to avoid confusion and unnecessary effort on the part of the AD user.

The weight of opinion from people who were interviewed and surveyed was that personal characteristics should be described when relevant, with relevance being broken down into several elements: relevance to the plot, to the context of the play (historical, social, cultural, the play's themes), to the characters or to the creative intention. The survey data suggested some differences between participant groups about which aspects of relevance were more or less important. Theatre professionals tended to be less likely to agree that casting decisions were relevant, compared to audio describers and blind and visually impaired people. All three groups of participants, however, were in agreement that plot and character were important aspects of relevance.

Many audio describers emphasised that personal characteristics should be described only if they are important to the story. As this participant mentioned in interview: 'stay focused on the story, stay focused on what's at the heart of the story, as at the end of the day, that's what our audience wants.' Numerous

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examples were given where description of personal characteristics would be fundamental to an understanding of the performance, with one audio describer relating how they described a dance piece for a disability theatre festival:

‘It was mainly a one-woman show, a dance piece about her relationship with her crutch, as she needed her crutch to get around and to dance. So, in that instance you would describe the disability, as that was part of the show, that’s entwined into what the show was getting across - her experience as a disabled artist.’

However, determining whether or not a characteristic is indeed relevant is not always clear-cut, and can be subjective. As one theatre professional pointed out, ‘the qualifier of "relevance" introduces issues of power (who is making the decisions of what is "relevant"?), which I think complicates the process.’ This can be mitigated, to some extent, by collaborative working. VocalEyes descriptions are usually prepared by two audio describers working together, and the Audio Introduction script will be reviewed with an editor. Some describers regularly consult blind and visually impaired people in the preparation of their AD, and, if possible, members of the theatre company.

A working definition of relevance was discussed in the workshops with describers, with a useful definition proposed whereby ‘an outcome would be different if a piece of information was omitted. It might disadvantage our users in their understanding or engagement with the production.’ However, the describers also recognised that ‘we need to understand and be aware of the different realities that surround us – what’s relevant for one part of the audience might not be relevant for another part of the audience.’ There was broad agreement that audio describers will need to address personal characteristics in order to transmit a visual reality, and to aid AD users in their understanding and enjoyment of the piece.

AD users agreed that description of characteristics can be crucial to their inclusion in the theatrical experience: ‘I think that if it’s relevant to the character, the role, the piece, or the theme, then yes (it should be described), because otherwise I’d be missing out on something.’ (AD user). Determining relevance for a production is therefore fundamental to AD’s remit as access facilitator, as it relates to providing parity of experience for the blind and visually impaired audience. As one theatre professional put it, ‘I don’t ever want someone using this service to ever miss out on those little conversations you have with yourself...I’m making a connection there with something else, and I don’t want anyone to miss out on that.’ As audio describers stated in the workshop: ‘if the information enhances the experience, we should give it.’ Providing an equitable experience means that the blind or visually

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impaired audience member should be able to have a discussion about the production with non-blind audience members, for example in a chat in a bar or restaurant afterwards. They should be able to have this discussion on equal terms, without becoming aware that there was something they did not know because the AD did not provide the information.

There may be occasions where characteristics may need to be described in order to account for information that AD users take in through non-visual senses such as sound. For example, audio describers mentioned that a particular movement, such as the use of wheelchair, can create a sound on stage that the AD should identify and clarify. The difficulty arises when this has no relevance to the plot or character – for example, if an actor has been cast quite incidentally of their disability. Theatre professionals generally resisted the idea of describing characteristics in the case of incidental casting, with many expressing the view that by describing the characteristic, and thereby drawing attention to it, the principles of incidental casting would be undermined. However, withholding information about a mobility aid, which may create sounds on stage, may lead to confusion in this case.

There is also the question of the importance of AD users knowing that a disabled actor is on stage. If non-blind audience members have access to this information, then blind and visually impaired audiences should also, as the purpose of AD is to offer an equivalent experience. Furthermore, the example of incidental casting of disabled actors opens up discussions about representation, and the importance of blind and visually impaired people knowing that such casting has taken place.

More broadly, not describing diverse characteristics could result in AD users missing out on information and therefore being excluded. Blind and visually impaired people also need to have access to information in order to form their own, independent response to it, as one AD user emphasised: ‘And I think that if we’re going to go the theatre and enjoy the production, then we should have the freedom as well to think, well, that’s what they’re describing – what does that mean to us?’

Seeking to provide parity of experience raised questions about AD users sometimes being given information that the non-blind audience members may not readily have access to, despite the fact that describers emphasise that they typically seek to reflect what a ‘well-informed non-blind audience member might understand’. An AD user here reflects on having had ‘privileged’ access to information:

‘They had asked the describer to use the term ‘they’ as the pronoun, so that was really interesting, as that was an experience that only I was getting, or only people who were listening to the audio description were receiving, and

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that wasn't the same experience for the rest of the audience. So yeah I found that really fascinating – not good, not bad, just different, and a really interesting way that they had made that decision.'

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Describing Diversity – the theatrical landscape

Despite the barriers frequently encountered by D/deaf and disabled people seeking training in acting, design, stage management and other aspects of theatre work, recent years have shown an increase in D/deaf and disabled representation on British stages. Talent nurtured by companies such as Graeae, Deafinitely Theatre, Extant and Access All Areas (among others) is being given increased space in companies which are traditionally neither Deaf nor disabled-led. These actors and other creatives bring their talent and experience as well as a wealth of knowledge around the creative potential of access and centring access within the creative process.

The Act for Change project launched in 2014 with the aim to see equal representation covering the full range of protected characteristics in both stage and television casting. Since then it has been a driving force in holding theatres to account, making it clear that the barriers facing D/deaf disabled people in becoming actors starts at representation: the aspiration to become an actor is curtailed when young people do not see actors like themselves flourishing.

Equally, people who have sought training have come up against the fundamentally inaccessible nature of many leading drama schools. However, progress is being made here too. The National Youth Theatre has dedicated considerable resources to make their site more physically accessible, while working alongside partners such as Diverse City and Touretteshero to encourage engagement from D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent young people. Thorough and considerate programmes, alongside the progressive, open and frank attitude of the National Youth Theatre have had a transformative impact on the training landscape.

There has also been audience-led demand for equality in casting opportunities. Touretteshero's *Backstage in Biscuitland* (2010) spoke to the need for greater access by staging a monologue about the experience of attending live comedy. Born out of Improbable's Devoted and Disgruntled series of Open Space conferences, *I'm Here, Where are You?* was a disability arts festival produced by Liz Counsell and Linda Rocco in 2019. In Counsell's own words:

'everyone said their frustration with the industry was that when they were present in theatre, whether on stage or in the audience, they rarely found any disabled people around them.'¹²

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Within the wider theatre ecosystem, traditional practices are increasingly being challenged. The Ramps on the Moon consortium of theatres, whose first production toured in 2016, have each created annual touring productions that are fully accessible and offer equal casting opportunities to D/deaf and disabled actors.

The DH (Deaf and Hearing) Ensemble strives for parity between D/deaf and hearing roles, focussing on the story-telling implicit in sign language. In the last two years, D/deaf actors have performed at venues such as the Royal Court, the Royal Shakespeare Theatre and Shakespeare's Globe.

Various audio description techniques have been used to bring signed languages and the work of D/deaf actors to life for blind audience members. Notions of access have been further explored and exploded in productions such as Baz Production's *The Process* (2019) which questioned the fallacy of shared experience and the homogenous audience: what if the unique experience of each audience member is acknowledged in the creative process instead of using access as a means to try and force a single, normative experience?

Representation still has a long way to go, especially within film, where there has been a long tradition of non-disabled actors playing disabled characters (such as Eddie Redmayne as Stephen Hawking, Daniel Day Lewis in *My Left Foot*, and Dustin Hoffman in *Rain Man*) that shows no sign of abating.¹³ In August 2020, the US-made film *Come As You Are* was released in British cinemas. It follows three disabled characters, but disabled actors were not seen or cast for any of these parts. Here, an audio describer would find themselves in a position where they are being asked to describe a non-disabled body seeking to be read as disabled.

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The world at large

Deciding what is ‘relevant’ for the production is a clear determiner for inclusion of personal characteristics in AD. However, the potential implications of addressing characteristics – or not – has wider implications. As one describer put it, ‘from my perspective, even if [diverse characteristics] is not relevant to the plot of the show, it is relevant to where that show exists in the socio-political climate.’ In other words, audio description can help to clarify, or, conversely, obscure, the production’s socio-political position at the time of staging. Thus, decisions taken by theatre audio describers have a significance in the world at large. This section explores what the impact of those decisions may be.

Casting choices are one way in which productions can locate themselves in this socio-political and cultural climate. In interviews, casting was explored as a series of creative decisions that could be

- a) **completely incidental:** casting the best actor for the job;
- b) **politically motivated:** for example, casting an actor who does not have the body shape typically associated with a particular role to challenge conventional ideals of ‘beauty’;
- c) **culturally conscious:** adding something to the framing of the performance, in terms of the context contributed by casting decisions.

The terminology used to discuss casting also differed among participants. The terms ‘colour-blind casting’ or ‘non-traditional’ casting have been widely used and were in use in our discussions with participants. However, these terms are problematic. A casting director told us:

‘Well, it would be very rare these days that you would see a play ... certainly a classical play, from Shakespeare through to Chekhov and beyond actually- it would be very rare to see that on London stages without a diverse cast. In the last 20 years or so that I’ve been working in theatres it’s been a very clear direction of travel. It’s occasionally called colour-blind casting, that’s a phrase I never use myself. I just think its casting now, and we should be considering all actors, regardless of what the colour of their skin is.’

Similarly, an audio describer pointed out in their survey response that we should move beyond a binary understanding of traditional/non-traditional casting. As the project progressed, we therefore adopted the term ‘integrated casting’.

