End-user Experiences of Audio Description for Live Theatre: Complexities Beyond Practice

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Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint award of this degree.

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Karen Heather Seeley

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I dedicate this thesis to:

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Abstract

Audio description (AD) scholarship has identified the need for a greater focus on end-user experience. However, much of that AD scholarship has considered end-user experience only in terms of end-user comprehension of the AD content, known in the field as 'reception'. Such research has focussed on elements of AD quality which have informed the professionalisation of practice. While end-users have identified a preference for high quality and professional AD services, the research so far has not adequately understood or accounted for the embodied experience of end-users accessing AD services, nor has it addressed barriers to engagement with AD that end-users have identified.

This project draws on scholarship from a number of different research fields, such as AD, disability studies, theatre studies, and audience studies, to explore barriers to blind/vision-impaired (b/vi) end-user experiences of AD for live performances. In particular, the project investigates those barriers which sit beyond AD practice, and which have not been well understood or accounted for in AD research to date. The project also asks whether improving the quality of AD services adequately addresses those barriers and results in b/vi people's increased participation in social and cultural experiences.

London, Singapore, and Adelaide were the three research sites chosen because they are closely linked in the recent history of the development of AD. London practitioners supported the development of professional AD services in Adelaide, and Adelaide practitioner/trainers were instrumental in establishing AD services in Singapore. Live theatre is the only live performance genre for which AD is readily available across all three research sites.

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with b/vi end-users and with staff working for blind service organisations (BSOs) and for venue/theatre companies, to explore end-user

experiences of AD for live theatre, and to investigate the ways in which BSOs and venue/theatre companies impact those end-user experiences.

Research has identified that AD end-user experience is something more than comprehension of the information that AD provides. End-user experience is about entering into the world of the story itself and enjoying that embodied experience. Therefore, this project seeks to better understand the end-user experience of live theatre, but without the improvement of AD practice being the primary focus of this research. The project also investigates the broader contexts which impact on b/vi people's participation and experience of AD. Broader contexts, such as social, cultural, and political environments are also explored in as much as they shape the contexts of daily life of the b/vi end-user respondents, as well as the BSOs and venue/theatre companies that support AD for live theatre.

This research identifies that end-user experience of AD for live theatre is complicated and is impacted by complexities that sit beyond AD practice. This study has shown that considering AD practice in isolation does not fully account for barriers to end-user AD experiences that respondents identified. Further, the study shows that improving the quality of the AD has not adequately addressed many of those barriers to participation. This study also finds that different understandings of disability and how it operates in each of the three research sites, creates paradigms which shape the broader social, cultural, and political contexts of daily life for the b/vi end-user respondents. Previous AD scholarship has not accounted for the complex layers of contexts which this study shows to significantly impact on the end-user experience of AD for live theatre. In bringing these two perspectives together, AD practice and elements of the broader disability context, this study complicates previous understandings of AD end-user experiences. This study shows the important social and cultural connections that AD can facilitate for b/vi end-users to ensure their access, inclusion, and participation in community. However, AD end-user experiences sit within a complex cluster of contexts and contingencies,

and many of the barriers to b/vi end-user participation have not been well understood or accounted for in prior scholarship. This thesis shows that many barriers to participation sit beyond AD practice, where improving AD quality may not adequately address those barriers.

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List of Publications During Candidature

Book Chapters

Seeley, K 2022, 'Audio description in Australia', in C Taylor & E Perego (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Audio Description*, Routledge, London and New York, pp. 560-578.

Conference Presentations

Seeley, K 2019, *Positioning AD in Media Theory: An Australian Context*, ARSAD 2019, Advanced Research Seminar on Audio Description, Barcelona, March 19-20.

Seeley, K 2019, *Cross-cultural AD training for the performing arts: A Singapore Case Study*, ADLAB PRO 2019, Audio Description: A Laboratory for the development of a new professional profile (2016-2019), Barcelona, March 21.

Seeley, K 2021, *Audio Description in Education*, Online International Faculty Development Programme for Humanities and Social Sciences, Stella Maris College (Autonomous), Chennai, December 13-17.

Seeley, K 2023, *End-User Experiences of AD for the Performing Arts: Complexities Beyond Practice*, ARSAD 2023, Advanced Research Seminar on Audio Description, Barcelona, April 20-21.

List of Tables & Boxes.

Abbreviations

AD	Audio Description
ADA	Audio Description Association (UK)
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
A2A	Access2Arts
AVT	AudioVisual Translations
BB	Beyond Blindness
BSO	blind service organisation
b/vi	blind/vision-impaired
EU	European Union
OfComm	Office of Communications (UK)
RNIB	Royal National Institute of Blind People (UK)
RSB	Royal Society for the Blind (Australia)
SRT	Singapore Repertory Theatre
STCSA	State Theatre Company of South Australia
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNCRPD	United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities
UPIAS	Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation
US	United States of America

Chapter 1: Introduction

Background to the study

For the last nine years, I have been delivering audio description (AD) for live theatre, live events such as pageants, street parades, and outdoor promenade performances, and for conferences, visual art installations, static art installations, tourism, films, and other digital content. However, most of my professional AD work has been for live theatre, which remains the locus of most AD activity in Australia (Seeley 2022). I undertook professional AD training in Adelaide, South Australia, in 2015 and further training in Washington, DC, in the United States of America (US) in 2019. I have also co-delivered professional AD training for audio describers in both Australia and in Singapore. As an academic, I have authored a chapter about AD in Australia (Seeley 2022), tracing its origins from AD practice developed in the United Kingdom (UK). Professional AD in the UK was developed with an emphasis on live theatre, through the National Theatre and VocalEyes. Established in 1998, VocalEyes is an organisation that addresses barriers to access and inclusion for blind/vision-impaired (b/vi) people, primarily through the provision of AD. The Access2Arts (A2A) training in Adelaide was developed in association with describers from VocalEyes, and was based on that organisation's internationally-recognised AD training.

In mid-2018 I spoke with Grant and Janna Lock, who had recently returned from Central Asia, where they had spent the previous twenty-plus years working in aid and development. They had returned to Adelaide because Grant had experienced sudden and significant sight loss due to the adult-onset of an inherited condition, and he was consequently unable to continue his work overseas. As my conversation with Grant and Janna was coming to a close, I mentioned that I was heading off to audio describe a theatre show later that day and Grant asked me what

I meant by 'audio description'. I briefly explained how AD supported b/vi people at a theatre performance to follow the on-stage action, as a describer verbalised visual elements into a transmitter, received by the b/vi person in real time. As he processed that information and began to realise what AD was, and that it was readily available in Adelaide, he became agitated. When I asked him why, Grant shared that he had been told about various social and community activities with which he could engage, but none of the blind service organisations (BSOs), with which he had recently registered, had even mentioned AD to him. Like Grant, I too was very surprised that the BSOs had not told him about this service. From ad hoc b/vi audience feedback that I had received after providing AD in Adelaide, I knew those b/vi audience members found the service invaluable, and I could not imagine why a BSO would not tell their b/vi clients that AD existed.

From Grant's experience, it seemed that the BSOs were simply not telling the b/vi community about the availability of this AD service that would support them in accessing live performances. AD is known to be "an important instrument of social inclusion" (Braun 2008, p. 12), and AD has been available in Adelaide since 2002 (Seeley 2022). In fact, one of the BSOs with whom Grant was registered was instrumental in supporting AD services in Adelaide for some nine years, from 2002 to 2011. Therefore, I could not understand why that particular BSO had not told Grant about AD. By their very nature, BSOs exist to advise the b/vi community on available services, and in some cases to even provide some of those services. In this first conversation, Grant articulated some of my own questions: "Why haven't they told me about AD? They must know that it exists, so why are they hiding it from us?" I had no answers at the time, but I wanted to find out.

Once Grant heard about AD, he wanted to experience it for himself. Grant's identical twin brother, Barry, had also experienced sudden on-set of the inherited condition which had also resulted in significant sight loss. He had consequently also recently returned with his wife

from working in education overseas for the previous 20 years. When I met them, both of the brothers were in the process of finding various b/vi services available in Adelaide to enable them to overcome sight loss barriers and to continue their full involvement in social and cultural life. Barry and Grant, along with their respective wives, attended an audio described theatre production presented by the State Theatre Company of South Australia (STCSA). In arranging their first visit to an AD theatre performance, I realised that one can only capture a first experience once, so I also arranged to record an interview with each of the brothers. The interview was conducted in two parts: firstly, before each of them experienced AD for live theatre for the first time, and then again immediately after the show. This interview process was undertaken as part of my Bachelor of Media (Honours) research project, and was undertaken within processes formally approved under Ethics Approval No H-2018-081.

In those 2018 interviews, I asked each of the brothers to talk about their first experience of AD for a live performance. They both said they enjoyed the whole experience, and that the AD helped them to follow the on-stage action. While they still had some peripheral sight at that point, they identified that the AD was especially helpful in scenes with low light when they were unable to distinguish any movement on stage for themselves. Grant said that during the show there were times that he became unaware of the AD itself. He forgot it was there and he engaged directly with the world of the on-stage action. In that moment he was unaware of the AD mediating his live theatre experience. Both brothers were keen to experience AD for live theatre again, and Grant was determined to press the BSOs to explain to him why they had not told the brothers about AD for live theatre.

My initial conversation with Grant, and the pre-show and post-show interviews with the two brothers about their first AD experience of live theatre in 2018, have shaped the focus of this research project which thus explores end-user experiences of AD for live theatre. In the first instance, the brothers identified that their first hurdle to experiencing AD for live theatre

was simply being informed by BSOs that AD existed. Therefore, this project investigates end-user experiences of AD in terms of whether BSOs are aware of AD for live theatre, and if they are acting as 'gatekeepers' in terms of limiting knowledge of, and thus demand for, AD services across the b/vi community.

The Adelaide AD services established in 2002 (Seeley 2022), were initially provided by volunteers through the Royal Society for the Blind (RSB) until the service was professionalised in 2011. This is when A2A became responsible for providing professional AD services for live performances. The Adelaide AD services continue to be recognised as some of the highest quality AD services in Australia, with many organisations and individuals seeking AD training and professional development through A2A each year. The focus of A2A training continues to be on developing and delivering high quality AD services in order to improve end-user experiences. Yet, since the transition in 2011 away from the voluntary service supported by RSB, the service has not been well attended in Adelaide. Fewer b/vi people are experiencing AD for live theatre. It is clear that something happened during this transition which was contrary to expectations.

I will therefore investigate this unexpected decline in b/vi experiences of AD in Adelaide. In my own experience of providing professional AD for live theatre since 2015, there have been times that only one or two b/vi people attended an AD theatre performance. A2A holds to the adage 'build it and they will come': that if AD services are provided at a high quality, b/vi people will attend AD theatre. However, it has become clear that, regardless of the quality of the AD in Adelaide, the number of b/vi people experiencing AD for live theatre has dramatically decreased, and it appears that the BSOs may have contributed to that decline.

I will thus also investigate if BSOs are advising their clients about AD for live theatre. In the case of RSB, the organisation has a history of involvement in AD, yet staff have anecdotally not advised clients about AD. This research will thus ask if BSO staff knew about AD for live

theatre and if BSOs are more focussed on supporting and delivering other services that are considered to be more important. That is, are leisure activities peripheral to BSO's focus on supporting b/vi people to secure housing, employment, education and independence? These questions will be asked of the RSB and its staff as well as other BSOs in Adelaide and other locations, in particular to determine if this scenario is peculiar to Adelaide.

Much of AD scholarship has considered issues of AD quality and the professionalisation of practice (Bardini 2020; Fryer 2019; Mazur 2020; Mazur & Chmiel 2021; Orero et al. 2019) and, while b/vi end-users have identified a preference for high quality and professional AD services (Ellis, Peaty, et al. 2019), the research has not adequately understood or accounted for the barriers to b/vi engagement with AD. Certainly in the case of the Lock brothers, the quality of the AD service was not the barrier to their engagement in Adelaide. The barrier for them appeared to be an element of 'gatekeeping' by the BSOs. This project thus also explores barriers to experiencing AD for live performance, which may sit outside of AD practice, and why those barriers have not been understood or accounted for in AD research to date. It also asks whether improving the quality of the AD service will adequately address those barriers and result in increasing the participation of b/vi people experiencing AD for live theatre.