Our findings revealed a spectrum of opinion about whether or not integrated casting choices should be addressed in AD, and if so, how. Group differences

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became apparent from the survey. Our online survey asked participants to express their views on the relevance of describing various characteristics related to race, disability, body shape, gender and age through selecting the options:

- When relevant to plot
- When relevant to character
- When relevant to casting decisions taken by the creative team
- Always
- Never

Multiple selection of the first three options was possible, meaning that participants could select just one, or any combination that they chose. There were 16 questions structured in this way, which explored different aspects of diversity. Analysing these in aggregate, we observed that theatre professionals were more likely to select **plot** and **character** than they were **plot, character** and **casting decisions**. While some theatre professionals did select **casting decisions**, the choice of this option was consistently lower among theatre professionals compared to blind and visually impaired people or audio describers (Figure 1).

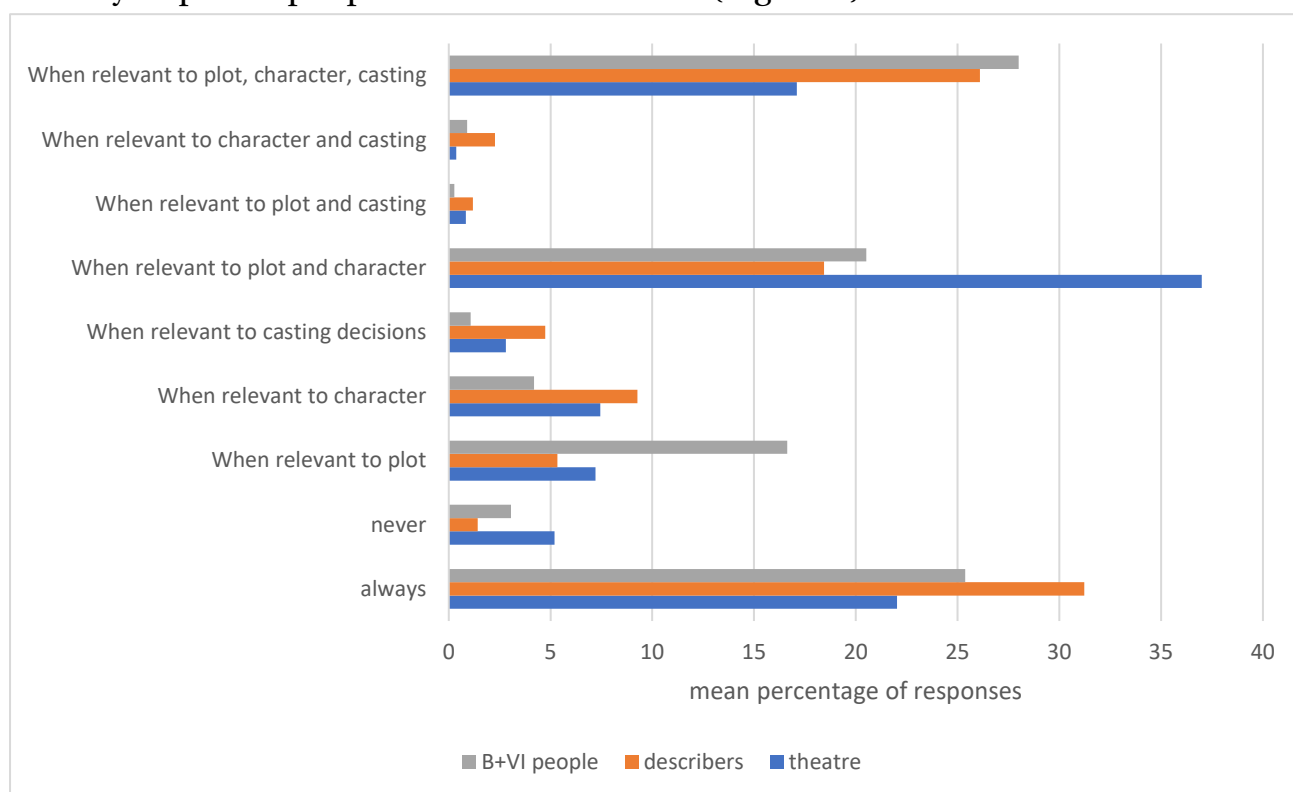


Figure 1: mean percentage of responses across 16 diversity questions, by participant group

Figure 1 suggests a general reticence among theatre professionals for AD to address personal characteristics in the context of casting decisions. This was also

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apparent in the free-text survey responses and was explored further in the in-depth interviews.

Deeper discussion in interviews revealed the central conundrum with integrated casting. The articulation, through description, of the casting of actors from minority groups, be those ethnicity, disability, or gender-based, stands to reinforce the very notion of 'difference' that integrated casting seeks to deconstruct. As one audio describer put it, they are at risk of 're-describing the racist categories of the real, existing world outside the theatre.' The reticence of theatre professionals to have attention drawn to casting decisions may reflect a reluctance to explicitly verbalise decisions, for this very reason. Comments from the survey expressed and explained this reluctance:

'I'm torn, because sometimes the contrasts of blind casting and the performed characters brings incredible unique perspectives that elevate the work, and I don't want people to miss out on that because it's not part of the AD (e.g. an older performer playing a child, or a pregnant actor performing a monologue about losing a child). However, more often the intention of blind casting is to push focus onto the words / performance and characterisation itself, and the audience participates in not 'seeing' the actor but suspending disbelief and focusing on the character. I feel those using AD shouldn't miss out on this either! I'm leaning more towards the actors not being described through AD.'

Another theatre professional said: 'It would be nice to celebrate inclusive casting, to help normalize and promote the practice. But doing so almost defeats the purpose.' This very clearly articulates the paradox of integrated casting and AD.

While this reluctance did come across in interviews with theatre professionals, as well as through the survey findings, there was simultaneously great concern at the implications of *not* addressing integrated casting in AD. Representation and erasure were themes that emerged through discussions with theatre professionals, as well as with audio describers and blind and visually impaired people. It was felt that knowing someone was on stage who is a person of colour, disabled, or trans, could help attract other actors with that characteristic into the profession, and could also show audiences that they are represented. A visually impaired actor interviewed emphasised that it gives other people 'hope, and role models to look up to'.

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Colour-blindness as ideology

Colour-blindness is of course not restricted to the theatre and casting. It is a broader belief that posits that the best way to end discrimination is by treating individuals equally, without regard to race, culture, or ethnicity. While at face value, this seems uncontroversial, it does nothing to dismantle inequality or racism.

Renni Eddo-Lodge writes on colour-blindness in her book *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People about Race* (London, 2018), and a *Guardian* article of 2017:

‘I think that we placate ourselves with the fallacy of meritocracy by insisting that we don't see race. This makes us feel progressive. But this claim to not see race is tantamount to compulsory assimilation. My blackness has been politicised against my will, but I don't want it wilfully ignored in an effort to instil some sort of precarious, false harmony.’ (pp. 81-82)

‘Not seeing race does little to deconstruct racist structures or materially improve the conditions which people of colour are subject to daily. In order to dismantle unjust, racist structures, we must see race. We must see who benefits from their race, who is disproportionately impacted by negative stereotypes about their race, and to who power and privilege is bestowed upon – earned or not – because of their race, their class, and their gender. Seeing race is essential to changing the system.’ (p. 84)

‘Colour-blindness is a childish, stunted analysis of racism. It starts and ends at ‘discriminating against a person because of the colour of their skin is bad’, without any accounting for the ways structural power works in these exchanges. This definition of racism is often used to silence people of colour when we attempt to articulate the racism we face. When we point this out, we are accused of being racist against white people, and the avoidance of accountability continues.’ (Guardian, May 2017).¹⁴

Within theatre, venues and producers occasionally publicly state a ‘casting strategy’ based on the concepts and practices of what has been termed ‘colour-blind’ or ‘non-traditional’ casting that originally emerged in the United States in the mid-twentieth century. ‘Colour-blind’ implies that an actor is cast in a role irrespective of their ethnicity, and what the script might indicate. In 1967, UK Equity created a proposal for ‘integrated casting’, that sought to tackle the major barriers faced by British Black and Asian actors by

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asking that actors be cast based on skills rather than ethnicity. Non-traditional casting is a related practice extending to gender, age and body type, where actors are cast contrary to expected conventions or tradition.

Historically these were crucial movements which increased opportunities for actors who faced discrimination. However, the discourse has now moved beyond these terms, as concerns have built about how they conceptualise difference and visibility. The very term ‘colour-blind’ implies that the audience should ‘not see’ actors’ or characters’ race, based on the common misunderstanding of racism as being the sum of individual prejudices or discrimination, rather than something that is structured within society. Canadian actor Omari Newton writes:

“‘Colour blind casting’ is insulting. It is confusing. It is a form of erasure rooted in white guilt and systemic racism. I encourage directors and producers to cast roles non-traditionally, but not ‘blindly.’

What we need is ‘colour conscious casting.’ If you want to introduce characters of colour into your story as a writer, director or producer, please do so in ways that encompass our complex history and our lived experiences.’¹⁵

The term and concept of ‘non-traditional’ casting has also been criticised, as it implies a white ‘traditional’ past. ‘Colour-conscious’ is certainly better, but it does suggest that the production is more conscious of skin colour than any other characteristic, such as gender or disability.

The implication of these concepts for audio description is that if non-blind people should ‘not see’, or ‘see beyond’ the race (or disability) of actors, then there is no need for audio describers to name it, or for the blind or visually impaired people to know it. However, such an approach would be problematic. It would withhold information from the blind or visually impaired audience, and risk reducing awareness of the diversity of people on stage – thus erasing that diversity. It is therefore important that we do not let a misguided ideology be perpetuated through audio description. This could come about either through pressure from the creative team on describers not to refer to or name characters’ race; or through self-censorship by theatre describers, who may find it awkward to do so. A describer writes about being asked to consider the intention behind casting decisions:

‘Are we being asked to look beyond identity traits, or to see identity traits in a new way? Audio describers won’t always know and anyway, the mixture of signifiers on stage will always shift and bounce off one another

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in different ways depending on production choices, audience and context. The questions also relate to an even broader ask: what is presented to us, given to be seen, and what is read onto the body? With identity traits, it is often a mixture of the two, so it is really hard to say, 'this is simply appearance, whereas this reading is interpretation.