Later in 2018, I was engaged by A2A to co-deliver the first professional AD training in Singapore. In line with best practice, the training included a b/vi end-user as part of the Singapore cohort. During that training, a number of cultural challenges were encountered. For example, human guiding is offered to assist b/vi people in navigating the venue. In Australia, when a sighted guide is leading a b/vi person towards a staircase, it is standard practice for the sighted guide to place the hand of their own guiding arm on a stair banister and allow the b/vi person to trace the outside of the sighted guide's arm with their own hand to locate the banister. In Australia, the sighted guide never grasps the hand or arm of the b/vi person being guided as that is seen as taking away the autonomy of the person being guided. However, the b/vi person

undertaking the AD training in Singapore considered that tracing of the sighted guide's arm was too intimate a process for Singaporean social sensibilities. Rather, in Singapore, the guide would grasp the hand of the b/vi person and place it on the banister. The b/vi training participant also identified that it was not usual for b/vi people to attend theatre in Singapore. She felt that it was because many disabled people in Singapore did not have adequate employment so they may struggle to afford theatre tickets. This led me to wonder if other contexts, beyond AD practice, such as social, cultural, or even political contexts, enabled or constrained b/vi engagement with AD services for live theatre. I also wondered how these contexts might vary between Singapore and Adelaide.

The earliest formal description for a blind audience in the UK was reported by Audio Description Association (ADA) as having occurred in 1917 (Audio Description Association 2014). However, Pfanstiehl and Pfanstiehl's (1985) and in particular Margaret Pfanstiehl's (1997) pioneering work in Washington, DC is acknowledged as instrumental in the development of AD in the so-called 'modern era' of AD (ADA 2014; Fryer 2016; Snyder 2005, 2014), and Washington DC is thus recognised as the birthplace of contemporary AD (ADA 2014; Snyder 2014). Pfanstiehl and Pfanstiehl (1985) were instrumental in supporting the development of a volunteer-run AD service for live theatre in London in the 1980s (Fryer 2016) and their work had a direct impact on the development of live AD for the performing arts in London and across the UK (Fryer 2016). In the late 1980's, professional AD services for live theatre in London were established through VocalEyes (Holland 2009). Volunteer AD services were established in Adelaide in the early 2000s, with describers from VocalEyes engaged by A2A providing formal training and support to establish professional AD services in Adelaide from 2011 (Seeley 2022). Then, in late 2018, A2A supported the Singapore Repertory Theatre (SRT) to establish professional AD services in Singapore. Just as London's AD services

influenced the development of AD in Adelaide, so Adelaide's AD services influenced the development of AD in Singapore.

Thus, three research sites, London, Singapore, and Adelaide, were chosen for this research because they are closely linked in the recent history of AD. In each of these sites, contemporary AD services were first developed for live theatre, and in spite of the fact that in Europe, opera "is where most live AD is delivered" (Taylor 2016, p. 230), AD is not available for opera at all in either Adelaide or Singapore. AD for live theatre was the launching point for my initial investigation in 2018, and AD for live theatre is the only genre of live performance that is readily available in all three research sites at the present time. Therefore, live theatre was chosen as the genre through which this project investigates AD end-user experiences in London, Singapore, and Adelaide. Therefore, given this history of the development of AD, and my professional connection with both the Adelaide and Singapore AD services through A2A, AD end-user experiences in London, Singapore, and Adelaide will be compared and contrasted.

AD research has drawn on scholarship across several disciplines, such as studies of disability, linguistics, media, accessibility, psychology, and human rights, and more. AD has been studied from product, process, and reception perspectives, with a view to enhancing end-user experiences (Holsanova 2022). However, even with this end-user focus (Matamala & Orero 2016b), the dominant paradigm within which AD research is undertaken remains translation studies (Braun & Starr 2021). This means that most of the AD scholarship focusses on issues of interpretation (process and reception) and the consequent implications for practice. This has resulted in the full range of end-user experiences not being well understood or taken into account. It is this gap that the current project begins to address.

This research draws on scholarship from critical disability studies, audience studies, and theatre studies. It further broadens AD scholarship to consider political, social and cultural contexts through which to explore a number of barriers identified by b/vi end-users as being

important to them (Schoenmakers 1990). The research data suggests that those issues are often external to the AD product, process, or reception, yet significantly impact on AD end-user experiences, thereby challenging previous understandings of what has been referred to in the literature as the end-user 'experience' of AD.

AD scholarship has identified that end-user experience remains imperative for informing further research (Matamala & Orero 2016b). However, in the research that does consider end-user experience, projects have tended to investigate that experience in terms of end-user 'reception' of the audio description. 'Reception' has typically been understood as the end-user's understanding or comprehension of the visual content of the source text (Chmiel & Mazur 2012; Fels et al. 2006; Fernández, Martínez & Núñez 2015; Holsanova 2022; Mazur & Chmiel 2016). That is, end-user 'reception' has been explored primarily through comparing the consequent impact of different describer choices of words or styles of delivery (process and practice) on the end-user's understanding (reception) of the source text (Fernández-Torné & Matamala 2015; Fresno, Castellà Mate & Soler Vilageliu 2014; Romero-Fresco & Fryer 2013). Holsanova (2016, 2022) has explored end-user reception through cognitively oriented research and identifies that AD involves more than simply the task of conveying the content of a visual text. Holsanova (2016, p. 49) stated that AD is about helping "end-users get involved … with the story," and about describers "conveying experience – so that people with visual impairments can enjoy the performance" (2016, p. 51). Holsanova (2016) suggests that the end-user AD experience is something more than just the comprehension of the information that AD provides. It is about entering into the world of the story itself and enjoying that embodied experience. As mentioned, much AD research to date has focussed on end-user comprehension, but has not understood or accounted for a full range of end-user experiences. Neither has the focus on improving the quality of AD services, known as professionalisation, adequately addressed the barriers to the end-user experience of a live theatre performance.

There are several reasons why this project focusses on live theatre to explore questions of end-users' embodied experiences. Firstly, live theatre is the only genre of live performance that is offered in Singapore, it is the locus of most AD activity in Adelaide, and it was the focus of AD in London when contemporary AD services were first developed. Live theatre is the common genre across all three sites for which AD is readily available. Therefore, the current research project seeks to better understand and account for a broader range of AD end-user experiences, beyond comprehension or 'reception', and particularly as they relate to live theatre, including barriers identified by end-users to that engagement.

After their first experience of AD for live theatre, the respondents in my 2018 research remarked that although they could not identify the moment it happened, at some point in the live performance experience they had stopped being aware that they were listening to the AD, and had simply engaged in the world of the on-stage performance itself. This is echoed in AD research by Fryer, Pring and Freeman (2013) that explored end-user 'presence' which is understood to be "immersion in a mediated environment such that it seems unmediated" (Fryer, Pring & Freeman 2013, p. 65). Although exploring AD end-user engagement in relation to film, rather than live theatre, Fresno (2017) identifies that engagement is "the feeling of being transported to the narrative world" which is "facilitated by [both] comprehension and immersion" (p. 13). Fryer and Walczak (2021) suggest that "emotional engagement, enjoyment and narrative understanding can be shown to be constituent parts of presence [and] measuring presence is one way of measuring quality" (p. 15). This work is concerned with measuring end-user engagement with a view to improving the quality of AD practice. In contrast, the current project does not measure end-user engagement but it does explore end-user experiences of AD for live performance, and considers whether improving the quality of AD practice adequately addresses the barriers to AD engagement which the end-user respondents identify.

Rationale, Justification and Study Aims

One of the brothers in my 2018 research was deeply moved by his AD experience. It was not unlike the experience captured by Cronin and King (1990) in regard to a respondent's first experience of AD, albeit for television: "[It] was very emotional… It was like somebody had opened a door into a new world in which I was able to see with my ears what most people see with their eyes" (p. 505). Although almost three decades apart, these similar and intensely emotional and personal responses to a first encounter with AD suggests that further investigation into end-user responses to the experience of AD as a whole event may be warranted. Therefore, this research investigates the end-user experience of AD for a live performance event as a whole, as an embodied experience, beyond the end-user's cognitive reception of the source text.

Also motivating this work is a desire to better understand AD experience as it sits in its wider social and cultural contexts. The respondents interviewed in 2018 spoke of other barriers they encountered in the overall experience of attending an AD theatre show. The barriers were unrelated to the AD performance itself, and were encountered within the contexts of their daily lives and which presented significant challenges to b/vi participation in social, cultural, and leisure activities, including live theatre. In the first instance, they were not informed that AD even existed, which appeared to be a systemic or organisational barrier. Once they had experienced AD for live theatre, they also identified barriers such as transport, ticketing, and sighted-guide supports required for them to attend a show. These barriers had nothing to do with the quality of the AD or the professionalism of the service. More needs to be understood about the wider barriers to participation that b/vi people encounter, in order to more fully understand the b/vi AD experience.

This project builds on AD scholarship which identifies the need for a greater focus on end-user experience. Greening and Rolph (2007), when reporting on AD for television and films in the UK, highlight the need for formal end-user engagement, beyond spontaneous and/or informal feedback. Matamala and Orero (2016b) identify the need for b/vi AD end-users to be involved in shaping research. Holsanova (2016) also identifies the importance of engaging end-users in AD research, particularly recommending the use of qualitative methods to capture the personal experiences of AD end-users.

In its focus on 'thicker' descriptions (Geertz 1973) of user experiences, informed by the priorities and practicalities of the people and organisations involved, this research aims to reflect understandings from cultural studies of the importance of prioritising participant perspectives and voices. This project also draws upon perspectives from critical disability studies that suggest that for disability research to be empowering, it must generate data and analyses that are meaningful, that inform practice, and that translate into improved outcomes for those living with disability (Barnes 1992; Skoss 2018). The research must also connect theory and daily life (Kitchin 2000), and acknowledge the lived experiences of disabled people whose lives are being researched (Imrie 1996).

The rationale for the current project was therefore distilled at the intersection of several issues raised in both my professional and academic experience, namely: AD services had been available in Adelaide for almost 20 years; the professionalisation of the AD services in Adelaide had not resulted in growing the number of b/vi people accessing AD, but had instead resulted in a sudden and significant drop in b/vi AD end-users, a trend that has continued; improving the quality of AD practice had largely failed to address significant barriers to b/vi participation; and, it had become evident that there is more to the b/vi AD end-user experiences than the extent of comprehension of source texts through the AD content.

Therefore this project seeks to better understand the end-user experience of AD for live theatre. The improvement of AD practice is not the primary focus. Rather, the project investigates the broader contexts which impact on b/vi people's participation and experience of AD. It identifies broader enablers or barriers to AD experiences, and explores the embodied b/vi end-user experience of AD for live theatre. Utilising Singapore and London as additional research sites offers significant points of comparison of end-user experiences, which allows an investigation into whether my initial observations in the Adelaide context are reflected elsewhere, or if different issues are identified in different locations and contexts. My own professional experiences in Adelaide and Singapore have provided easy access to industry contacts to support recruitment in those two sites, as well as introductions to key personnel involved in AD services in London.

Terminology

AD is inherently multi-disciplinary (Holsanova 2022; Matamala & Orero 2016b; Starr & Braun 2021) and thus it must be noted that the terminology used in one discipline can be applied differently in another. For example, one such term is 'reception'. As identified earlier, in most AD research 'reception' refers to the end-user's comprehension of the AD. Whereas, in the field of audience studies, 'reception' applies to the end-user's whole experience of the live performance event (Brown, AS & Novak 2007; Reason 2010; Tulloch 2009; Walmsley 2019). The audience's experience of a live performance event is also explored in the field of psychology, where scholars use the terms 'flow' or 'presence' (Csikszentmihalyi 2000; Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi 2014).

Furthermore, signifiers are charged with meaning. Consider the terms 'wheelchair bound' and 'wheelchair user'. The former term places the person as passive and constrained, whereas

with the latter term, the person is situated as active and autonomous. The choice of identifier in AD research may reflect the context in which the research has been undertaken. For example, some scholars talk about end-users as 'customers' (Fryer & Walczak 2021) while others use 'audience' (Braun & Starr 2021). Such terms may be used as intentional signifiers, referencing the politicization of the disability movement and therefore positioning the b/vi person in an active stance. For example, AD scholarship has also used the term 'beneficiaries' (Jankowska 2015), 'viewers' (Bardini 2020), and 'citizens' (Hughes, C, Orero & Rai 2021) to describe b/vi AD audiences. However, terms for identifying b/vi people who use AD that refer to a 'user', 'end user', or 'end-user' have been used extensively in AD scholarship (Holsanova 2016; Orero & Tor-Carroggio 2018; Perego & Taylor 2022; Tor-Carroggio & Orero 2019). By incorporating '*user*', all of these terms indicate an active engagement initiated by the b/vi person, rather than passivity and constraint; a user acts whereas a recipient is passive and acted upon. Prioritising this active stance in those who use a service reflects both long-standing disability scholarship (Barnes & Mercer 2006; Charlton 2000), and how disability operates in each of the three research sites. Consequently, the term 'end-user' will be used in this thesis to refer to b/vi persons who use AD services, in order to reflect their position as active users.