Describers can't and shouldn't try to solve the whole question of identity. It's an impossible ask. They also have to let signifiers shift and bounce off each other to some extent, without being wilfully obscure. But they can try to be conscious of when they are reading something onto a body or using language that does that implicitly.'

In short, saying 'race shouldn't matter' avoids the more difficult task of facing up to the complex task of actively dismantling racism, and making race not matter. Theatre does not stand apart from society: there is no reason for audio describers to adopt and perpetuate the 'colour-blind' ideology through their description. The describer is part of society: they see Blackness, and Whiteness, not simply shades and textures of hair and skin.

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Erasure was the perceived result of not describing diversity. As one describer put it, if white/cis-gendered/non-disabled is the default, then 'if that is the assumption when it is not mentioned, then I feel that what's happening is we are silencing and erasing the voices of people and presence of people who have been traditionally silenced and erased throughout our history.'

Drawing attention to integrated casting in AD also related to the broad theme of parity of experience. Omitting the information stands to exclude blind and visually impaired audience members. As one audio describer put it:

'I think what is important is what the AD audience thinks is important, eg. having the same visual information as sighted audience members and, like them, the freedom to dismiss it if irrelevant to them: being on an equal footing with them in any interval or post-show discussions they may have about casting decisions. The director may consider the actor's ethnicity to be irrelevant to the character, plot and production, but it may be highly relevant to an audience member of the same ethnicity as the actor. Describers are traditionally 'the eyes of the audience, not the voice of the director.'

It should also not be assumed that integrated casting is expected or anticipated by all theatre-goers. While a casting director said in interview that 'non-literal' casting was now so commonplace that audiences would expect it, other participants (describers) felt that this still challenged audiences and required them to overcome their own prejudices or unconscious biases. They felt that blind and visually impaired audiences should have the opportunity to go on the same 'journey' as their non-blind companions or other theatre-goers.

In the course of our research, we heard from AD users who felt passionately that having access to casting decisions was crucial: 'If it's visibly obvious to everybody else, then I want to be a part of that discussion too. I cannot have an educated discussion with my peers about the production after witnessing it without having this type of information.' Others considered it unnecessary. Audio describers also reported that AD users are used to selecting the information that they need: 'Conversations I've had with blind and visually impaired people about this have usually resulted in them saying 'I let things I don't need wash over me, but I know they're important to others. I just take what I need.' This strongly suggests that the information should be provided, so that it is available to those who wish to know.

The general consensus of opinion was that integrated casting should be mentioned early on in the Audio Introduction, but not overly dwelt on. This view was shared by many audio describers, blind and visually impaired audience members and theatre professionals. The casting director we spoke to drew a distinction between

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making the information part of the introduction to a production as a whole, rather than to individual characters, which reflects how AD currently generally works. Audio describers typically include a statement in the Audio Introduction about the diversity of the cast, in order to present the breadth of the production. Many emphasised that they tend to keep this statement short and succinct, rather than dwelling on individual differences – in other words, they are seeking to capture the essence of incidental, integrated casting.

This approach appears to be acceptable to many blind and visually impaired audience members, as one AD user explained: ‘I want to know when the cast has people of different colors, different abilities, different genders. Simply providing me with this information at the beginning should suffice unless these specific traits become relevant to the story.’ Describers can therefore usefully use this summary as an equivalent to the ‘glance’ – ‘the cast is made up of predominantly young British South Asian actors’, or the ‘all-White cast’, while then going into more detail and nuance within individual character descriptions as and when they are relevant.

There is the potential for closer collaboration between theatres and describers with regards to the description of casting. The casting director we interviewed was enthusiastic about the idea of providing a short statement or having a conversation about the casting strategy, which could feed into information for AD users who may wish to know more. They used an example to explain why this should be important to theatres as well as audiences:

‘There’s a production ... at the moment – very, very diverse cast... And it’s so deliberate, so carefully done, and so beautifully cast, that one would hope actually that a director of a production like that, and the casting director of a production like that, would like to introduce that to people who couldn’t necessarily understand that immediately, because they couldn’t see that when a curtain goes up and a group of very diverse people walks forward.’

Audio describers had mixed views about seeking and presenting further information and input from theatres about casting strategies. Some felt that this would be beneficial, and help them to navigate what can be a problematic area, while others felt that it would go beyond the visual information usually available to a non-blind audience member.

In summary, personal characteristics are a ‘need to know’ when they are relevant within the world of the play in order that blind and visually impaired audiences have equitable access to the theatrical experience. AD should also address integrated and incidental casting, to ensure representation and inclusion. In order

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to respect the principles of integrated casting, this can be done through a short statement at the start of the Audio Introduction. A deeper level of description can then follow if the aspect of diversity is relevant to the plot, character or context of the play.

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2.2 Consultation: how do we involve actors, other theatre professionals and AD users in the development of descriptions?

Consultation emerged as a key theme throughout the research process. Practical difficulties and the possibility of conflict were also prevalent sub-themes. These potential difficulties need to be sensitively navigated during the various stages of theatre audio description, and several possible strategies were set out by our research participants.

Theatre professionals, audio describers and many AD users talked about consultation and its fundamental importance, especially when audio describers are not confident about describing a particular characteristic. Audio describers generally talked about having better access to actors and other theatre professionals in smaller-scale work, especially with smaller, disability-led companies. These interactions facilitate discussion about describing personal characteristics and the appropriate terminology for that particular production. Larger productions tend to afford less access to the cast and other professionals for audio describers, although there are of course exceptions. Case studies about good practice could be circulated within both the subsidised and commercial sector to raise awareness of the benefits of consultation.

Consultation with actors

During discussions about consultation between audio describers and actors, a key theme was **sensitivity**, with the additional recognition that there is huge variability: 'But these things are, to some people, of little concern, and to some people they might be very, very sensitive' (theatre professional). The potential for upset is significant, as this reflection on transness demonstrates: 'so it's a really sensitive and really difficult one with transness, as the very act of saying to someone, you look trans, are you trans, how can we describe you, could be really humiliating and really alienating and ostracizing' (theatre professional).

Describers are naturally aware of this and are very concerned about unwittingly causing offence; there is a general lack of confidence and anxiety around this. Some acknowledged that they avoid describing characteristics for fearing of 'getting it wrong'. This can lead to frustration for AD users who then feel the descriptions lack detail: 'they could have been a bit more explicit about it. I think there was some caution around it – sometimes I wonder if people don't want to

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offend the audience' (blind or visually impaired AD user). Also, as this quote demonstrates, both actors and audiences stand to be upset by AD.

When actors are asked to self-describe, all actors in a production are invited to do so. Nonetheless, participants recognised that while this can feel like a relatively straightforward, comfortable exercise for some, for others it can feel like they are being asked to do more emotional labour, as expressed by one performer who was involved in writing their own description: 'And me and the person of colour were like, ok, so basically we have to really out ourselves, it feels really weird in this setting to label ourselves in and amongst other people who really don't have to' (AD user/performer).

In situations where audio describers work more closely with actors, there have been instances of disagreement. One theatre professional, for example, described a situation where performers who identify as non-binary were misgendered, as the audio describers decided that gender-neutral pronouns would be confusing for the blind and visually impaired audience. In such instances, the gender-neutral pronoun 'they' may be confused with the plural pronoun 'they' if both are used during a live description. A collaborative analysis of such instances with actor(s) and describer(s) working together is needed to find a way forward that respects the right of performers to be gendered correctly while avoiding narrative confusion for AD users.

There is also potential for actors to be made aware of how they have been described through conversation with blind and visually-impaired audience members, typically at the touch tour. In general, actors do not read or hear the Audio Introduction, or the specific description of their character. Indeed, in the majority of cases, only the audio describers and the users read or hear the describers' words. However, as AD seeks to become more integrated and embedded into theatrical productions, and AD becomes more widely read and evaluated, the sensitive nature of describing personal characteristics should continue to be foregrounded.

Much of this potential for conflict can be avoided through interactions between audio describers and actors, as they work towards dialogue and mutual understanding. Many actors may have no prior knowledge of AD, and simply explaining that the audio describer seeks primarily to describe their character, rather than them personally, will be likely to reassure. However, the conflation between actor and character was nevertheless an important theme that emerged from the in-depth interviews. Actors are invariably the main subjects of description, and among the different components of a production, the boundary between the signifier (actor) and the signified (character) is often blurred, complex,

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and occasionally, in the case of autobiographical pieces, non-existent. A recent example was BBC's comedy *Staged* (June 2020) starring David and Georgia Tennant, Michael Sheen and Anna Lundberg as actors whose West End play has been put on hold due to Covid-19, but whose director has persuaded them to carry on rehearsing online. In most cases, the description of the personal characteristics of the character, is, in the main, the same as those of the actor. This also needs to be recognised in discussions with actors.

Our research revealed that the actor-character conflation is something that AD users are naturally aware of and interested in: 'obviously that character is embodied in a person, so it's a kind of double description I guess, which is interesting to look at' (blind or visually impaired AD user). Another AD user commented that having some description of the actor as well as the character adds extra interest and evokes curiosity. One audio describer talked about describing actors as a 'kind of canvas for the character', which they approach by

'asking the performers to identify their heritage and mentioning that in the description right up at the top. So, we'd start with the performer and some basic information about them and their identity, and then you'd move into the character description so you paint the character over the performer in a way.'

This approach is a deliberate strategy to give 'more of a well-rounded sense of a person's identity'. Although this goes beyond the provision of visual information, or 'what you see is what you say' principles, it was felt that this approach was more respectful to the actors than giving 'just my decision as a white person about what their skin tone is.'¹⁶

Knowing when to address differences between actors and characters (e.g. a young woman playing an elderly woman or a person playing someone from a different culture) can be problematic for describers: 'People should know that someone who's not – is playing somebody else, you know? And so that gets into some challenging territory, too.' Comments from two performers stressed the need for separation between actor/character - especially in the case of trans performers, who may be playing a character with a different gender identity.

Collaboration between audio describers and actors therefore needs to clarify that AD primarily addresses characters, while being sensitive to the fact that this may, to varying degrees, mean describing an actor's own personal characteristics, such as those related to race, disability or body shape.

Audio describers provided multiple examples, through the survey and interviews, of instances where they consulted with actors in order to find the right language or

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terminology. This practice can also help guide audio describers regarding decision making, such as whether to name or describe race: ‘Where possible, I consult the actor about how he or she would like to be described, therefore I would use colour terms rather than race terms if the actor preferred this’ (audio describer). For many of our participants, such consultation was a question of empowerment for actors. As one theatre professional put it:

‘So I think there is a lot to be said for describing people’s physical characteristics on stage, it’s just using the language that the actor wants you to use about them and retaining that agency, and as soon as you start asking the person with the disability how they want to be described then that empowers them, and avoid projecting an able-bodied gaze onto them, if the person doing the describing is able bodied. So, I think there’s got to be a big focus on empowering the actor as well as empowering the visually impaired person.’

An audio describer agreed: ‘Having had several discussions with actors of colour, it feels more empowering for describers to ask actors how they would like to be described.’

Participants also shared experiences of actors describing themselves. In mainstream AD (larger theatres and shows) this was reported as relatively rare. It was most prevalent in anecdotes about smaller, disability-led companies and/or integrated AD. Performers were enthusiastic about the experience of describing their characters: ‘So the last time I did a gig, I was asked to provide a character description, and a description of that act as part of that... The description becomes an enhancement of the act, as you are describing the persona’ (theatre professional and audio describer).

Some describers reported mixed results with actors describing themselves. Often, they lacked understanding about AD, meaning that their descriptions did not provide the information needed – ‘he defined himself, rather than described himself’ (audio describer). One visually-impaired actor pointed out that actors may feel that they personally are being described, rather than their character, meaning that their input may not be as helpful to the audio describer. Continuing to build awareness among actors about AD and its purpose is also likely to reassure them about being described. Increasing actors’ participation at touch tours was highlighted as one practical way to achieve this.

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Consultation with other theatre professionals

Collaboration between theatres and audio describers about the content of AD is still relatively limited. Although there are exceptions, theatres tend to commission AD and then have minimal involvement in its creation, and generally do not familiarise themselves with the final product. This is surprising, considering the ways in which AD must capture subtle aspects of the performance in writing and subsequent spoken delivery and suggests that some theatres do not take AD, or blind and visually impaired audiences seriously. In areas of AD for forms that are more predominantly visual, such as dance or museums and heritage, the audio describer typically has access to experts such as choreographers or curators. Describers have reported that dance companies, in particular, are often very enthusiastic about AD helping to broaden access to their work, and they are keen to have creative input into the process. There is certainly scope for much closer collaboration with theatres.

For AD to grow within a theatre setting, and for describers to continually refine their practice in relation to describing personal characteristics, consultation needs to happen throughout the organisation and not exclusively with actors. Audio describers reported mixed experiences of this happening. Some venues and companies are very willing to engage, others less so: it is recognised and understood that theatre professionals are almost certainly working under extreme time pressures (as are audio describers). Again, developing case studies of best practice in collaboration and using these as tools for raising awareness will be a positive way forward.

Ideally, audio describers would like to have access to a variety of people involved in a production. Collaboration with directors/casting directors will be very valuable in terms of understanding the strategic intent of a piece and the casting decisions. Audio describers did point out that they are supposed to represent a well-informed non-blind audience member, and so they would not necessarily include directorial input if it was not apparent and accessible to the rest of the audience. However, having insight from the director can help the audio describer to 'read' the play and to have a good critical understanding of the production's intentions and the importance of particular design choices. It may be important to set expectations early on by letting directors know that the audio describer would like some time with them before starting work on the AD. This will also help to position AD as an important part of the production and its creative process rather than as an 'add-on'.

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Audio describers will also benefit from closer collaboration with other members of the creative team such as costume and set designers. This will help them to learn more about the creative intentions and to capture the ‘visual language’ of a production in words. In an ideal world, in producing theatres, audio describers would talk with the creative team from the beginning of the show. The process of rehearsals and the development of the set, costumes, lighting etc. would inform the description. Knowledge of AD practice would flow into the creative team; and knowledge of the creative intention flow out to the describers.

Collaboration would be greatly improved through more theatre professionals listening to the AD of productions that they are involved in. Ushers are often encouraged to listen to some of it, but it does not seem to be a general practice among other non-blind theatre professionals. The creative team should be invited to listen to the AD and offer input.

However, while describers are keen to collaborate with theatres, they also wish to maintain a sense of independence and distance:

‘Rather than making people think that they’re going to be controlling the audio description and having a sense of ownership over the outcome of it, as we still want to maintain that distance so that the audience is not just getting a director’s commentary’ (audio describer).

In practice, describers want to reserve the right to ‘filter’ inputs (e.g. actors describing themselves, or information about casting/directorial intent) through the lens of what they know about AD and the needs of their audience. Maintaining this independence came through as an important concern for describers.

In summary, the description of personal characteristics and theatre AD more broadly stand to benefit greatly from closer collaboration between audio describers and theatre professionals. This will mean shifting the perception of AD from that of an ‘add-on’ service, to a fundamental element of the production, as a casting director explained:

‘it’s about putting the pressure on the producers and the people making the work, who are commissioning people to audio describe – engage with the people doing that work. It’s as much a part of the production as the design, as the casting, rather than an add-on that happens after the event. I bet that there are many people in productions that I have cast, on stage right now, who have no idea that there is a concurrent AD track happening, and what that experience is. And I think that is just about making sure everyone knows that really. And maybe one of the ways to engage that really, is to say are you happy to be described in that way?’

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Consultation with Audio Description users

Consultation with blind and visually impaired audiences is key to the success of AD, and their experience should be central. It is important that audio describers, audio description companies, and those who commission them regularly consult their blind and visually impaired audiences. While people's views on description of personal characteristics will naturally differ, continual discussion and testing of descriptions is important.

VocalEyes and some UK theatres have user panels that regularly meet and enable theatre AD users to feedback on the audio description service. This can be incredibly useful, enabling issues to be raised and resolved for the benefit of service users, venues, service providers and audio describers. It also more actively engages audience members and promotes take-up of audio description.

VocalEyes also regularly assesses a selection of audio-described shows each year, using both a service user and an audio describer. While user panels can be particularly helpful at highlighting general and ongoing issues, a detailed assessment of a particular audio described performance can offer much more detailed and specific feedback – although often from the perspective of only one audience member.

Another approach that VocalEyes has taken previously is to conduct phone interviews with as many audience members as possible shortly after a particular audio description. This does require getting permission to use contact information in advance, but if conducted soon after a performance it can yield detailed responses from a range of perspectives.

User panels, assessments and surveys can all provide important learning opportunities for providers of audio description, but ways must then be found to record and share the learning so that it can influence future practice. On occasion VocalEyes has adapted its assessment programme so that the service user and the audio describer assessing the audio description attend the dry run or 'dress rehearsal' which usually takes place at the performance immediately preceding the public audio description. Including a service user at this stage means that they can highlight any part of the production or audio description that is not clear, or indeed let the describer(s) know if they are over-describing and certain elements are perfectly clear without need for audio description.

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It is quite rare for audio describers to get much feedback from blind and visually impaired audiences and both can really benefit from these discussions. Describers can better understand the user's perspective, but the users can also better understand the AD process – enabling them to give more constructive feedback to describers.

It can be difficult for audiences to get to venues regularly, and travelling simply for a user panel may not be possible. For some people they may be more likely to attend if consultation occurs directly after an audio described performance, so extra journeys are not needed. If some complimentary refreshments are supplied in recompense for their time, a user panel might also become a pleasant social event – and it may help facilitate that rare sharing of perspectives between user and describer immediately after a show when everything is still fresh in people's minds.

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2.3 How can we be transparent about decisions?

An important theme in our findings was the impact that AD can have. Although commonly viewed as an assistive service, the qualitative comments in the survey revealed that theatre AD is understood by many participants as a combination of 'access' and a creative art form. AD therefore has an importance and an impact in its own right, that goes beyond its provision of visual information. For example, it can reflect artistic choices, or can be political, as one performer explained: 'there are things politically that audio description can do, that kind of signal stuff that maybe wouldn't be otherwise known.'

Part of AD's impact, or potential power, stems from the fact it necessarily 'pins things down', or as one theatre professional put it: 'audio describing describes a thing that's liminal and undescribed other than visually'. By describing aspects of a performance and the personal characteristics of the performers, AD formalises, in written and spoken language, aspects that may not otherwise be verbalised. Furthermore, this takes place in the public domain, as the Audio Introduction is shared online in text and audio formats. This suggests a need for accountability and transparency about the creation of AD. The survey, in-depth interviews and workshops all confirmed a need for audio describers to have structures in place whereby they can be more explicit and transparent about their decision-making processes.

AD has traditionally been aligned by academics and researchers with principles of objectivity, whereby the audio describer seeks to convey visual information without their own interpretation or position 'getting in the way.'¹⁷ However, much of this focus on objectivity has been focused on AD for TV and film and there is increasing understanding that this is likely to be problematic for AD in creative settings such as theatres and museums. VocalEyes as an organisation, for example, has recognised since its inception that a level of interpretation on the part of the describer is not only inevitable, but also desirable, as it enables the description to more closely reflect the art and its register. More recent explorations of AD in a translation context have recognised that objectivity is not possible and have called for re-evaluation of the 'invisibility' of the describer.¹⁸ There are two main ways in which decisions taken in theatre AD could be made more transparent. Information could be made available regarding both who has been appointed to describe and which decisions they have taken with regards to describing personal characteristics.

On the first, academic theories of positionality become relevant. Positionality refers to the 'positioning' of the researcher in relation to the social and political

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context of the study, namely the community, the organization or the participant group. It has been suggested that audio describers should - either always, or when relevant - acknowledge their positionality and, identify the position from which they are speaking: e.g. 'I am a white bisexual cis-gendered woman'. This could take place at the start of their description, either within the Audio Introduction, or simply in conversation at the touch tour.