There are many terms by which people who live with low or no sight identify themselves in terms of their ocular capacity. Some people with no usable sight may be registered with government services under a classification of 'blind' and comfortably use that term in describing themselves. Others, who may have some usable sight, may prefer to be known as having 'impaired sight', or 'low vision', or as being 'vision-impaired'. Indeed, as will be discussed below, some of the respondents have used different terms to describe themselves at different times within the one interview. For clarity throughout this thesis, the term 'blind/vision-impaired' (b/vi) has been used to identify people with impaired sight, regardless of whether they have any usable ocular capacity or are totally blind. It should also be noted that

this study does not investigate the extent of ocular capacity of respondents. Nor does it consider where respondents sit on the continuum of having had sight and therefore access to visual memory, or having had no sight since birth.

Theory and Discipline

Considerable AD research to date has been undertaken within theoretical and pedagogical frameworks of reception and translation studies (Braun 2008; Braun & Starr 2021; Díaz Cintas, Orero & Remael 2007; Ely et al. 2006; Hoffner, Baker & Quinn 2008; Kleege & Wallin 2015). The imperative for research to prioritise AD end-user voice and experience, as identified by Matamala and Orero (2016b), is also foundational to this current study. This project echoes recent work by Fryer and Walczak (2021) that identifies "it is high time to revisit customer expectations" (p. 14). However, whereas that research continues to explore end-user experience in terms of process and reception, this project considers end-user 'customer' experience of the live performance event and explores barriers to participation in that experience.

Without an audience there is no performance (Bentley 1991; Freshwater 2009), and this project is about end-user experiences of live performance. The field of audience studies also prioritises lived experience (Johanson 2013) in seeking to understand the audience (Carlson 2016; Reason 2010; Reinelt 2014). By leveraging scholarship in audience studies, albeit for sighted audiences, this project explores the experiences of b/vi AD end-users as theatre audiences. This research is also situated within critical disability studies which is also inherently interdisciplinary (Kent, Robertson, et al. 2019) and prioritises the lived experience, where people living with disability are recognised as experts in their own lives (Duckett & Pratt 2001; Garland-Thomson 2019; Zarb 1992).

Issues of identity and citizenship are central to disability (Barnes 2007; Beresford & Croft 1993; Morris 2005), with an emerging awareness of 'cultural citizenship' within disability rights-based discourses (Pullen, Jackson & Silk 2020). In spite of this strong politicisation of disability issues, there remains little legislative support to enable b/vi people to exercise their cultural citizenship and there is no legislative requirement for AD for the performing arts in any of the three research sites. These political and cultural contexts are external to AD practice, and are not addressed by the research focus on product, process, or reception, yet clearly contribute to the broader environment within which b/vi end-users experience daily life. These contexts in turn shape their AD experience.

Researcher's Positionality

As Greene (2014) has pointed out, "Qualitative researchers should recognise and address their position and role in the research project, as such reflection will not only provide the reader with a fuller, richer account of the methods employed but will also work to ensure that the participant's voice is heard" (p. 12). Thus, from the outset it is important to recognise that I hold a number of positions in this project: I am both a professional describer and an academic; I regularly have conversations about access issues with b/vi AD end-users and with staff of venue/theatre companies; and I discuss the ongoing professional development of describers and AD services with BSOs that provide or support such services. These positions situate me uniquely (Holmes 2020) within this research project as well as outside of it (Berger, R 2015). In my professional role of describer, I am part of delivering AD services for live theatre, and as will be discussed below, I have had similar experiences to those which some respondents have spoken about in their interviews for this research, albeit from the delivery side rather than as a 'customer'. In my professional role of describer, I am also part of discussing, delivering, and

undertaking ongoing professional development of other describers and of description services, often based on informal end-user feedback.

Sharing a similar AD practice lexicon with the end-users and with staff from organisations that provide or support AD for live theatre, provided a significant advantage because it enabled me to quickly build a rapport with respondents and to easily facilitate the interviews which provided the primary research data for this project. However, this project did not explore the describer's perspective, nor did it investigate issues of AD practice. Therefore, in that regard, I am not fully 'an insider' in relation to this project which focusses on the b/vi end-user experience. I have not personally experienced impaired sight, and I have not used AD services myself. Rather, I am sighted, and I am part of delivering the AD services that end-users use. I therefore characterise myself as being a 'partial insider' in this project, in that the end-user respondents and I have shared some similar experiences of AD for live theatre, although I do maintain "a degree of distance or detachment" (Chavez 2008, p. 475) from the b/vi end-user participants. This distance was literal in relation to the London and Singapore end-users, whom I never physically met in person for this project, but only interviewed online. Although I met with the Adelaide end-users in person, my position as researcher in this project was somewhat detached from all of the end-users in that I had never delivered AD for any of the London or Singapore end-user respondents, and I had only delivered AD for one of the five Adelaide respondents, albeit several years before their involvement in this project.

As Greene (2014) identified, "positionality is determined by where one stands in relation to the other [and] this can shift throughout the process of conducting research" (p. 2). As well as reflecting on where I stand in relation to the b/vi end-user participants, my position also needs to be considered in relation to the BSOs and theatre/venue companies involved in supporting AD for live theatre. In that regard, this project could be considered to be a "practitioner enquiry" (Hellawell 2006) in that, I hold a professional role as an AD practitioner,

and this project explored some of the systemic challenges encountered by BSOs and venue/theatre companies in supporting the provision of AD for b/vi audiences attending live theatre. However, none of the BSO or venue/theatre staff respondents spoke specifically about the AD practice, but rather about their interface with the end-users. My 'partial insider' position as a professional describer provided me with significant advantages in the process of recruiting participants because it gave me an "immediate legitimacy in the field" (Chavez 2008, p. 479) and allowed me "to create nearly instant access and rapport" (Chavez 2008, p. 481) with participants in all three respondent cohorts – the end-users, the BSOs and the venue/theatre company staff. As Greene (2014) identified, an advantage of being an 'insider' researcher, albeit a 'partial insider' in this instance, is that my professional practice experience had already oriented myself with the research environment and I had pre-existing knowledge of some of the contexts of the participants, enabling me to "ask meaningful questions and read non-verbal cues" (Merriam et al. 2001, p. 411). Thus, while I am situated as a 'partial insider' in this research project, I am also in many ways situated as an 'outsider' in this research: this project does not investigate the experiences of describers; in my professional AD role I am not directly engaged by BSOs or theatres/venues that support AD; nor am I a member of the b/vi community. As both an 'outsider' and a 'partial insider' I have been able to use my own professional experience, "which offer[ed] intimate familiarity and hence potentially deeper understanding" (Pillow 2003, p. 224) to inform my interviews with respondents.

Project Design

The project design limited my interactions with participants to an initial one-hour interview, and follow-up emails to clarify any details as required. Therefore, I did not face any of the complications of the 'insider' positionality listed by Chavez (2008) such as group

dynamics that constrained my research objectives, expectations that I would get involved in participant events, or be entangled in political or cultural issues within participant communities. Nor did I face any access barriers due to the political climate in any of the three research sites.

Selection bias from the researcher perspective was not an issue in this study because all of the end-user participants that indicated their interest in being involved, and who met the specific attributes of (1) having a vision impairment, (2) having experienced AD for live theatre, and (3) being located in one of the three research sites, were included in the project. BSOs or venue/theatre companies in each of the three cities assisted me with participant recruitment and there may have been an element of selection bias at that level. However, the organisations that assisted with participant recruitment reported that they had emailed their database of those who met the stated criteria and invited them to be in direct contact with me. No other vetting of potential participants was reported by those organisations.

While I do not live with impaired sight, scholars with a lived experience of disability identify that the lived experience of non-disabled 'allies' can also provide important understandings of the disabled experience (Loftis 2018). Although I am not a b/vi person, this project "provide[s] space for the voices and experiences of those with disabilities to be present, heard, and valued [and examines] where social oppression continues, and [argues] for disabled … people [to have] equal rights to independent living and inclusion in their communities" (Sarah Whatley in Hadley et al. 2019, p. 367). This project thus prioritises the voices of b/vi AD end-users, who identify barriers to their social inclusion and community participation in relation to attending live theatre performances.

Hadley et al. (2019) suggest that future disability research on arts, culture, and media may include:

research that acknowledges that no one disabled person can recognise, reflect on, and speak to the whole, diverse, intersectional, interdependent reality of disability experience. Futures in which research by disabled people can exist in productive dialogue with research by non-disabled allies, advocates, and supporters who work with disabled people [and] experience a sense of commonality with those for whom they do this work. Futures in which research by a range of allies [and] advocates … exists in productive dialogue, enabling readers to reflect, critique, and draw their own conclusions on a range of different accounts of disability experience (Hadley et al. 2019, pp. 369-370).

This research project thus gathers input from a range of b/vi AD end-users in each of the three research sites. Those b/vi end-users share their experiences with me in my role as a non-b/vi researcher, and as a 'partial insider' in AD practice by virtue of my professional work as an audio describer. This project explores b/vi end-user experiences of AD for live theatre. It prioritises end-user voices in order to better understand barriers to access and participation in AD for live theatre, the barriers that the b/vi respondents themselves have identified. Accounts from people involved in providing or promoting those AD services are also included in this project, in order to understand the interactions of social, cultural and political contexts which are also shown to impact on end-user experiences.

Thesis Outline

This first chapter has introduced the thesis and provided a comprehensive background to the study based on my experiences and positionality in the field. The rationale for this research was explained, and the study aims were justified above. The parameters of the study were

outlined with a note on the three research sites. A note on terminology and the theoretical approach to this study was detailed.

The next chapter reviews relevant literature from the fields of audience studies, theatre studies, and critical disability studies to extend understandings about end-user reception and experience. The chapter also considers AD literature which has been dominated by a focus on issues of practice. Where AD research has considered end-user experience, it has been primarily in terms of end-user "reception", exploring the impact that different words or styles of delivery have had on the end-user understanding of the AD. However, there has been limited exploration of the embodied end-user experience of AD for live theatre. Nor have the barriers to that experience, as articulated by b/vi end-user respondents, been fully understood or adequately addressed by the predominant focus of AD scholarship on AD practice.

Chapter Three outlines the methods used in the research, which foregrounds the personal experiences of "the researched" (Morris 2007; Oliver 2013). Qualitative research is "contextual and subjective" (Whittemore, Chase & Mandle 2001, p. 524) and the chapter explains why and how semi-structured interviews were used with end-users to gather data about matters of interest to the respondents (Priest 2010; Weerakkody 2009). The approach allowed b/vi people "discuss the experiences they themselves consider important" (Schoenmakers 1990, p. 100), and to describe their own experiences in their own words (Campbell & Oliver 1998). The chapter also explains why, and how, semi-structured interviews with staff from Blind Service Organisations (BSOs) and with staff from venues/theatre companies supporting AD services, were used to gather data about contexts which enable or constrain their involvement in supporting end-users to engage with AD for live theatre.

Chapter Four considers a number of broad legislative and socio-cultural contexts which shape daily life experiences of the b/vi respondents in each of the three research sites. Firstly,

the chapter identifies a prevailing context which exists across all three sites. That context is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (United Nations [UN] 2006) to which all three sites are signatories. However, the chapter identifies that the Convention is enacted to different degrees in each site, and this shapes the ways in which disability is understood and how it operates in each site. The chapter then explores the different legislative contexts in each site which further shape the prevailing socio-cultural contexts therein. It is this unique combination of international convention and national legislation which provides a significant framework within which the BSOs and professional organisations that provide and/or support AD services operate. This chapter reports on findings from interviews with staff working with BSOs about their work and the contexts in which they operate, and how those contexts enable or constrain their involvement in supporting b/vi end-users to access AD for live theatre. The chapter also reports on findings from interviews with staff working with venues/theatre companies in each research site about the ways in which they support AD for live performances. The next three chapters of the thesis turn attention to the b/vi end-users.

Chapter Five reports on data from interviews with the London respondents who have attended the most AD theatre performances of all b/vi end-users in this project, and this is reflected in their nuanced articulations of their experiences. The London end-users identified several examples of AD practice which supported their inclusion and even immersion and deep engagement with live theatre experiences. However, in spite of reporting high quality AD services and extensive AD experiences, they still identified a number of barriers to their engagement with AD for live theatre, including a lack of awareness that AD for live theatre exists, challenges with the AD content or delivery, situational or environmental factors and transport challenges. The latter two areas of end-user disengagement with the AD service were not directly related to the AD at all, and would therefore not be adequately addressed by improving the quality of the AD services. The chapter argues that while AD scholarship has

focussed on improving end-user engagement by improving the quality of AD practices, barriers to AD end-user engagement may not be fully understood or adequately addressed by that professionalisation.

Chapter Six reports on findings from Singapore end-user interviews. Although Singapore's AD service was only established in late 2018, it adopted some elements of professional AD practice from the more mature UK service at the outset, and which are not yet in place in Adelaide even though that service has been available for more than 20 years. The research data identified some unintended consequences to the adoption of professional practice elements have impacted on the end-user experience in Singapore. The chapter shows how, despite the service being in its infancy, Singapore end-user respondents readily identified several elements of AD practice which contributed to a high quality AD service in that site. One such element is formal end-user feedback mechanisms. However, the interview data revealed an unexpected outcome of this professionalisation of the AD service in Singapore. The engagement of end-users in formal feedback processes has been identified as an important aspect of end-user empowerment, as well as both practice and service development. Paradoxically, this engagement in Singapore resulted in the *disengagement* of end-users from some aspects of the live theatre experience. This data suggests that b/vi people can encounter barriers to participation that may actually be caused by elements of AD practice. However, such barriers cannot be fully addressed by research whose primary goal has been to improve the quality of AD practice.

Chapter Seven identifies experiences of b/vi patrons attending theatre performances in Adelaide. Although AD services have been available in Adelaide for more than 20 years, only a small number of the Adelaide participants had attended more than one live performance with AD. The chapter discusses some surprising themes that emerge from the end-user interviews, including: low awareness of AD for live theatre; a lack of support and/or promotion of AD

services by the BSOs working within that research site; and the low uptake of AD services for live theatre. In Adelaide, several respondents also identified local transport as being a barrier to engagement. Once again, the interview data suggests that b/vi people encountered barriers to participation that have neither been well understood nor adequately addressed by research focused on the quality of AD practice. The chapter concludes by arguing that the inclusion of formal end-user feedback processes may help to begin addressing these issues in Adelaide; however, the data in this context shows that the impact of professionalising elements of practice in isolation may be minimal.

Chapter Eight sums up the project, responding to the main research question identified at the beginning of this chapter, identifies research constraints and opportunities for practice development, and provides recommendations for further research.

Summary

This first chapter has detailed the background to the study and justified this research. My experiences and positionality in the field were explained, and the study aims were justified above. The parameters of the study were outlined with a note on the three research sites. A note on terminology and the theoretical approach to this study was detailed. The structure of the thesis chapters were also outlined. Having now introduced the thesis, the next Chapter presents relevant literature from several disciplines, at the intersection of which are fertile grounds for extending interdisciplinary investigations in the field of AD, and which provide the scholarly foundations for the current project.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter reviews the relevant literature from the research fields of AD, critical disability studies, audience studies, and theatre studies. Firstly, the chapter considers disability and how different understandings of disability have shaped the contexts in which disability access supports have been developed and delivered. Understandings of disability and the way it operates have informed scholarship in critical disability studies and also in AD research. These understandings have contributed to the broader context in which AD is provided and have, to a greater or lesser degree in each research site, contributed to the development of AD services. The chapter presents a number of models of disability and identifies literature from the field of critical disability studies that explores disability as a social, cultural and political issue. Secondly, the chapter explores the literature on audience experience of the live performing arts. Thirdly, the chapter discusses literature in the fields of theatre studies and audience studies to illustrate issues of access and participation specifically relevant to the b/vi end-user experience of AD for the performing arts. Fourthly, this chapter reviews scholarly work in the field of AD, where most of that research to date has been primarily concerned with matters that inform practice.

While improving AD practice has delivered positive end-user experiences, I will argue that this focus has resulted in the full range of end-user experiences not being well understood or accounted for in AD scholarship to date. The AD literature uses the term 'experience' when measuring end-user 'reception' or comprehension of AD content or the source text. I will use theatre and audience scholarship to challenge that limited perspective of end-user 'experience' and will argue that there is more to the end-user 'experience' of AD for live theatre than

'reception' of the AD content or the source text which is described. Thus, the thesis will argue that end-user experience of AD for live theatre encompasses the embodied experience of attending a theatre performance.

Disability Intersectionality

Garland-Thomson (2002, p. 9) wrote that "Understanding how disability functions along with other systems of representation clarifies how all the systems intersect and mutually constitute one another". Thus, uunderstandings of disability and how it operates are foundational to understanding the context of the daily lives of the end-user respondents and I argue that those contexts shape the ways in which end-users experience AD for live theatre. The way disability is viewed is shaped by the socially dominant culture (Riddell & Watson 2003). A number of models of disability have been developed to frame understandings of disability and to explore how it operates. The charity model casts disabled people as objects to be pitied, "deserving of charity or public assistance" (Barnes & Mercer 2006, p. 2). By the late 1800s the medical model of disability prevailed in the industrialised world, where "confinement, institutionalization, and dependency had become the reality of disabled people's lives" (Hughes, B 2005, p. 83). As one disability arts scholar explains, "The medical model of disability is based upon a normative idea of the human body, so treatment and care for bodies that diverge from the 'norm' tends towards reducing difference so that the individual can fit more easily into social structures" (Whatley 2019, p. 325). The medical model of disability situates a defect in a person which needs to be cured "if the person is to achieve full capacity as a human being" (Siebers 2008, p. 3).

Understandings of disability were transformed in the 1980s (Campbell & Oliver 1998) which led Michael Oliver, through his work with the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) in the UK, to develop what he coined as the 'social model' of disability

(Davis 2013; Oliver 1983). This model shifted the concept of disability from supervision and medicalization to one of disablement by societal oppression (Hughes, B 2005). Developed as a tool to improve the lives of people living with disability (Oliver 2013), the social model broadly makes a case for the social and political nature of disability (Goggin 2018). Society is tasked with identifying and addressing the barriers to access and inclusion that people with disability encounter. It has been the impetus of much activity and activism within the disability community globally for more than 40 years. The social model is still used as a tool that "separate[s] the biological and the social" aspects of disability (Barnes 2007, p. 206). As Duckett and Pratt (2001) have pointed out, "it focuses on the social, economic and political barriers that 'disable' people who have impairments and contrasts the medical model of disability that equates disablement with impairment alone" (p. 816).

The social model of disability challenges "social discrimination and normative assumptions" (Berghs et al. 2019, p. 1035) that disabled people are in need of intervention and/or charity (Oliver 1990). The broad principles of the social model include individual choice and control, equity, access, and opportunity (Barnes & Mercer 2006; Campbell & Oliver 1998; Charlton 2000). Goodley (2016, 2017) identifies the intersectional character of disability as a paradigm from which to consider an array of political and practical issues. Disability is further understood to be "a social, political and cultural phenomenon" (Linton 1998, p. 2), with a political imperative to address social exclusion (Verhaeghe, Van der Bracht & Van de Putte 2016) and to pursue equal citizenship for all (Campbell & Oliver 1998). The social model of disability informs the UNCRPD (UN 2006), which is the first international treaty that frames disability in terms of human rights, including the equal access to participation in social life. It has been adopted and adapted internationally (Barnes 2007), including in all three sites of this research project, although to differing degrees in each location, as will be discussed below in Chapter 4.

While the social model of disability has transformed the lives of many disabled people, Levitt (2017) suggests an extension or reworking of that model is now required as "societal attitudes to … disability have changed substantially" (pp. 589-90) since it was first developed in the early 1980s. Others, including Crow (2010) and Shakespeare (1996), argue for a new model of disability that investigates "the complexities of disability, culture and identity" (Riddell & Watson 2003, p. 4). While the UNCRPD is based on the social model, it is the human rights model against which the UN monitors the signatory states' implementation thereof. Lawson and Beckett (2021, p. 350) argue that these models have different and even 'symbiotic' functions and that the social model and the human rights model should be considered as complementary. However, social policies in the UK and Australia are based predominantly on the social model of disability which seeks to validate and amplify the voices of disabled people themselves and to prioritise and support an individual's agency, choice, and control (Oliver 1983, 2013; Shakespeare 2013). The social model of disability suggests that people are more disabled by barriers within society, than by their physical or mental impairment (Boxall 2018). It moves away from the medicalised approach to a "social-contextual construction of disability" (Ellis, Garland-Thomson, et al. 2019b; Oliver 2009). Yet, "disability issues have always been set in a political context" (Barton-Farcas 2018, p. 3). Tom Shakespeare further suggests that "disability is a complex interaction of … cultural and socio-political factors" (2014, p. 26).

Within the social model, disability is conceived as a representational system rather than just a medical challenge. It becomes a social construct rather than a personal misfortune or a physical defect (Garland-Thomson 2019). Such considerations of disability raise issues such as equal access for all, and the historical exclusion of people living with disability from the public sphere. Civil rights approaches to disability bridge the activist and academic landscape, embracing the disability activist slogan "nothing about us without us" (Charlton 2000; Kent,

Ellis, et al. 2019). The individual, rather than being the object of pitiable misfortune (as tragic victim), or of admiration (as inspirational hero) (Fernandes & Robertson 2019; Kafer 2013), is now situated as the 'expert' in matters pertaining to themselves. This approach has informed the field of critical disability studies.

Critical Disability Studies

The academic study of disability, known as critical disability studies, locates its perspective in the lived experience of disability, recognising that those living with disability are best placed to speak about their own lived experiences. Critical disability studies began in the 1980s as part of the "politicized identity-based … rights-based, social-justice-influenced" fields of study that were developing at the time (Garland-Thomson 2019, p. 11). Out of this politicization of disability came the formation of UPIAS and the articulation of the social model of disability (Campbell & Oliver 1998; Oliver 1983, 2013). Scholars in this field highlight the importance of engaging both with people with lived experience of disability (Boxall 2018) and with those delivering disability services (Skoss 2018), so that research informs practice and delivers improved outcomes of meaningful participation (Llewellyn in Skoss 2018) and social inclusion for end-users (Simplican et al. 2015). These foundational understandings shape the approach taken in this research project investigating b/vi end-user experiences of AD for the performing arts. This project also draws on the inherently interdisciplinary nature of critical disability studies (Kent, Robertson, et al. 2019) which also considers disability to be a "human rights issue" (Garland-Thomson 2019, p. 12). The human rights aspect of disability is discussed further in Chapter 4, in terms of international convention.

Disability arts can help foster inclusion and innovation in the arts and in the society that the arts seek to reflect. Indeed, Hadley (2017) identifies that in Australia "references to disability, disabled artists, and disabled arts practices have become a regular part of theatre

training, production, policy, funding and critique" (p. 305). Other scholars identify that the involvement of people living with disability in researching access and involvement in disability arts more broadly (Borgdorff 2011; Fox & Macpherson 2015; Pointon 1997) fosters further inclusion. However, the experiences of theatre audiences in general have been under-researched (Freshwater 2009; Reinelt 2014; Walmsley 2019) and the experiences of b/vi theatre audiences in particular remain largely unresearched or at best under-researched (Udo, Acevedo & Fels 2010; Walczak & Fryer 2017).

Contemporary society is powerfully influenced by media, and much of the cultural life of society takes place through the media (Greco & Jankowska 2020). This is especially true in the realm of disability (Ellis & Goggin 2015), which challenges notions of media access. Braun (2008) and Braun and Orero (2010) identify AD as an arts and media access service, aimed at reducing the exclusion of b/vi people. Other recent AD research considered leveraging new technology in a virtual reality environment (Fryer & Walczak 2021) and the use of AD to "transform the accessibility of immersive content" (Hughes, C, Orero & Rai 2021, p. 121). There is a growing interest in the way that arts and media representation shape the lives of people who live with disability (Hadley & McDonald 2019), where media plays a central role in culturally embedding the profound sense of otherness that people who are living with disability experience (Goggin & Newell 2005). It has been suggested that disability arts/culture/media research should

> … make a difference in the way disabled people are positioned in the public
>
> sphere. In doing so, it should also make a difference in the practice and
>
> politics of representation more broadly (Hadley et al. 2019, p. 363).

A number of researchers have been investigating the intersection of disability and media, considering both the "great potential of digital technology" (Ellis & Kent 2011, p. 1) and also the growing so-called 'digital divide' between abled and disabled communities in relation to

accessing media (Ellcessor 2010; Goggin & Newell 2003). Ellis, Peaty, et al. (2019) identify the Australian b/vi audience in terms of television, where they note a pervasive cultural assumption that b/vi people do not require any assisted access to television because they do not engage with it. This is in spite of evidence that b/vi people do in fact watch television and enjoy the social nature of that activity (Cronin & King 1990; Packer & Kirchner 1997).

Researchers working in the area of disability and access to culture (Ellis 2014a, 2014b; Ellis, Kent & Locke 2018; Ellis, Peaty, et al. 2019) only briefly mention AD for live performance, even though this remains the locus of most AD activity in Australia (Seeley 2022). Recent AD research considers leveraging new technologies to explore end-user immersion in, and comprehension of, AD material in a virtual reality environment (Fryer & Walczak 2021) and the use of AD to "transform the accessibility of immersive content" (Hughes, C, Orero & Rai 2021, p. 121). Digital media continues to powerfully influence society and enable/constrain access to participation, and the European Commission report on television content accessibility noted that legislative requirements drive the development of access services (Kubitschke et al. 2013).