The counter view here is that the describer's identity is not of importance, but rather it is the cultural competency that they bring and the aesthetic qualities they offer vocally and through the linguistic choices and structuring of the words in the audio description. However, it may be a valuable approach in some contexts. For example, VocalEyes on occasion selects or would like to select a describer or describers to 'fit' the show and its intended audience. At times, this has proved challenging. In 2019, at Shakespeare's Globe, Adjoa Andoh and Lynette Linton directed the first ever company of women of colour in a Shakespeare play on a major UK stage. VocalEyes audio describers regularly work on the Globe's productions. At this time, there were no describers of colour, male or female, on the VocalEyes' team. Some transparency, or even explanation, regarding the describer's identity may therefore be appropriate and helpful on occasion. It is of course important to recognise that the describer can never 'represent' the communities of all actors in a company or cast: but that does not mean we do not have a responsibility to attempt to represent a wider range of them over time.

The second point, namely how to be more transparent about AD decisions, was an important theme in our research, with discussions centred around language, defaults and information overload.

Language

The choice of language used to describe personal characteristics was a recurring theme with blind and visually impaired people, audio describers and theatre professionals. The main concern was the rate of change and the potential to 'get it wrong.' Most participants rejected the idea of a list of 'suitable' terminology on this basis – terms that are acceptable in one context and to one person may cause offence in or to another. Collaboration with theatres, research and knowledge sharing were proposed as the key ways to minimise the risk of offence. As describers concluded in the workshop: 'as language constantly changes there's a need to regularly review terminology and approaches with representative groups - what may be agreed or feel appropriate now could be out of date or inappropriate by 2021.' One fairly common existing strategy is for describers to be open about the

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source of their language, whether they used information from the printed programme, the script, the actor's choice of words or something else.

In the survey we asked respondents to rate whether it was better to name the characteristic of a character (she is Black) or to use descriptive elements to make this evident (e.g. through hair colour, texture and style, and skin colour (she has tightly curled black hair and dark brown skin). There was no consensus between audio describers on the best way forward. Naming as opposed to describing race, for example, can have the advantage of being more concise. Conversely, as another audio describer pointed out, 'It's important not to use ethnicity as lazy shorthand to describe appearance.' Other audio describers emphasised that it is not always possible to determine someone's race from their physical characteristics and that guessing is a risky strategy. Describing appearance rather than naming race was for some describers closer to the 'what you see is what you say' approach to AD:

'I describe what I see so that the [visually impaired] audience become a part of the process in imagining what I have described and draw their own conclusion as to the character's race. For example, a character who appears to be African-Caribbean could be African-American. The character's race might become apparent from dialogue or accent. It's not my job to describe the race of a character. I describe their appearance.'

However, this approach can also run into difficulties, as another audio describer explained: 'You're trying to create the listener's mental image, so you need to be clear. "Dark brown skin" could mean Arab, Italian, Indian, or Caribbean. So, I think you need to clarify what you mean'. See also the analysis of a selection of Audio Introductions for further examples of differences in practice (**section 1**).

This difficulty is unlikely to be easily resolved, and so adds to the argument that AD could benefit from being clearer about the decisions taken. This is a point that blind and visually impaired audiences are interested in, and, unsurprisingly, have various opinions on just as audio describers do. As one audio describer pointed out, physical characteristics as a signifier for ethnicity may be less useful to people who have never had sight. For others, they may be a useful shorthand. Some additional transparency about the approach the audio describer has taken would, according to our findings, be of interest to the audience, and acceptable to describers.

Defaults and information overload

Another area in which it was felt that further transparency regarding describers' decisions would be useful was that of defaults, a complex issue that would benefit

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from further discussion and transparency. Our findings suggest that defaults should be considered in two ways:

- a. There should be no tacit assumptions of majority/dominant default (straight, white, cis etc.), that perpetuates and reinforces racist, sexist, or other structures;
- b. AD can usefully establish a production-specific default.

It was generally assumed that if someone's identity or characteristics are not addressed in AD, then the default understanding may be that the person is white, cis-gendered, with no visible disability. This presents the describer with a problem: do they describe all performers' personal characteristics equally? As one actor pointed out, describing all performers 'equally' would mean a lot of information, and could feel clinical. From the AD users' perspective, this means additional cognitive effort as they attempt to process all the descriptive information while engaging with the production itself. However, describing personal characteristics for some performers and not others risks singling some people out for 'special attention', which may feel uncomfortable and could lead to actors feeling 'othered'. Similarly, describing some personal characteristics, but not others, risks minimising aspects of human diversity that may be important to the performers, as an actor told us while discussing gender and trans performers: 'I feel the same with all the other things you've mentioned, all the other protected characteristics. If you're only describing the ones on one side, it doesn't seem fair, it doesn't seem right.'

Defaults become most problematic if the issue is avoided. As one audio describer put it:

'By acknowledging the default of a production (including when the default is normative), I believe we are contributing to the subtle and slow shift in society's acceptance and validation of the "other" for our audience members. And we are also affirming to the "other" that their "otherness" is valid and welcome. In order to normalise difference, we must become comfortable talking about it. Censorship and silence only serve to reinforce rejection.'

The creation of a 'default' for an individual production clarifies that the description of the performers is not based on any society-wide 'default'. For example, if all the actors in a production are White: the Audio Introduction would state that it is a company of White actors or an all-White cast. When going on to describe individual actors/characters, there would be no need to describe each actor individually as being White. Similarly, if the majority of the actors in a production

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are actors of colour, then this can be stated as ‘default’ up front, and there is no subsequent need to ‘name’ individual actors as people of colour. A White actor in this production would be named as White. The ‘default’ then belongs to the ‘world of the play’, rather than being the unstated assumptions of the audio describers. This could help to avoid information overload for AD users. In the case of a multi-racial cast, all actors should be described, not just those in the minority.

Stating the default of the production up front could address not only race but also disability and gender.

In summary, audio describers, could, like translators, provide more information on their process. This could take the form of a ‘translator’s foreword’, perhaps included within the Audio Introduction. Audio description companies like VocalEyes could also host more discussion of these issues, perhaps through online articles, blogs or forums. They could facilitate discussion of examples of good practice, giving audio describers resources to refer to when discussing the decisions that they made for an individual production.

2.4 How can we learn and develop our cultural competency?

Cultural competency is understood as being equitable and non-discriminatory in practice and behaviour. Culture embraces diversity in its broadest sense and includes differences and similarities due to age, gender, ethnicity, religion and belief, sexual orientation and disability.¹⁹ As a theme in the survey responses and interviews, it was prevalent among describers and theatre professionals familiar with AD. It reflected recognition that audio describers are required to describe characteristics outside their own cultural experience. This can lead to lack of confidence, fear of causing offence, and avoiding description altogether for fear of getting it ‘wrong’. It also leads to self-reflexivity: ‘it’s largely something that we try to think about - whether we have the cultural competency to describe something’ (audio describer). The same describer went on to explain the potential disconnect between describers and performers, or describers and audiences:

‘Basically, I imagine that the traditional mode of very ‘objective’ audio description requires a common cultural framework between artists, the describer and the audience of the AD. And when we have that common cultural framework, we can reference particular visual phenomena in a way that is objective and that will make sense to all three of those groups. The problem comes when one of those groups or more than one of those groups are not really on the same page and the most common version of that is that the describer is not confident in the culture of the artists presenting the work, or in the culture of the audience.’

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This places the onus on describers to reassure actors that they have the cultural experience and sensitivity to describe their character with the same level of detail and richness of vocabulary that they describe other actors. In practice, there is a need for more support for describers and more discussion on building cultural competency, based both on describers' comments in the survey, interviews and workshops, and also based on analysis of existing Audio Introductions. In these, an imbalance can be observed – white skin may be richly described, with little variety in comparison for Black skin and hair. This has not gone unnoticed by AD users:

'It's something people will skirt around, and say somebody's got dark skin and curly hair, which doesn't mean anything, when it actually looks like they're from an African Caribbean background. They won't go into particular detail about the complexion of the person, whereas if somebody's white, or Caucasian, there'll be a whole host of description about them having high cheekbones, long face, blue eyes, their hair, pert nose, and that feels to me, unequal.' (AD user and theatre professional)

The theme of language was also important in discussions of cultural competency. Again, in this context, it was widely agreed that it would not work to create lists of 'acceptable' terminology or vocabulary for AD, as language develops and evolves quickly. AD users were also concerned about describers' language choice: 'I think audio describers should be careful, as they could easily use the wrong language or use language that is not appropriate.'

There was concern about the appropriate language to use for race, disability and gender/trans, and also particular concern about language for body shape, where words can be 'burdened with cultural meaning', as one describer put it. Another describer summarised as follows:

'If I was to use a word as blunt as 'fat', there can be an assumed judgement on my part as a describer, even though it's such a simple word – it's quite laden, and so it creates more questions than it answers.'

Describers mentioned using the language of the play or language used by other characters to describe characteristics, simultaneously choosing to create a sense of distance on occasion, e.g. 'the other characters refer to her as 'fat.'

Conversely, describers also defended the view that blind and visually impaired people have a right to access visual information, even if that means describing a quality that can be challenging to talk about. While many mentioned using euphemism, others shared the view of this describer, who said that 'euphemisms around fatness can be more offensive.'

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Collaboration and research were consistently highlighted as ways for audio describers to build cultural competency. Speaking to actors and/or people of the community being described is the ideal approach. This way, describers can hope to acquire the most appropriate and accepted vocabulary for their descriptions. Several describers talked about the research that they undertake to understand aspects of culture that they are unfamiliar with. As one performer put it, audio describers can tap into various resources to build the knowledge that they need:

‘So if an audio describer say is in a traditional setting where they might not get a lot of chance to speak to the actors and the creative team and they’re describing a cast that is full of people of colour, read up on how people of colour talk about themselves. Listen to podcasts, listen to media that doesn’t come from white people. If you’re describing a cast full of trans people, do at least some base research on how trans people talk about themselves, what’s the language that’s used.’