Disability also challenges understandings of citizenship. Dahlgren (2000) presents four aspects of citizenship relevant to the media/society link: civil citizenship (seeking to guarantee basic legal integrity); political citizenship (ensuring rights associated with participation in democracy); social citizenship (one's sense of belonging within society); and cultural citizenship (the right to participate in and enjoy one's culture and leisure). Being a part of media audiences is "becoming crucial to the way in which they participate as citizens" (Livingstone 1998, p 197). This has implications for those who are excluded from participating as citizens because their disability excludes them from being members of media audiences (Goggin & Newell 2003). Digital media and participatory cultures have the potential to foster engaged, active citizens, yet digital media technology has not solved problems of access and inclusion,

and may even have exacerbated them. "Technology not only fails to 'fix' disability, but may even create it through technological barriers which function to exclude certain bodies from full participation" (Ellcessor 2016, pp. 2-3, 5).

Snyder (2005) suggests that AD is about democracy, where citizens have equal rights before the law, and where b/vi people should not be culturally or socially disadvantaged or excluded. In the early 1970s, new social movements emerged around a struggle for genuine social equality, justice, and participatory democracy (Croft & Beresford 1992). A foundational principle of disability rights activism is that of end-user voice informing equal participation (Charlton 2000; Oliver 1983, 2013; Shakespeare 2013; UPIAS 1976). The broad disability rights movement saw changes in legislation and policy that had previously kept disabled people from "exercising the privileges and obligations of full citizenship" (Garland-Thomson 2016). In spite of all three research sites being signatories to the UNCRPD, I will argue that the ongoing lack of national legislative requirements for the provision of AD is perpetuating disadvantage and exclusion.

Citizenship and participation in cultural life are foundational issues for people living with disability (Barnes 2007; Beresford & Croft 1993; Croft & Beresford 1992; Morris 2005). Participation in social and cultural life has been identified as being of great importance for people living with disabilities (Patterson & Pegg 2009). Darcy and Taylor (2009) suggest that this is because disabled people have been denied the opportunity to express active citizenship through contribution such as employment. Yet research into disability participation has focussed more on the benefits of movement through participating in activity, even though cultural life is so much more than merely a physical activity with therapeutic outcomes (Barnes 1999; Barnes & Mercer 2006; Barnes, Mercer & Shakespeare 1999; Darcy & Taylor 2009). Morris (2005) identifies that self-determination, participation, and contribution, through citizenship, is an important part of disabled people asserting their rights. "[F]ull citizenship

involves the exercise of autonomy" (Morris 2006, p. 243) and without the 'choice and control' of autonomy, disabled people are excluded from full participation in society. Issues of access and equity also inform the work of several academics researching disability. Reflecting the disability rights mandate of "nothing about us without us" (Charlton 2000), studies capturing the opinions of disabled research subjects (Duckett & Pratt 2001; Kitchin 2000) identify that disabled people's human rights are of central importance. Morris (2006) advocates for policies that support the imperative of 'choice and control' in enabling disabled people to "have equal access to opportunities" and to "access their human and civil rights" (p. 237). Barnes (2007) claims disability as "an equal rights issue" (p. 204).

As mentioned above, much disability activism in the UK resulted in significant changes in legislation and social policy. Researchers have identified that social policy in Australia has been shaped by achievements of the UK disability movement. Issues of accessibility and inclusion inform the work of several academics researching disability in Australia (Ellis 2015a; Ellis, Garland-Thomson, et al. 2019a; Garland-Thomson 2002, 2017; Goggin & Newell 2005). Other research has focussed on disability access and engagement with media (Ellis & Goggin 2015; Ellis & Kent 2011), the internet (Goggin 2004; Goggin & Griff 2001; Goggin & Lally 2003), digital television (Ellis 2014a, 2014b; Ellis & Kent 2015) and streaming services (Ellis 2015b; Ellis, Kent & Locke 2016; Ellis et al. 2017). It is only quite recently that any academic research concerning AD has been undertaken in Australia. This is surprising given that AD for live performance has been available in Australia for more than 20 years.

Issues of citizenship and identity also inform the work of several academics researching disability in Singapore, where disabled people do not have any individual rights. Wodak et al. (2009) identify the discursive construction of national identity which frames all social policy in Singapore (Wong et al. 2017) in terms of "the crucible of individual responsibility" (Haskins 2011, p. 1). Expressed as the communitarian principle of "nation before community and society

above self" (Chua 1995, p. 32), all citizens are expected to contribute to broader society for the benefit of all (Haskins 2011; Wong, ME et al. 2017) and to not be a burden on the state (Low & Aw 2004). An individual is valued for their self-reliance and contribution to the nation (Zhuang 2016) and social interdependence is prioritised over individual rights (Chua & Kwok 2004; Raghunathan et al. 2015; Wong, ME et al. 2017; Zhuang 2010). There is also a perception of privilege attached to paid employment which adds to an even greater sense of personal responsibility to contribute to society for the good of others (Haskins 2011; Low & Aw 2004; Parmenter 2014). This crucible of personal responsibility frames the socio-cultural context of daily life within which b/vi end-users experience AD for the performing arts in Singapore. Issues of access and participation also occupy academics working in the interrelated fields of theatre studies and audience studies.

Theatre and Audiences

Grotowski (2012, p. 32) poignantly asks, "Can the theatre exist without an audience? At least one spectator is needed to make it a performance." Indeed, theatre is a "social, situational and experiential phenomenon" (Walmsley 2011, p. 336), where the audience is an essential element of, and contributes to, the whole theatrical experience (Bennett 2013). While audiences may be hard to define (Ruddock 2001), they are such a part of our everyday that their complexity is taken for granted. However, the ways of being an audience are "essential to cultural participation" (Nightingale 2011, p. 1), and this is the essence of audience research. Livingstone (1998) suggests that the term 'audience' is inherently relational, a contractual exchange between the viewer and the viewed, and Silverstone (1990) identifies the audience as "a potentially crucial pivot for the understanding of a whole range of social and cultural processes" (p. 173). Although these two conceptions of audience were developed in relation to media audiences, they hold true for audiences of live performance.

Audience research also considers participation and the implications for the experience of citizenship and public life (Nightingale 2011). Other scholars suggest that audience studies considers both what an audience is and what an audience does (Brooker & Jermyn 2003; Ross & Nightingale 2003; Ruddock 2001). Pitts (2005) noted the strong engagement with the "collective experience of being part of an audience" (p. 260) which is also an important part of the social experience of attending live performance (Radbourne et al. 2009). Audiences have reported enjoying the anticipation of attending a live event where "anything might happen" (Mackintosh inWalmsley 2019). Audiences have also reported seeking a longer engagement with the theatre experience, and research has considered activities which can build anticipation of the theatre event (Johanson 2013). One such element is that of meeting the cast, which provides "a rare connection to actors and creatives" (Walmsley 2011, p. 347) and which further deepens the engagement with the live performance experience (Brown, AS & Novak 2007). Theatre audiences have identified that feelings of inclusion are an important element of their overall theatre experience (Radbourne et al. 2009; Reason 2010; Walmsley 2013, 2019).

Given the wealth of research into theatre and audiences, and the growing interest in disability and the implications of the social model of disability in shaping future policy and practice, it is remarkable that so little work has been done to date on understanding people living with disability as audiences. This current research project draws on audience studies scholarship from a number of researchers such as Johanson (2013) and Walmsley (2011). Furthermore, Bennett (2013) foregrounds audiences and demonstrates their creative involvement in, and contribution to, the theatrical experience. Livingstone and Lunt (2011) suggest that audience studies have "ways of enabling audiences to speak for themselves" (p. 186). This is reflected in the current project which allows respondents to discuss "the experiences they themselves consider important" (Schoenmakers 1990, p .100).

Freshwater (2009) observes that there are complex paradoxes inherent in being a member of a theatre audience, where individuals watching a performance are, at the same time, both together and alone, experiencing the tension between the awareness of differences among fellow spectators and the collective experience of being 'an audience'. As a live performance unfolds, each patron's place in the temporary community of collective experience is "partial and provisional" (Brine & Keidan in Freshwater 2009, p.7), and individual responses to that experience can be both complex and diverse (Freshwater 2009). However, all theatre audiences, by virtue of their presence (at the theatre), are contracted to listen, where listening is "focussed hearing [or] active auditory attention" (Brown, R 2009, pp. 135-6). Yet, attending a live theatre performance is more than just listening. Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) posit that live performance involves a connection between performer and audience, where audiences are actively involved in the performance. "In this view audiences are, therefore, actively involved in a performance; they share a space with it and contribute to its process of signification" (Di Giovanni 2018, p. 190). Further, Home-Cook (2015) suggests that attending theatre is an embodied act of participation, which plays a key role in shaping the theatrical experience.

Barthes' essays discuss the act of engaging with performing arts and this important act of listening, even suggesting that "freedom of listening is as necessary as freedom of speech" (1985, p. 260). For b/vi patrons attending a performance the act of listening, both to the performance itself and to the AD, is an important freedom that affords them access to the performance from which they would otherwise be excluded. However, Home-Cook (2015) suggests that there is a difference between hearing and listening, where listening is about attending, by which he means 'attention'. He says "*how* we attend shapes *what* we perceive" (Home-Cook 2015, p. 165, emphasis in original) and identifies that "the act of listening [is] a dynamic embodied act of attending-in-the-world" and that "when we listen, we *shape* meaning" (p. 169, emphasis in original). He suggests that, in attending theatre, there is

a great deal more to listening than meets the ear. Listening is not only

something we do, but it is an 'act' that does something: *how* we listen

phenomenally affects our perception of *what* we hear. (Home-Cook 2015, p.

168, emphasis in original)

For the b/vi end-user, listening to AD for live theatre is akin to listening to a radio play,

where the audience, rather than seeing the stage, actors and action, creates pictures in their mind

from what they hear. However, in considering (sighted) theatre audiences and their and aural

attention, Home-cook suggests:

The practice of attending theatre, *unlike* that of listening to a radio play,

consists of an inter-subjective act of embodied participation. This collective

act of attendance, moreover, plays a key role in shaping theatrical experience.

(Home-Cook 2015, p. 168, emphasis added).

He further posits:

…attention plays a vital role in … the manifestation of experience [and that]

theatre is … a place where experience is manifestly *enacted* by its participants

[because] theatre is, above all, a phenomenal 'event' that we *attend* [and] in

attending theatre we not only *do* something, but also phenomenally

'participate' in shaping [that] theatrical experience. (Home-Cook 2015, p.

170, emphasis in original)

This offers new ways of thinking about the AD end-user experience of live performance,

as being an act of attending and participating in, and even creating the theatrical experience. It

is this embodied theatrical experience, as articulated by b/vi AD end-users who attend and

listen, and thereby participate in, and create, that this project explores.

Listening is the essence of the AD end-user experience. Therefore b/vi end-users are active participants in this dynamic act of attention. Meaning is continually shaped in the act of 'attending' theatre. When it comes to theatre, one cannot link attention to ocular capacity. The b/vi audience may have impaired vision, or no useable sight at all, but they are fully capable of attending theatre, of being attentive in the theatre, and to listening to a theatrical performance and to AD. This is supported by Home-Cook who suggests that "in attending theatre we not only *do* something, but also 'participate' in shaping theatrical experience" (Home-Cook 2015, p. 170, emphasis in original). Theatre has been called a "phenomenal 'event' which is received-and-perceived through and in the act of attending" (Home-Cook 2015, p. 171). This approach to understanding theatre and audiences shapes our understanding of AD for the performing arts, which provides access for b/vi people to participate in the embodied experience of that performance, and to thereby shape that experience.

Audio Description

Fresno (2022, p. 312) has argued that in relation to AD, "many areas of this discipline are still under-researched". Since the mid-1980s AD research globally has largely focussed on the practice of AD, which is the process of development and delivery of AD services. Since Pfanstiehl and Pfanstiehl's (1985) and Pfanstiehl's (1997) work on making opera accessible for b/vi audiences, a significant focus of academic research on AD for live performance has been on AD for opera. This includes work on opera accessibility undertaken by Matamala and Orero (2007), including identifying the linguistic and sensorial barriers to opera (Orero & Matamala 2008). Others have explored developing audio introductions for opera (Gallardo & de Solás 2019; York 2007), and new approaches to opera AD in Barcelona (i Cáceres 2010). Further work has included a review of European AD services including opera (Reviers 2016), a two-year research project on opera AD in Italy (Di Giovanni 2018), new technologies helping to

develop new services (Orero et al. 2019), developing easy-to-understand (E2U) AD for live performances including opera (Arias-Badia & Matamala 2020), and defining the lexico-grammatical patterns of opera AD in Spain (Hermosa-Ramírez 2021).

More recently, Fresno (2022) suggests that even more AD research has focussed on film AD, where this work has been undertaken with a view to improving end-user 'experience'. However, as with much existing scholarship, end-user 'experience' here is essentially about end-user comprehension or 'reception' of the AD content or source text. Reception studies have been used to identify end-user preferences between different words and styles, and to discover how much of any given description an end-user has understood. This has led to exploring the "the cognitive efficiency of AD" (Chmiel & Mazur 2016, p. 1). AD scholarship has informed practice by quantifying end-user comprehension of the described material and recommending improvements in AD practice in order to enhance the end-user 'reception' of the AD content.

The following section maps some of the significant work in the field of AD research over the last 15 years. This includes several projects that have used the term 'experience' while exploring end-user 'reception' of the artistic content, as a means to inform the development of practice, rather than exploring the end-user's embodied experience of a live performance event, which is the focus of this project. Some of those projects are discussed below.

York (2007), in one of the first publications that describes AD practice (Di Giovanni 2018), details the process of providing AD and audio introductions just prior to opera and ballet performances. York details the process of setting up the service, including the process, production, and presentation, which was developed in 1993, with feedback from vision-impaired people (VIPs) after every show. York's work is concerned with addressing "the needs of vision-impaired patrons at the opera and ballet" and enabling describers to hone their "skills according to the needs of the listeners" (York 2007, p. 1). York's focus remains to "ensure that

vision-impaired patrons are provided with introductions which are vivid, colourful, memorable and, above all, entertaining [so] that, when the curtain goes up, our VIPs will have a good idea of what the show is about and what it looks like" (York 2007, p. 229). The focus here is on AD practice and process, particularly in order to ensure end-user comprehension of the content of live performances, and on detailing the process. In other words, York focusses on the elements of AD practice.

In his seminal practice manual, Snyder (2014) urges practitioners to 'say what you see', and to keep descriptions objective without interpreting emotions or motives. A describer must necessarily make intentional choices about what will be described and in what order. Further choices of both the words and the vocal delivery (intonation, pronunciation, rhythm, and more) are made. However, as Holsanova (2016) points out, AD mediates the visual content in particular ways before it reaches the end-users, so it is actually "problematic to talk about an 'objective' AD" (p. 52). Several other scholars have suggested that Snyder's pursuit of objectivity places unrealistic expectations on the describer to remain detached from the visual text which they are verbalising (Kleege & Wallin 2015; Udo & Fels 2010). Holland (2009) suggests that such an approach would be to "short change" the b/vi audience. He rather suggests that:

> Description should aim to get to the heart of a work of art and to recreate an experience of that work by bringing it to life. It should not be content with telling someone the physical details of something they cannot see. When you leave the art gallery, you want to come away discussing the art, not the description. Good description must allow the viewer to enter into a relation with the object, person or painting being described 'as a whole' … so that it becomes part of the artistic experience, rather than keeping that experience at arms' length (Holland 2009, p. 184).

Holland's conception of AD adds a different focus to the end-user 'experience', where AD enables the end-user to enter into the artistic experience of the event as a whole. Holland presents the importance of AD enabling the overall end-user experience and not merely focussing on the comprehension of information about that artistic source text.

Louise Fryer's seminal practice guide (2016) approaches AD from an AudioVisual Translation (AVT) perspective where AD is seen as an inter-semiotic translation. AD in the UK was first developed for live theatre, and as well as AD for live performance, Fryer's guide considers AD for film by genre, on-screen text (including titles, subtitles, logos, and end credits), whether or not to describe camera angles and movements, and approaches to differing cultural sensibilities around censorship and political correctness. The issue of objective/subjective description continues to be contentious within AD practice, and Fryer tackles this through a linguistic lens, where nuances of meaning are necessarily raised in the process and practice of language translation. Once again, the end-user 'experience' is considered in terms of end-user's 'reception' or understanding of the AD content or source text, rather than the embodied experience of attending the film as an experience in itself.

Translation studies, and particularly audio-visual translation, remains the predominant paradigm in which AD research has been undertaken (Braun & Starr 2021). Translation studies is concerned with the 'reception' or comprehension of the source text through its translation and this is the approach through which most AD scholarship explores AD end-user 'experience'. For example, Braun and Orero (2010) measure end-user comprehension of different AD practices and audio subtitling practices in relation to foreign language films. Szarkowska and Jankowska (2012) consider text-to-speech AD to address some of the challenges encountered by b/vi audiences watching a film with an original soundtrack in a foreign language, and requiring voicing of both the captions and description. Jankowska (2015)

explores the process of translating already-prepared AD scripts for revoicing in a different language, and measures the extent to which end-users understand different terminology.

As well as AD scholarship within translation studies, Matamala and Orero (2016b) consider new multidisciplinary approaches to AD research at the intersections of a broad range of disciplines addressing accessibility from complimentary perspectives. That range of disciplines includes translation (Walczak 2016), accessibility (Greco 2016; Matamala & Orero 2016a; Orero 2016; Taylor 2016), media (Dávila-Montes & Orero 2016; Sadowska 2016), cognitive science (Holsanova 2016), gaming (Mangiron & Zhang 2016), and more. In all of these studies, the "overwhelming focus [is] towards the end user" (Matamala & Orero 2016b, p. 2). Further work considers possible new applications of AD as a pedagogical tool (Walczak 2016), echoing the work of Kleege and Wallin (2015) in using AD with sighted students in a mainstream university setting, in course content that is unrelated to disability access studies. More recently, Starr and Braun (2021) propose re-versioning AD to support emotion recognition by sighted people with autism, and Holsanova (2022) identifies that AD "researchers have used various theories and methods and defined audio description from various perspectives" (p. 57) but suggests that there is a need for cognitive approaches to researching AD practice and end-user 'reception'.

AD research "has traditionally been targeted at refining practices" (Starr & Braun 2021, p. 98), and these studies have mostly explored end-user experience in terms of the 'reception' or comprehension of the AD content and/or the source text, and how such understandings inform the development of practice. In the proposed re-versioning of AD to support emotion recognition difficulties (Starr & Braun 2021), the process (that is, the practice) of varying the AD script content for this new application of AD is explored and then tested for comprehension (reception) by the sighted target audience. As Holsanova (2022) has pointed out,

The cognitive approach to AD in particular concerns meaning-making processes during *reception* of the original material, selection and decision-making processes during production of AD and meaning-making processes during *reception* of AD by [end-user] audiences (Holsanova 2022, p. 57, emphasis added).

The emphasis in this work is on end-user comprehension of the material being described, alongside AD process and practice.

AD research has encouraged the improvement of the quality of AD practice as a means to address gaps in end-user comprehension of the source text with a view to thereby enhancing end-user experience. Scholars agree that, "there is a clear interest from researchers with regards to exploring how AD scripts are produced as a way of understanding what is considered … to be quality AD [and] that an audio description that is easier to … understand will elicit a better audience comprehension" (Bernabe & Orero 2021, p. 56).

Quality AD has been measured by end-user comprehension (Fryer 2019), and "audio description research has traditionally been targeted at refining practices" (Starr & Braun 2021, p. 98) in order "to aid comprehension" (Hughes, C, Orero & Rai 2021, p. 122). However, AD for live performance is about "the embodied rather than the literary aspect of performance" (Margolies 2015, p. 23), where description is only one part of the end-user performance experience (Holland 2009). AD must also convey the experience so the end-user is able to "enjoy the performance" (Holsanova 2016, p. 51). While researchers have identified this desirable outcome of AD practice, AD research to date has not explored end-user experiences of the performance as a whole. The barriers to end-user access and engagement with the embodied AD experience of a live performance event have not been fully understood, nor has the professionalisation of practice adequately addressed many of the barriers the participation that end-users identify.

It is known that legislative requirements drive the development of access services (Kubitschke et al. 2013). In the case of AD, this is demonstrated from the literature which identifies that AD is mandated in the European Union (EU) by the European Parliament's Audiovisual Directive issued in 2007 as an access imperative (Jankowska 2015). While this Directive is enacted to varying degrees across the continent (Maszerowska et al. 2014), this legislative framework requires EU Member States to deliver AD against minimum standards of quantity and quality. Europe-wide industry standards are also being developed as a result of the Directive. The highest demand for AD in Europe has been for television broadcast, which has driven much of the progress in this area (Maszerowska, Matamala & Orero 2014). Much AD research has focussed on the very complex issues that arise through the practice of AD which is then translated into other languages, particularly in relation to audio-visual translation (AVT), which includes audio subtitling for foreign language film and for television productions (Braun & Orero 2010; Chmiel & Mazur 2012; Díaz Cintas & Neves 2015; Fernández, Martínez & Núñez 2015; Jimenez Hurtado & Soler Gallego 2013; Orero 2012). AD practice in Europe has developed in response to the demand for services, driven in part by the legal requirements to provide disability access. However, there are no such legal requirements for the provision of AD at all in either Singapore or Adelaide, in spite of various disability equality and access policies being in place in those locations.

Access has been foundational to the multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches to AD research and practice. Greening and Rolph (2007) consider AD in terms of access while Greco (2016) approaches AD from a human rights perspective. Braun and Orero (2010) explore audio-subtitling to create b/vi access to foreign language films. Remael (2012) and Jimenez Hurtado and Soler Gallego (2013) investigate media accessibility within the field of translation studies. Romero-Fresco (2018) explores issues of access to both content and creation, while Matamala and Orero (2018) consider international standardization in the field of media

accessibility. Orero et al. (2019) explore ways in which to address access expectations in AD end-users, including freedom to choose any seat in the auditorium and any performance, rather than having to choose from limited options of performances and limited seats at those particular performances. While Starr and Braun (2021) explore repurposing AD for end-users within the disability community but beyond the b/vi community, Greco and Jankowska (2020) advocate extending media accessibility considerations of AD beyond the disability community entirely, and Ellis, Peaty, et al. (2019) and Peaty (2020) explore ways in which AD is already being used outside of the disability community to gain access to digital content.

AD research and practice in Europe sits at the intersections of several fields, including translation studies (Bardini 2020; Jankowska 2015; Mazur 2020; Mazur & Chmiel 2021) and access studies (Díaz Cintas, Orero & Remael 2007; Greco 2016; Greco & Jankowska 2020; Remael 2012). Scholarship which draws from multiple disciplines (Holsanova 2016, 2022) has further strengthened AD practice (Di Giovanni 2018). One example of this multidisciplinary perspective is the work undertaken by Maszerowska, Matamala and Orero (2014) in which they analyse a single film in detail using frameworks from film, translation, cultural, linguistics, and semiotics studies. The analysis concerns end-users in relation to their 'reception' or understanding of various elements of the film. Orero and Vilaró (2014) extend this work with further analysis of visual perception and descriptions of secondary elements in this film, and end-user understandings of these elements. These projects provide intriguing insights into some of the very complex decision processes that a describer must undertake in order to adequately describe visual elements of a very complex film, full of intertextual and cultural references. Undertaken from the describer perspective, the project focussed on end-user understandings in order to develop AD practice guidelines for describers. End-user reception was explored through things such as "eye-tracking technology, looking at the effect of the audio description on [the] visual perception of the film" (Orero & Vilaró 2014, p. 203). Other aspects of end-user

reception of AD have been investigated in relation to a number of elements of practice: the impact of AD delivery style (Fryer & Freeman 2012; Romero-Fresco & Fryer 2013; Walczak & Fryer 2017); the addition of sound effects (Fryer, Pring & Freeman 2013); the use of cinematic language such as identifying camera angles, framing, or movement (Fryer & Freeman 2013); alternative narrative approaches (Fels et al. 2006); and 'open' AD embedded within live performance which can be heard by all audience members (Udo & Fels 2011).

Exploring end-user comprehension of different elements of practice has developed broad and deep understandings of the process of creating and presenting AD in many settings. When AD scholarship has considered the end-user, it has largely been as it relates to improving the practice of description and the extent to which that practice supports end-user reception or comprehension of the literary aspect of the performance (Matamala & Orero 2016b). Practice manuals by Snyder (2014) and Fryer (2016) consider AD for live theatre and are essentially concerned with AD practice. While these works are instructive on how to develop and deliver an engaging and helpful description for b/vi audiences, they do not formally investigate the embodied experience of the b/vi end-user. However, as Holland (2009) explains, "by its very nature [AD] will change the experience someone has of the art" (p. 183). AD "becomes … 'part of the spectrum of the experience', as Raina Haig, a film-maker and user of [AD] puts it" (Margolies 2015, p. 17). Udo and Fels (2011) investigate AD for live theatre, but also do this from the describer perspective of creating and delivering different styles of AD content. Further research on AD for live theatre has been undertaken, but from the perspective of the director (Udo, Copeland & Fels 2011).

Building on recommendations by Matamala and Orero (2018) to ensure end-user voices are heard and acted upon in AD research, Tor-Carroggio (2020) surveys b/vi people in China about their experiences of AD, although it is in relation to live AD for a movie session held at a local cinema. All participants indicated they had no experience of other applications of AD.