A final point on cultural competency was the question of the extent to which audio describers should explain the terminology that they use. While some describers felt they should not be expected to be ‘social educators’, others felt that a brief explanation, for example of ‘they/their’ pronouns, could be useful.

Early in the project, we realised that the outcomes would not include a set of prescriptive guidelines for describers, in the form of lists of words to use or avoid when describing personal characteristics. Two factors influenced this:

1. general rules that apply in every situation are next to impossible to make given the importance of context (the play, the cast, the plot and character’s position);
2. What is acceptable and preferred changes and evolves over time, and any fixed terminology could soon be out of date.

Instead, we aimed to use the insight brought to us through the research process to draw up recommendations for principles and strategies that individual describers, and VocalEyes as an organisation, could adopt and develop while identifying and supporting ways that theatre audio describers could develop their cultural competency, learning and practice.

3. Recommendations and next steps

3. Recommendations and next steps

3.1 Developing process

Various interventions and enhancements to the process of developing and delivering an AD were proposed, listed in order below. These could involve additional time, that companies may not wish to pay for, or describers may not have; they are often working on multiple productions and can only spare the time to immerse themselves in a production shortly before the AD performance itself. For touring shows, any extended process would only work or be necessary at the outset, rather than for each venue.

Statement of intent / mission statement

A short general statement of intent / mission statement about the purpose of Audio Description and the importance of describing a character's appearance. **See section 3.2.**

The statement could be made available to all on the VocalEyes website and circulated to the theatre / company following initial enquiry and prior to confirmation of the commission. In this way the theatre knows what is expected of them in terms of the process and their resources.

Video introduction to AD

The company watch a short video containing information about theatre AD and the rationale behind the description of characters. The video will lay out how company members can contribute to the process to help describers provide the richest, truest experience to the blind and visually impaired audience member.

It would ideally be presented by a blind or visually impaired person, and might include examples of character notes, potentially alongside a photograph of a character, and live description, ideally with actual footage of a show.

VocalEyes will aim to build relationships with producers so that this is sent out to the cast and creatives at the point of casting, and/or at the start of rehearsals.

This could be an alternative to audio describers visiting companies during rehearsals, which would incur additional fees and expenses, and would need the company to be enthusiastic about giving up some of their rehearsal time.

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Rehearsals

The describer(s) could attend an early rehearsal, observe the play at an early stage, talk to the company about AD and answer questions.

In a best-case scenario, an audio describer could influence several aspects of a production to make it more inclusive, obviating the need for some elements of description, or make it easier to deliver, e.g. getting descriptive language added to the script, or changes to timings of actors' delivery to allow the describer more time to describe a key action.

Character questionnaire for actors

The character questionnaire for actors (**section 3.5**) is issued to each member of the company via the company manager. It asks actors a series of questions about the character(s) that they play, their age, appearance, movement, costume, etc.

The questionnaire would be introduced to actors by the video, and would have two main aims: to increase awareness among actors of the process of AD and to assist describers by providing useful information for their description that can save time and reduce ambiguity.

Set walk

Describer(s) do a set walk with the Company Stage Manager (CSM) and discuss the Touch Tour. The set walk will improve the accuracy of the AD and establish a connection with the CSM.

Dry run

VocalEyes describers rehearse their script on a live show one or two days before the public audio-described performance and get notes from their paired describer. Ideally a blind or visually impaired AD user/expert would also listen and give feedback.

The dry run also provides an opportunity for a member of the creative team to listen and give feedback at a time when the describer is already taking on other comments.

Audio Introduction script

A VocalEyes audio introduction is usually written by the two describers working on a show, often based on evening up the workload. One might take the set, and the other the characters, or they might divide up the characters, possibly by which part of the play they feature in – so if a character first

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appears in the second half, described by Describer 2, then Describer 2 might write their description.

Discussion of the overall diversity of the company should be included, defining the 'default' for the specific production. The description should then include all relevant, visual information that relates to visible characteristics for each character of importance. This may not be necessary for choruses, extras etc.

Describers could also add a translator's foreword, giving users access to describers' decisions, strategy and sources about character description, for those who are interested.

See 3.3: Twelve principles for describing human characteristics in an Audio Introduction

Touch tour

Depending on which and how many actors attend the touch tour, this also gives an opportunity for imparting information about the characters, through description and the actors introducing themselves and their character.

The more aware an actor is about AD, the higher the chance that they will attend a touch tour, and provide useful description of their character.

Audio-described performance

There is usually little opportunity for describing personal characteristics during the performance itself, unless a character undergoes a dramatic change of appearance: though this could also be covered in the Audio Introduction.

Show report

After each audio-described production, VocalEyes gathers notes from the describer(s), venue and any user feedback, which includes observations about how each aspect of the AD went, including front of house, and technical. The report is shared with the producer and venue.

The show report could also be used to record issues around contentious points in the language around the description and the notes process, and share these issues more widely among other describers.

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3.2 General statement around theatre audio description

The following statement aims to sum up VocalEyes' ethos about theatre audio description. This will naturally evolve over time, and the latest version will be on the Vocaleyes website.

Theatre audio description aims to achieve inclusion and equality both for those blind and visually impaired theatre-goers for whom description is an essential component of their experience, and for those being described, the actors and the characters they play.

We will:

1. Try to increase awareness of the purpose of AD among those involved in the process of development, and as far as possible consult with actors and the creatives who develop productions.
2. Try to be equitable in our description, be aware of our position in society and as describers, and how this might affect how we write our descriptions. We commit to continual improvement of our cultural competency and knowledge of the broadest possible range of groups, cultures and individuals: through study and dialogue.
3. Always represent the needs of blind and visually impaired people for whom audio description is designed: remaining silent or using vague or ambiguous words does not give the listener an equivalent experience to the non-blind theatre-goer.

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3.3 Twelve principles for describing human characteristics in an Audio Introduction

Some of these principles will already be regularly practised by audio describers. Each can be followed to a lesser or greater degree, and some may be more or less relevant depending on the production.

- 1) Start with a broad-brush description of the cast – but remember, ‘diverse’, or ‘multi-ethnic’ are not helpful descriptive words: this should be followed up by clear and unambiguous description of the individual main characters.
- 2) Don’t presume a default, or let it be presumed, simply because it saves time: establish the default explicitly for each production.
- 3) Describe the characters – but remember, the actor is the real person on stage, and could be affected by your words.
- 4) Describe equitably – for characters of equal importance to the production, give equal weight in your description; similarly, for actors of colour / White actors, disabled / non-disabled actors. Don’t over or under-describe.
- 5) Avoid judgements and micro-aggressions, e.g. contrasting or comparing features with an ‘acceptable’ norm. Many describers adopt the tone of the original production for their description, and slip into judgements that the production suggests (attitudes to women, disabled people for example). If this is a deliberate strategy, then be explicit and address it up front in your ‘describer’s strategy’.
- 6) Use privileged information to name the actor’s ethnicity, disability, gender or other identity if you can, and with their input: it will help reduce ambiguity and avoid erasure.

‘When you are used to white being the default, black isn’t black unless it is clearly pointed out as so.’²⁰
- 7) Name Whiteness, not just Blackness. If the cast is all-White, say so, and then there is no need to repeat for individuals. If some of the cast are White, then name the individuals as White.
- 8) Filter the inputs you use: as the eyes of the audience, you need to be selective and consider information overload.
- 9) Consider and acknowledge your own position: you will never be objective.
- 10) If in doubt, something will almost always be relevant to someone in the audience.

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- 11) Be transparent about your position, your strategy, and your sources of information; consider including a 'describer's preface' or 'describer's note' to explain your decision-making processes.
- 12) Learn about what you don't know: talk to others, do some reading, follow new people on social media.

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3.4 Twelve recommendations for theatres and theatre companies

If you feel that your theatre's management will not have time to read the full report, here is a list of what they can do to ensure the best quality of the audio description of their productions and the experience of the blind or visually impaired user at their venue.

1. Talk to users of the AD service at your venue. Listen and respond to their concerns.
2. Ensure that any paid or volunteer staff that an AD user might encounter (box office, front of house, shop, bar, etc.) understands:
 - a. what audio description is, and what it involves (including the Audio Introduction and the Touch Tour);
 - b. how the headset works;
 - c. how to communicate effectively with audience members.
3. Encourage as many staff members as possible to read or listen to the audio description of your productions and attend touch tours.
4. Involve actors in the AD process: share the questionnaire with them (**section 3.5**).
5. Encourage actors to attend Touch Tours.
6. Give the describer access to the creative team, including designers, wardrobe and props: anyone involved in creating the visual aspects of the production.
7. Involve describers as early as possible – their description will be better for it.
8. Give the director the opportunity to attend the AD dry run so that they can offer feedback. Make sure they understand AD and its purpose beforehand.
9. Respect describers' independence and their role as providing blind and visually impaired theatre-goers with information about the show's visual aspects; rather than being an extension of the director's vision, or marketing.
10. Name the describers and/or AD company on your website, in your marketing, and if possible, front of house, and as an insert into the programme on the day(s) that the AD is provided.

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11. Tell everyone about your AD service: in the programme, over the PA, in your marketing, press and comms. Word-of-mouth is one of the most powerful ways to get new patrons, and everyone in the community can help spread the word.²¹
12. Ensure there are feedback procedures in place in case any member of the company feels there have been problems around the AD and ensure that it is offered upwards through the organisation.

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3.5 Template character questionnaire for actors

VocalEyes has successfully trialled earlier versions of this questionnaire as a means of consultation before several audio-described productions at Donmar Warehouse. This version has been updated during the project with input from VocalEyes describers.

The survey can be put online using Google Forms, SurveyMonkey or other survey software. VocalEyes will publish alternative formats including Large Print (Word document), BSL and Easy Read on their website after the report publication.