Di Giovanni (2018) reports on a two-year project that looked at making opera accessible for b/vi audiences. Analysis of end-user feedback is undertaken from the perspective of end-user reception of the artistic text, through questions about elements of the AD and technical aspects of the delivery. This captures end-user opinions on the AD content and their comprehension of the AD and source text, but it does not capture the end-user embodied experience of the live performance. Of particular interest to this research is that Di Giovanni's (2018) project extended investigations to include theatre staff who provided and/or supported the AD service. Therefore, this research project also includes interview data from theatre staff, as well as BSO staff, because these cohorts hold important roles in supporting AD practice and enabling delivery, and can directly impact the end-user experience of AD for live theatre performance.

Some multidisciplinary AD research has also drawn on the fields of audience studies and psychology to explore 'flow' (Biocca 1997; Freeman et al. 1999; Lombard & Ditton 1997; Lombard & Jones 2011; Walczak 2017; Walczak & Fryer 2017), or the perception of 'being there' (Barfield et al. 1995; Fryer & Freeman 2012). The state of being immersed in a performance is a concept developed by Csikszentmihalyi (2000) in the field of positive psychology. The concept of flow has been applied in the study of the experiences of live performance audiences by Brown and Novak (2007), where they use the term 'captivation', referring to the extent to which individuals are engrossed in a performance. They identify that high levels of engagement are closely linked to satisfaction or enjoyment. In his qualitative study of the impact of theatre with sighted audiences, Walmsley (2013) identified that "flow was regularly discussed in terms of … immersion" (p.81). In AD research this phenomenon has been referred to as 'presence', framing the AD experience as "experiencing the mediated environment as though it were unmediated" (Fryer, Pring & Freeman 2013, p. 65). This is captured in an end-user comment that "the best AD is when you don't really notice it's there"

(Fryer & Walczak 2021, p. 16). This is supported by data from end-user respondents in this project, as explored in chapter 5 of this thesis.

Another aspect of end-user comprehension of AD has been linked to measuring the quality of AD. In terms of quality, respondents in the study by Ellis, Peaty, et al. (2019) on AD in Australia "believed quality of AD was very important" (p. 3). From an audience studies perspective, the "audience experience is an appropriate and important measure of quality in the performing arts" (Radbourne et al. 2009, p. 16). Some AD studies have measured end-user presence through quantitative research (Fryer & Freeman 2012; Fryer, Pring & Freeman 2013; Fryer & Walczak 2021; Ramos 2015), where this research has informed the professionalization of practice in order to enhance AD reception. Scholars have conceded that studies exploring end-user presence, that is the embodied experience of an AD event, may be impacted by factors beyond AD practice (Mazur 2020). However, AD research thus far has not been sensitive to the complexities of factors external to AD practice and user comprehension which shape the context in which an end-user experiences AD for live theatre. Considering these broader elements of experience is necessary to address the gap in current research, and addressing this gap is important to getting a fuller understanding of end-user experiences, as well as accounting for the barriers to that experience which they identify, many of which sit beyond AD practice.

Summary

This chapter has presented literature from three key fields of scholarship on which this thesis draws, namely critical disability studies, theatre and audience studies, and AD. The chapter presented a number of models of disability which continue to shape social policy and daily lives, albeit to different degrees in each of the three research sites. The chapter demonstrated that participation in social and cultural life, as well as being able to engage in political life as a citizen, are foundational issues for people living with disability. The relevant

literature was reviewed from the fields of theatre and audience studies, which foregrounds the embodied audience experience of the theatre event. AD research to date has been largely concerned with issues related to practice and end-user 'experience' in terms of comprehension of the AD content or source text, as opposed to the embodied experience of attending a live theatre event. The embodied experience of sighted theatre audiences was explored in this chapter, however there is a gap in understanding the embodied experience of live theatre for b/vi AD end-users. The aim of this research is thus to better understand the embodied experience of live theatre for b/vi AD end-users. To this end, the next chapter outlines the methods used to undertake this research.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

The previous chapter identified a gap in current knowledge in the field in regard to end-user experience of AD, beyond end-user comprehension of AD. This chapter outlines the methodology used for collecting and analysing the data for this research project which aims to address this gap in the literature. Using qualitative research methods, semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data from b/vi end-users of AD for live performance and staff working in organisations that either support b/vi people or support b/vi services, or both. This chapter describes the research design, followed by an explanation of how data was collected, and from whom. The chapter also explains the process used to analyse that data.

Qualitative Research

Although there is no "single 'best' method" for undertaking planned, critical research in social sciences" (Hansen & Machin 2013, p. 6, 13), in order to foreground the personal experience of 'the researched' in this project (Morris 2007; Oliver 2013), qualitative methods were chosen as the basis of overall research design (Crotty 1998). Qualitative research navigates the "landscapes of human experience" (Sandelowski 1993, p. 1) which aligns with both the theoretical perspective of foregrounding the lived experience of people living with disability and the AD research perspective of exploring end-user experience. Qualitative research is "contextual and subjective" rather than "generalizable and objective" (Whittemore, Chase & Mandle 2001, p. 524). It is concerned with depth rather than breadth, considering the subtle nuances of life experience, rather than looking to aggregate evidence (Ambert et al. 1995),

supporting the discovery of what is not yet known, challenging accepted thinking, and extending beyond previously established knowledge (Marshall 1990). At the same time qualitative research is both highly creative and analytically rigorous, following due process in a systematic way (Patton 1990; Peshkin 2001; Whittemore, Chase & Mandle 2001).

There are several qualitative approaches which support exploring human and social complexities in specific circumstances (Maykut & Morehouse 1994) that are best suited to capturing and analysing personal experiences (Ezzy 2002). Qualitative research methods can gather data by observation, through conducting surveys, or by conducting interviews. Research by interviewing participants often makes use of small sample sizes where data gathering sometimes ceases once the data stops revealing new information and repetition is identified, known as the 'saturation point', which can be reached after as few as 12 interviews (Lincoln & Guba 1985), although some qualitative research does not even attempt to reach this point, such as Condit's (1989) study that only sampled two participants.

While audience research about disabled people, involving disabled people, is still not extensive, such research is almost entirely absent among the b/vi community. Although not specifically researching audiences, Duckett and Pratt (2001) research the opinions of b/vi people about visual impairment research. They note that researchers planning to work with b/vi participants may need to develop specific strategies to access this segment of the disability community, which remains largely hidden from services.

Interviewing participants provided me with access to the participants' own "ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher" (Reinharz 1992, p. 19), giving "privileged access to people's basic experience of the lived world" (Brinkmann & Kvale 2015, p. 32). Interviews are more practical than observation, as permission is only required from those who are interviewed, rather than from large groups the

researcher may wish to observe. Interviews allow for the gathering of information that cannot be gained by observation alone, including insights into the relevant aspects of histories and past behaviour and experiences of those being interviewed as they relate to the research focus (Berger, AA 2016). Interviews are more flexible than observation because the researcher has more control over the structure of participant interactions. Interviews are also more flexible than surveys because of the capacity for the interviewer to seek explanations beyond initial participant responses, and to ask follow-up questions to better understand responses (Priest 2010).

The University of Adelaide's Human Research Ethics Committee approved this study (Ethics Approval No H-2020-008). Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the qualitative data because they gave me the capacity to explore areas of particular interest to each participant (Priest 2010; Weerakkody 2009). Semi-structured interviews are not based on a set script, but rather use a pre-planned framework of descriptive, structural and contrast questions that allow freedom and flexibility for participants to identify and explore related areas of particular interest to them. At the same time, the semi-structured approach allowed me to reword or reorder questions to suit each participant and each conversation (Chhabra 2020). Additional clarifying questions were posed to further explore any interesting observations articulated by the participant (Weerakkody 2009). There was freedom and flexibility for participants to explore tangents and themes of specific interest to them and their experiences (Chhabra 2020; Priest 2010; Weerakkody 2009) and to discuss matters that they themselves felt were important (Schoenmakers 1990). Semi-structured interviews were chosen over structured interviews because structured interviews are necessarily controlled and restrictive, with prepared questions and clear guidelines for specific follow-up questions depending on participant responses. Structured interviews impede the broader and deeper exploration of participant responses. The semi-structured interviews were planned in such a way that ensured

similar ground was covered with all interviewees, although the order of the questions was developed organically in each interview, depending on participant responses.

Participants

"[N]o one disabled person can recognise, reflect on, and speak to the whole, diverse, intersectional, interdependent reality of disability experience" (Hadley et al. 2019, p. 369). A variety of voices are therefore needed to explore the diversity of experience. Disability scholarship calls for research that considers a range of non-homogenous, nuanced accounts of disability experiences, and what those experiences mean for those whose lives are marked in some way by disability. A total of 28 participants were recruited and interviewed from across three different cohorts, including 17 b/vi AD end-users, and 11 staff working with professional organisations supporting b/vi people and the provision or promotion of AD services, including seven BSOs, and four venues/theatre companies.

Although this project is primarily interested in understanding end-user experience, participants from these other groups were chosen because AD services are not experienced in isolation. There are a number of elements required to ensure that b/vi people have appropriate access to AD services and many of those elements sit beyond AD practice. Matamala and Orero (2018) identify the importance of hearing from end-users about their experiences and for practice to act upon those experiences. Informed by my personal experience in AD practice, I understood that, in the course of their work, staff from professional organisations such as Blind Service Organisations (BSOs) and venues/theatre companies may have an impact on AD end-user experience. This research therefore included interviewing staff working in BSOs and with venue/theatre companies, because this is where end-user voice may be actioned in shaping AD practice. The rationale for this research was therefore to explore AD end-user experience, with

consideration of the contexts shaped by professional organisations such as BSOs and theatres/venues that promote and/or support AD services for live performance. This allowed staff from professional organisations, and end-users alike, to recognise themselves in the research (Ezzy 2002) and for their experiences to shape future research and practice.

In order to gain an 'insider's' perspective (Priest 2010) on the experiences of b/vi patrons using AD for the performing arts, the project recruited b/vi AD end-users, according to certain criteria. End-users needed to: live with blindness or vision-impairment (b/vi); be proficient in the English language; be at least 18 years of age; and be capable of providing informed consent. In the case of participants based overseas, in London or Singapore, each participant needed to have access to either a phone or device through which the interviews could be conducted and recorded by the researcher. For those participants based in Adelaide, some interviews were conducted in person and audio recorded. In London, a total of 13 interviews were conducted, eight with end-users, four with BSO staff and one with venue/theatre company staff. Seven interviews were conducted in Singapore – four with end-users, one with BSO staff, and two with venue/theatre company staff. Lastly, eight interviews were undertaken in Adelaide, comprising five with end-users, two with BSO staff, and four with venue/theatre company staff.

Research Sites

Three cities were chosen as sites in which to investigate end-user experiences of AD for live performance. The three cities were London, Singapore, and Adelaide, and these were chosen for a number of reasons. Firstly, for the very practical reason that this research is being conducted in English and AD for the performing arts in each of these cities is provided in the English language. Secondly, there are direct links between London, Adelaide, and Singapore, in terms of the history and development of AD practice. AD for live theatre was developed in

London in 1998 through VocalEyes. Training for AD for live theatre was delivered in Adelaide by describers from VocalEyes in the early 2000s (Seeley 2022), and in late 2018 I co-delivered training in AD for live theatre in Singapore, along with a blind end-user expert, on behalf of A2A from Adelaide. A further reason for choosing these three sites for the current project was that I had, by virtue of my AD practice experience, direct access to BSOs and venues/theatre companies in both Adelaide and Singapore. Professional and academic relationships in the broader AD research field, which were established by me at the Advanced Research Seminar on Audio Description (ARSAD) in Barcelona in 2019, were instrumental in assisting me to connect with relevant organisations and potential participants in the UK. By interviewing participants across three sites, I was able to identify and explore similarities and differences in cultural approaches to disability. I could also compare and contrast the ways in which those situated cultural contexts shaped b/vi access to the performing arts in each city.

Research Design

Semi-structured interviews were employed to capture, compare, and contrast the previously under-researched personal experiences of b/vi AD end-users, along with the experiences of two inter-related stakeholder cohorts that provide support for AD for the performing arts. The one-to-one semi-structured interviews conducted for this project, were originally planned to have all been conducted live and in person in each of the three cities. However, due to the prevailing global COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent health crisis, most interviews were instead conducted and recorded via the online platform Zoom. Following an easing of isolation restrictions in Adelaide, some interviews were conducted in person. All interviews were conducted at a time and place convenient and familiar to the participants. Those conducted online were through the use of personal devices such as computers, tablets or

smartphones. I hosted and recorded the Zoom interviews online. Those conducted in person in Adelaide were held at a place and time convenient and familiar to the participant such as local cafés, and were audio recorded.

While participants were able to freely express their personal opinions and experiences, I guided the semi-structured interviews, or "conversations with a purpose" (Lindlof 1995, p. 164), according to a pre-planned interview questions framework. The interviews were conducted live, in real time on a digital platform that supported video content. Each participant was in a location both comfortable and comforting to them (usually their home or other familiar location of their choosing), thereby minimising the likelihood of disengagement by the participants (Deacon et al. 2007, p. 68). In one instance, the participant 'logged on' to only the audio part of the Zoom platform through their land-line.