Audio description: character questionnaire for actors

The production [.....] is being audio-described for blind and visually-impaired theatre-goers. We'd be very grateful for your input to make the audio description as useful as possible by completing this short questionnaire. It should not take more than 5 minutes.

Introduction to theatre audio description

Audience members who are not blind or visually impaired will very quickly take in visual information about the set, props, costumes and characters on stage as soon as the curtain opens and actors appears on stage. The live audio description provided for blind and visually impaired audience members happens during the gaps in dialogue – and does not have time to give detailed visual descriptions. It usually focuses on describing the action as it unfolds.

To level the playing field between non-blind and blind or visually impaired audience members, people booking for the audio description are provided in advance of the touch tour and performance with an **Audio Introduction** (usually 10-15 minutes in length) that describes the visual world of the show in more detail. These are scripted by the audio describers beforehand, recorded and sent to AD bookers on CD and made available for download online. The audio describers also run through the Introduction just before curtain up, for those who prefer to listen at the theatre.

As part of the Audio Introduction, the appearance of each character is described. To aid this process we'd be really grateful if you, the actor, could help begin the description of your character or characters. Your responses will then be sent to the audio describer(s) working on this production. Your input is really valued, but please keep in mind that your answers will inform the process, but the precise words or phrasings you give may not be used in the final version of the Audio Introduction – so please do not worry about crafting perfect sentences.

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The description is mostly of the **character**. Some characteristics you, the actor, will share with your character and others you will not. Visual descriptions that connect with the character's internal life and motivations can obviously be particularly illuminating and will tend to be highlighted in the Audio Introduction.

Please complete a separate questionnaire for each character you play.

The character

- 1) Character name? (this might include how other characters address you as well as how it appears in the script or the programme)
- 2) What is the gender of your character? What pronouns should the describer use for your character?
- 3) Please give an approximate age for your character (e.g. early 20s)
- 4) What is your character's height and build?
- 5) How do you convey your character's personality through the way you move?
- 6) Please describe your character's hair: length, texture, colour(s) and style? Does it make some sort of statement?
- 7) How would you describe your character's skin colour and appearance?
- 8) Does the character have any particularly distinct facial features? Including facial hair. Is there anything that is highlighted either through performance or make-up?
- 9) Please describe the costume(s) that your character wears, and in particular, how it informs or constrains the way your character moves.
- 10) How do other characters respond to your character? (Do they notice your arrival or ignore you? Do they keep their distance or come close?)

You, the actor

- 11) Do you have any preference for how you as an individual would prefer to be identified? E.g. a Black British actor, French-born, Korean, non-binary, partially blind.
- 12) What pronouns would you like the describer to use when referring to you?

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3.6 Diversity and representation

One of the main reasons the Describing Diversity project needed to take place was that the pool of theatre audio describers working in the UK does not adequately reflect the diversity of the wider population.

To begin to change this we have to understand the routes into becoming an audio describer, and what barriers may exist preventing wider representation. In short, there are no formal career paths within Higher or Further Education to becoming a theatre audio describer, and few opportunities for non-academic, vocational training in the UK. Analysis in 2016-17 of 192 AD courses across Europe (93 academic and 99 non-academic courses) showed that the majority cover film/TV (81%), followed by museums (55%), theatre (40%), other live events (30%), visuals in teaching materials (20%) and opera (17%).²²

The Audio Description Association run a course accredited by Open College Network Yorkshire and North Humber (OCNYHR), however, this is usually commissioned by a theatre venue, where it is conducted as in-house training.

In 2019 VocalEyes raised funds from charitable trusts and foundations to run a heavily-subsidised course for 12 people (selected from 70 applicants through initial selection from CV and application letter, followed by a workshop and assessed practical exercise) to train as theatre audio describers. Like the ADA course, this also involved working on and being assessed on delivery of AD of a live production. The newly qualified describers from this course are going on to work for VocalEyes and independently as freelancers. The 2019 course was the first time that VocalEyes had trained new audio describers since the See-A-Voice Project (2006-2010) where the training was delivered in collaboration with the Audio Description Association.

VocalEyes made an effort to promote the opportunity as widely as possible, targeting specific companies and individuals to ask them to share details, with the aim of increasing exposure to the training to people from minority groups. VocalEyes recognises that while they made some headway in increasing the diversity of the team of audio describers, they need to take even more positive action in future recruitment and training.

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3.7 Culture and learning

The arts reflect political and societal change and trends – theatre is not stagnant and so audio description needs to reflect that. The common cultural framework is evolving and will need reviewing every 1-2 years.

VocalEyes describers agreed that they should be responsible for:

1. Increasing their awareness of best practice.
2. Continuously interrogating their own descriptive practice.
3. Making use of programme information, including actors' biographies.
4. Increasing their awareness of their own biases and lack of knowledge.
5. Increasing their cultural competency.

To support this, VocalEyes will:

1. Create and maintain a list of books, articles and links to guidelines created by organisations run by and for different groups of people with protected characteristics.
2. Arrange awareness training for describers as professional development through some of these same groups, for example, Spare Tyre and Mind the Gap on working with actors with learning disabilities, Graeae on sensory/physical disabilities.
3. Discuss the possibility of representatives from organisations being a point of contact online - to field queries and feedback about our language, description and how our process has been informed. This would help create stronger links between VocalEyes, describers, these organisations and theatre professionals generally.
4. Create a space for describers, theatre professionals and audio description users to share experiences and strategies.
5. Constantly encourage feedback on what works and what doesn't, so we can continue to learn.

A key message from the project was that audio describers should not be afraid to ask for help. As one performer put it, when discussing language about transness: 'describers should not be afraid to approach and ask. ... So not being afraid to get it wrong and make mistakes, because everyone's learning - ... I am, everyone is.'

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3.8 Raising awareness about theatre audio description

These research findings showed a clear need to develop awareness of AD in theatres, with the aim of increasing the buy-in from theatres and support for describers as they take decisions. There is currently limited understanding of the processes and requirements of AD among theatre professionals and in particular the decisions that audio describers must make regarding the description of personal characteristics. Most theatre professionals that we surveyed or interviewed were not aware of the difference between the Audio Introduction and the live Audio Description delivered during the show. Performers, theatre professionals and describers emphasised that many members of a cast may be completely unaware that AD is even taking place. Participants suggested that directors, producers and access officers should all be aware of AD and have an interest in helping it to be successful.

The casting director we spoke to voiced their support:

‘I think that directors should be aware that AD is going on and that their shows are being interpreted for a particular part of the audience in a particular way. And I think venues/companies should be doing that, should be knowing that this goes on, and wanting to find ways to improve it and support the service. They should care about this audience.... I think it’s about letting people like me know. And I’m up for the conversation really.’

Practical ways to raise awareness were broadly split between:

1. Ways to embed AD in the world of theatre (long-term education)
 - a. Workshops for producers about AD
 - b. Expanding existing efforts to present AD to acting, stage management and technical students, through sessions at organisations such as LAMDA, Guildhall, Central School of Speech and Drama and the MTA.
2. High-impact ways to raise awareness, for example:
 - a. Banners to set up in the foyer.
 - b. Including inserts about AD in the show programme.
 - c. Articles in member/subscriber magazines or on venue websites.
 - d. A pre-recorded announcement like those about mobile phones at the start of the performance, that credits the audio describer / AD company. This could also empower blind people so they know who to communicate with if they have feedback or complaints. If provided by

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a company, such as VocalEyes, this would be directed to them, allowing the AD user to remain a step removed from an individual describer, thus making it easier / more likely for them to do.

Raising awareness should also increase tolerance and understanding from the audience when they see patrons wearing headphones or using a mobile phone for an audio description app.

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3.9 Next steps

VocalEyes and Royal Holloway, University of London have submitted an application for funding to facilitate further engagement with this research, trialling and extending some of the recommendations made within the report through:

- Audio-described productions, workshops and collaboration with 5 partner theatres and companies around the UK
- Creating a MOOC (online learning course) and other resources for theatres and institutions within the creative industries, specifically film and television production companies, commissioners, broadcasters and decision-makers who have not yet included audio introductions in their provision for blind and visually impaired audiences. Audio describers working in film and television who are unfamiliar with the audio introduction but who want to develop their competencies in this area or move into theatre AD will also find the MOOC valuable.
- An online central hub for discussion/knowledge sharing among audio describers.

VocalEyes will also introduce the recommendations in this report to all existing and new theatre clients, making the recommendations and templates in this section of the report available in stand-alone documents, including alternative formats (BSL, Easy Read, Large Print).

Appendixes

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Appendix 1 Survey diversity data

The figures below present the responses to questions about the respondent's personal characteristics within **Phase A: Online Survey** (n=219). Respondents were not restricted to fixed responses to any questions except age, and could thus answer in any way, or not at all. No prompts or examples were given.

Some respondents gave responses to ethnicity, gender and sexuality that used multiple terms. For example, for ethnicity, some listed several countries, or a combination of race and country or region combined (e.g. Black British, or Caucasian European). Rather than listing all the individual variants of these multi-term responses, we have counted terms individually, so if a respondent wrote 'White British', this has been counted as a response for both 'White' and 'British'. Thus, for some categories, percentages will add up to more than 100%. We have not inferred 'broader' terms, for example, the figure next to the term 'European' or 'Asian' only includes respondents who specifically used those terms.

Where only 1 person used a term (i.e. under 1%), for clarity '1 respondent' has been used in place of <1%.

Age

- 18-30 14%
- 31-40 20%
- 41-50 19%
- 51-60 21%
- 61-70 13%
- 71-80 8%
- 81+ 1 respondent

Gender

- Woman / Female 67%
- Male 25%
- Non-binary / gender-fluid 1%
- Cis 1%
- No response 7%

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Nationality

We have presented this category broken down by respondent type, as well as for all respondents.

Audio Description users

- 64% are from the UK
- 11% are from US and Canada
- 17% are from 13 other countries (Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Colombia, Netherlands, France, Germany, India, Ireland, New Zealand, Norway and Portugal)
- 7% not stated

Audio describers

- 53% are from the UK
- 25% are from US and Canada
- 16% are from 6 other countries (Argentina, Australia, Netherlands, Ireland, New Zealand, Portugal)
- 5% not stated

Theatre professionals

- 68% are from the UK
- 6% from US and Canada
- 15% are from 4 other countries (Belgium, Colombia, Germany, Ireland)
- 8% not stated

All respondents

- 62% are from the UK
- 14% are from US and Canada
- 17% from 12 other countries (Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Colombia, France, Germany, India, Ireland, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal)
- 7% not stated

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Ethnicity

13% did not respond, said it was not relevant, etc. Terms used have been presented in 2 broad groups:

1. Race/ethnicity (used by 72% of respondents)
2. Continent / large area (used by 9% of respondents) and Country (used by 38% of respondents, despite the earlier question related to nationality).

Group 1 terms

- White (55%), White/Caucasian (4%) or Caucasian (22%)
- Black (2%)
- Mixed / Mixed Race / Multiple Ethnicities (1%)
- Arab (1 respondent)
- Hispanic (1 respondent)
- Latinx (1 respondent)

Group 2 terms

Africa

- African (1%)

Asia

- Asian (1%)
- Chinese (1 respondent)
- Indian (1%)
- Pakistani (1 respondent)
- Turkish (1 respondent)

Americas

- American (no respondents used this term)
- Mexican (1 respondent)
- Caribbean (1%)

Australia

- New Zealand (1 respondent)

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Europe

- European (6%)
- British (24%), UK (1 respondent), English (2%), Anglo-Saxon (1%), Cornish (1 respondent), Scottish (1 respondent)
- Dutch (1 respondent)
- German (1%)
- Irish (3%)
- Italian (1 respondent)
- Nordic (1 respondent)
- Portuguese (1 respondent)
- Swiss (1 respondent)

Middle East

- Middle Eastern (1 respondent)

Disability

- 40% of respondents stated that they were disabled or detailed specific impairments or health conditions. The majority of these were blind or visually impaired.
- 45% stated that they were not disabled;
- 15% did not respond / preferred not to say.

Sexuality

- Bisexual (8%)
- Celibate (1 respondent)
- Fluid (1 respondent)
- Gay (4%)
- Heterosexual/Straight/Heteronormative (52%)
- Lesbian (1%)
- Pan / Pansexual (1%)
- Queer (2%)
- LGBTQIA (1 respondent)
- Declined / did not respond / stated 'not relevant', 'private' or similar (25%)

Appendixes

Appendix 2 Recommended reading

Books and reports

Jeffrey Boakye, *Black, Listed* (2019)

Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (2018)

Reni Eddo-Lodge, *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race* (2017)

Louise Fryer, *An Introduction to Audio Description. A Practical Guide* (2016)

Louise Fryer and Amelia Cavallo, *Is it Working? Integrated Access Inquiry 2017-18*
[Extant.org.uk/integrated_access- is_it_working/](http://Extant.org.uk/integrated_access-_is_it_working/)

Online resources

This is by no means a comprehensive list. Following the report publication, it will be placed on the VocalEyes website and added to over time.

All About Trans (AllAboutTrans.org.uk/about/resources/): a selection of links to useful resources and websites

Describing Words (DescribingWords.io/). Search for anything (nose, eyes, skin, hair, for example) to bring up lists of adjectives from a database of thousands of books.

LGBTQ+ Vocabulary Definitions (ItsPronouncedMetrosexual.com/2013/01/a-comprehensive-list-of-lgbtq-term-definitions/)

Radical Copy Editor blog (radicalcopyeditor.com/blog). ‘The concept of radical copyediting is based on the fact that language is not neutral. Through language we communicate values, norms, and ideals. Words matter: they can be used to harm or to heal; to perpetuate prejudice or imagine a different world; to oppress or to liberate.... Radical copyediting helps language live up to its most radical potential—serving the ends of access, inclusion, and liberation, rather than maintaining oppression and the status quo.’

Stonewall: glossary of terms (StoneWall.org.uk/help-advice/faqs-and-glossary/glossary-terms)

Theatre Casting Toolkit (<https://www.TheatreCastingToolkit.org/>) has a range of resources and links.

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Appendix 3 UK organisations and initiatives promoting access, equality and diversity in the arts

This list is by no means comprehensive, but covers organisations mentioned in the report.

Act for Change (Act-For-Change.com) promotes equality and diversity in the arts.

Access All Areas (AccessAllAreasTheatre.org) makes urban, disruptive performance by learning disabled and autistic artists.

Audio Description Association (AudioDescription.co.uk) works to raise the standard and profile of audio description nationwide, supporting audio describers and facilitating a quality service for blind and partially sighted people.

BEATS (WeAreBEATS.org.uk) British East and South East Asians in the Screen and Stage Industry are a not-for-profit advocacy organisation which seeks to humanise the representation of BESEA in arts and culture; increase the visibility of BESEA on the stages and screens and advocate for equal opportunity for BESEA in the theatre and screen industry.

Birds of Paradise (BOPtheatre.co.uk) is a theatre company based in Scotland, where disabled and non-disabled artists, writers and theatre-makers drawn from diverse cultures make world-class, innovative and accessible work that embeds creative access.

Black Theatre Live (BlackTheatreLive.co.uk) was a pioneering national consortium of 8 regional theatres led by Tara Arts, committed to effecting change nationally for Black, Asian & Minority Ethnic touring theatre through a sustainable 3-year programme (2015-18) of national touring, structural support and audience development.

Deafinitely Theatre (DeafinitelyTheatre.co.uk) are the first deaf launched and deaf led professional theatre company in the UK producing quality bilingual theatre in british sign language and spoken English.

Devoted and Disgruntled (DevotedAndDisgruntled.com) is a nationwide conversation about theatre and the performing arts, run by theatre company

Improbable (Improbable.co.uk).

Diverse City (DiverseCity.org.uk) is an award-winning organisation committed to equality and diversity in the arts.

Extant (Extant.org.uk) is the UK's leading professional performing arts company of visually impaired artists and theatre practitioners, producing touring productions and delivering training regionally and internationally.

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Graeae (Graeae.org) is a force for change in world-class theatre, boldly placing D/deaf and disabled actors centre stage and challenging preconceptions.

ProFile (ProFilePerformers.com) is a video database of D/deaf and disabled actors for use by casting directors and other professionals across the UK film, theatre and TV industries. A free service (both for actors and industry users) hosted by Spotlight and the National Theatre.

Ramps on the Moon (RampsOnTheMoon.co.uk) is a collaborative network of six National Portfolio Organisation theatres led by New Wolsey Theatre, Ipswich: Birmingham Repertory Theatre, Theatre Royal Stratford East, Nottingham Playhouse, Leeds Playhouse, Sheffield Theatres and strategic partner Graeae Theatre, which aims to enrich the stories we tell and the way we tell them by normalising the presence of D/deaf and disabled people both on and off stage.

Stagetext (StageText.org) provides captioning and live subtitling services to theatres and other arts venues to make their activities accessible to people who are d/Deaf, deafened or hard of hearing.

Touretteshero (TourettesHero.com) celebrates and shares the creativity and humour of Tourettes with the widest possible audience, and promotes inclusion of neurodiversity in the arts.

Unscene Suffolk (UnSceneSuffolk.co.uk) is a community theatre company for adults with visual impairment based in Suffolk, UK.

VocalEyes (VocalEyes.co.uk) brings theatre, museums, galleries and heritage sites to life for blind and partially sighted people.

#WeShallNotBeRemoved (WeShallNotBeRemoved.com) is an alliance of organisations and individuals that campaigns for and supports D/deaf, neurodivergent and disabled creative practitioners and organisations through and after the coronavirus pandemic: to ensure a sustainable future for disability and inclusive arts in the UK, and amplify the voices of D/deaf, neurodivergent and disabled creative practitioners and disability arts organisations at a time of crisis for the arts and for disabled people.

Notes

- 1 Correspondence with the authors.
- 2 Correspondence with the authors.
- 3 Jeffrey Boakye, *Black, Listed: Black British Culture Explored* (2019).
- 4 Kwame Anthony Appiah, 'The Case for Capitalizing the B in Black', *The Atlantic*, 18 June 2020, [TheAtlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/time-to-capitalize-blackand-white/613159/](https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/time-to-capitalize-blackand-white/613159/).
- 5 David Bellwood, 'Audio description and Shakespeare', VocalEyes, 27 April 2017, [VocalEyes.co.uk/audio-description-and-shakespeare/](https://vocaleyes.co.uk/audio-description-and-shakespeare/).
- 6 The right of access is enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (CRPD, 2008), article 3 of which recognizes "the right of persons with disabilities to take part on an equal basis with others in cultural life." Signatory countries "shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities enjoy access to cultural materials in accessible formats." [UN.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html](https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html).
- 7 For the early history of AD in the UK, see M. Raffray and M. Lambert, *Audio Description in the UK: the founding years 1982-92* [AudioDescription.co.uk/uploads/general/AD_in_the_UK_1982to92.pdf](https://audiodescription.co.uk/uploads/general/AD_in_the_UK_1982to92.pdf). See also 'Purveyors of Happiness', the Report of the First National Audio Description Conference, organised by the RNIB and AUDEST (Audio Description Training for Theatres), Nottingham Playhouse 19 March 1997 [AudioDescription.co.uk/uploads/general/PURVEYORS_OF_HAPPINESS.pdf](https://audiodescription.co.uk/uploads/general/PURVEYORS_OF_HAPPINESS.pdf)
- 8 R. Hutchinson, *Museums for all: towards engaging, memorable museum experiences through inclusive audio description*. PhD thesis, Department of Psychology, University of Westminster, 2020.
- 9 Cited in L. Fryer, *An Introduction to Audio Description. A Practical Guide* (2016), p.6.
- 10 The phrase 'what you see is what you say' (WYSIWYS) was coined by US audio describer Joel Snyder. See, for example, J. Snyder, 'Audio Description: The Visual Made Verbal' in *The International Journal of the Arts in Society*, vol. 2 (2007), pp. 99-104.
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Notes

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