The framework for the semi-structured interview questions was general in nature and tailored for each of the three cohorts, and further tailored to each individual participant. Open questions require a more comprehensive answer than a simple yes/no response. I therefore used open questions framed in terms of "tell me about …" or "please share your experiences of …". The interviews covered topics ranging from attending live performances in general and live theatre specifically, sharing their best/worst experiences of AD for live performance. I also asked them to identify any challenges they had experienced in attending live performances, and whether they had provided feedback on AD services. For BSO staff, questions established the context of their role within their organisation, and the leisure activities that the organisation supported. Other topics included their experiences of supporting clients to attend live performance, whether they had experienced AD for live theatre, and if they could identify any challenges in supporting or promoting AD. For theatre/venue staff, questions that established the context of their role and their organisation were followed by some practical questions around the promotion or support of AD services, and lastly about AD services and any

challenges they may have identified in its provision. The interviews each lasted around 60 minutes.

Researcher/Researched Relationship

The inherent power imbalance in the research relationship between researcher and the researched is heightened in disability research due to the inequality that exists between abled and disabled people in broader society (Stone & Priestley 1996). There is a history of non-disabled researchers casting themselves as experts, rather than foregrounding the lived experiences and personal knowledge of the disabled research participants. Therefore some disabled people "have come to see [disability] research as a violation of their experience, as irrelevant to their needs and as failing to improve their material circumstances and quality of life" (Oliver 1992, p. 105). Therefore, there is an imperative for this research to have practical relevance to the lives of the researched, in order to challenge disabling social barriers (Stone & Priestley 1996). My position, as a sighted/abled researcher, within the research process must also be carefully considered and articulated, and was briefly explored above in Chapter 1.

Further to the above discussion on the researcher's positionality, it is particularly important to consider this in qualitative research. In reflecting upon and acknowledging my own position and subjectivity, I acknowledge that my position can influence all stages of the research process, including the formation of research questions, data collection, analysis, and conclusions (Bradbury-Jones 2007; Guillemin & Gillam 2004; Pillow 2003). Reflexivity helps me to consider how I am part of the social world that this project studies (Frank 1997). This social world being studied is "affected by whether the researcher is part of the researched and shares the participants' experience" (Berger, R 2015, p. 219). As a professional describer and AD trainer, I share many of the participants' experiences in being part of the AD ecosystem.

By AD ecosystem, I mean the system of the development, delivery, and use of any or all elements of AD practice, in which each element of that system depends on every other element, either directly or indirectly. However, I also stand 'apart from' many of the participant experiences because I am sighted. When I attend a live performance I am not reliant on AD services in order to access visual elements of that performance. Therefore my personal experiences are different to those of the end-user participants.

Scholars suggest that research may be shaped by the position of the researcher in three main ways: Firstly, De Tona (2006) identifies that participants may be more willing to share personal experiences with a researcher they perceive as being sympathetic to their situation, thereby enhancing access to the 'field'. Further, the researcher's prior knowledge of the field of enquiry may provide easy access to participants, but may shape assumptions, data collection and analysis (Finlay 2002). As an AD practitioner and researcher, I am very interested in, and sympathetic to experiences of b/vi participants. I have extensive prior knowledge of the field of enquiry and have ready access to networks and key players, especially to BSOs and venues/theatre companies familiar with AD services. Several of these key players assisted with recruiting participants, in line with ethics approved processes. However, this may have resulted in recruiting participants who were already positively engaged with the BSOs and venues/theatre companies and therefore more likely to share only positive AD experiences. The semi-structured interview process allows for participants to raise the issues that they themselves feel are important (Schoenmakers 1990), without any pressure to perform or conform to perceived expectations aligned to AD service provision. Interviews in this project were conducted individually which also provided each respondent the space to articulate their own personal experiences.

Secondly, the researcher may shape the nature of the researcher/researched relationship (Berger, R 2015). This could easily settle into a familiarity due to common knowledge and

understandings of the field, with participants being more comfortable to discuss issues and experiences with someone already familiar with AD. On the other hand, this common knowledge of the field may inhibit some participants from speaking freely. My professional standing may have unduly censored the "seeing and speaking" of some participants (Fernandes & Robertson 2019, p. 38). In other words, b/vi participants may have viewed me as an 'expert', and this perceived position of privilege may have meant that the participants were inclined to modify their responses to only provide answers that they thought I expected or wanted to hear, rather than feeling free to express their actual experiences and opinions. B/vi participants may have believed that their experiences or opinions could have directly impacted on the provision or withdrawal of future services. To counter this potential, at both the recruitment and the interview stages of this research, I provided assurance that the articulation of personal experiences, whether positive and negative, were important for this project. I also provided clarification that interviewee responses would in no way impact on future access or provision of AD services. My 'insider' position affected how I shaped the interviews, and I was able to explain that while we shared aspects of the AD experience, each person's experience would be different and that I wanted to hear their stories. This 'insider' status also helped me to understand implied content, to hear the unsaid, and follow thoughts and opinions that other researchers without this depth of personal knowledge of the field may have missed.

Lastly, the worldview of the researcher shapes their use of language, how questions are posed, what thoughts and ideas are explored, and even the lens used to filter and prioritise information that participants share. Kacen and Chaitin (2006) identify that this ultimately shapes the analysis and conclusions of the study. My professional experience in working for more than eight years in a strengths-based disability arts organisation, as well as my professional AD work, has shaped my perspective on working with people who live with disability. In both of these professional settings, services focus on better understanding those

who live with disability whom we support, and seeking ways to provide the supports needed for them to pursue their own best life (Fox & Macpherson 2015).

Several scholars suggest that practitioner researchers tend to recognise these three aspects of shaping research as being inherent in the research, and use reflexivity to hold the balance between involvement and detachment, and between researcher and the researched (Bradbury-Jones 2007; Drake 2010; Pillow 2003). Such researchers also understand their place in the field of study (Mason 1996). This project is significantly shaped and supported by the specific competencies, skills, and knowledge that I bring as a sighted researcher and as an AD practitioner. The cluster of these skills and competencies, developed over several years of AD practice, as well as my professional work in the disability arts field, will contribute to the quality of the knowledge produced (Brinkmann & Kvale 2015) by this research. Although my own experience in AD practice brought familiarity and potentially deeper understanding of the issues, I needed to be intentional to not superimpose my personal and professional experience on the experiences of the participants (Pillow 2003). The project was informed and shaped by my personal and professional experiences working within the field of research (Church 1995), and motivated by the imperative of the amplification of the end-user voice.

The quality of qualitative research is measured by the extent to which researchers let participants "speak for themselves" (Trinh 1991, p. 57). That is, the extent to which researcher reflexivity, in terms of recognition of the other (Pillow 2003), is explored and articulated. While this research foregrounds the end-user experience, I recognise that the power dynamics between b/vi participants and myself, a sighted researcher, can be uneven. A sighted researcher has privileged access to visual information and it is very important to keep this privilege and potential bias in mind and to endeavour, as much as is possible, to mitigate against this privilege. However, by situating the researcher as non-exploitative and compassionate, the possible negative implications of the power imbalance between the researcher and the

researched are addressed (Berger, R 2015; Pillow 2003). This created an environment conducive to participants being free to speak for themselves about matters that they felt were important (Schoenmakers 1990) and to giving participants "a real opportunity to voice and share their experiences" (Nyatanga 2019, p. 367). With this in mind, I now describe the process by which participants were recruited to this research project.

Recruitment of Participants

In qualitative research, samples tend to be illustrative of broader social and cultural processes, rather than representative, so smaller sample sizes are suitable, and are often a result of practical considerations such as time and to ensure the effective use of limited resources (Deacon et al. 2007; Palinkas et al. 2015; Weerakkody 2009). Purposive sampling was used to select a small number of specific participants able to provide appropriate and useful information relevant to the research topic (Kelly, Bourgeault & Dingwall 2010), yet with different experiences so as to provide various perspectives of the issues explored (Mason 2017; Miles, Huberman & Saldana 2014; Robinson 2014). It is known that recruiting b/vi participants can be particularly challenging (Chmiel & Mazur 2016; Mazur 2020; Pfanstiehl & Pfanstiehl 1985). Recruitment of participants in the three research sites for this project was based on specific characteristics required for this project: firstly, people who identified as b/vi, and with a personal experience of AD for the performing arts; secondly, people who worked in BSOs that actively supported and/or promoted AD services for b/vi to access the performing arts; and thirdly, people who worked in venue/theatre companies that also actively supported and/or promoted those same AD services, were all invited to participate in the study.

As well as employing a 'purposive' approach to engaging participants, I also used a strategy known as 'cluster sampling' which makes use of the relative proximity of participants

in one research area (Deacon et al. 2007). This research has targeted participant recruitment through a key contact point in each city, which helped to facilitate the targeted recruitment of individuals within each cohort. For purely practical reasons, only one repertory theatre in each research site was recruited for this project. This is because there is only one repertory theatre in each of Singapore and Adelaide that consistently supports AD for live performance. It therefore followed that the research in London should mirror the research conducted in Singapore and Adelaide.

In London, I contacted VocalEyes, a BSO and AD service provider, who assisted this research by offering two staff members to assist me with recruiting staff from two other BSOs, namely Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) and London Vision. One theatre/venue staff member was recruited to participate in the study, namely the Access Manager at The Globe Theatre, and eight b/vi end-users were also recruited. It should be noted that the two BSO staff members recruited were also b/vi AD end-users, and this personal experience of AD shaped their advocacy for AD within their employment. A total of 13 participants were recruited in London.

Through its head of Learning and Engagement, the SRT was instrumental in arranging for the first AD training for live theatre in Singapore which I co-presented with a blind end-user AD expert. SRT recruited a second staff member in-house, as well as facilitated an introduction to one BSO active in Singapore, namely iC2PrepHouse. SRT also facilitated the recruitment of four b/vi end-users. A total of seven participants were recruited in Singapore.

In Adelaide, the STCSA, a repertory theatre company with a long association of provision and promotion of AD services for b/vi patrons to access live theatre, was instrumental in supporting this project. One STCSA staff member who is actively involved in supporting and/or promoting AD for live theatre was recruited to participate. Through STCSA and my own

professional contacts, staff from two BSO's were recruited, including Beyond Blindness (BB), and the RSB. BB assisted this study by broadcasting an email with an open call for b/vi participants, and helped to facilitate the recruitment of three end-users. STCSA helped to recruit another two b/vi participants. A total of eight participants were recruited in Adelaide (See Table 3.1).

Table 3.1 Number of participants - semi-structured interviews

	B/VI AD End-users	BSO staff	Theatre/Venue staff	TOTAL
London	8	4	1	13
Singapore	4	1	2	7
Adelaide	5	2	1	8
TOTAL	17	7	4	28

Given the length of time that AD for the live theatre has been available in London, the larger number of participants recruited was expected. Similarly, given that AD for the performing arts has only been available in Singapore since late 2018, the lower numbers of respondents was expected. However, with AD for the performing arts having been available for more than 20 years in Adelaide, and given that I have been describing for about eight years, it had been expected that participant recruitment in Adelaide would have resulted in almost double the number of participants. To ensure an adequate sample size in Adelaide, I followed up with repertory theatre a second time to seek their further assistance in recruiting end-users and this resulted in a total of five end-user participants.

Although semi-structured interviews are ideally conducted face-to-face, in the context of the global pandemic between years 2020-22, when international travel was significantly curtailed, Zoom interviews enabled as much of the in-person element of the live interview process as possible. An amendment to the original ethics approval was confirmed, to allow for the online recording of all participant interviews. An unexpected consequence of the pandemic were the global shutdowns which resulted in participants more likely spending more time at home, with access to technology, making them more readily available than they might have otherwise been. This made the recruitment process and the scheduling of interviews far more straightforward than at first expected, as well as reduced the direct costs of the research, since the international travel costs such as flights and accommodation were not incurred.

Research Data

All interviews were recorded for transcription. Prior to the interviews, an informed consent form was provided to each participant, outlining the scope of the project and the interview. Participants were asked to provide formal consent prior to the interview. B/vi participants were given the option of signing and returning the form, or providing written consent by email, or recording their verbal consent at the commencement of the Zoom session recording. Participants were asked to advise whether they wished to remain anonymous or be identified by a pseudonym or by their first or full names. All participants except one chose to be identified by their first or full names. That one participant has been assigned a pseudonym.

Interviews were transcribed using an automated transcription from digital recording through www.Otter.ai, an online subscription-based transcription website. I scrutinized these transcripts and amended any auto-transcription errors, referring back to the Zoom or audio recordings of each interview for clarification. This was an efficient and cost-effective process

because I conducted this transcription review process myself, which enabled me to continually re-familiarise myself with the interview data. The transcripts were then emailed to each interviewee for checking, within two weeks of the interview being conducted, to maintain timely interaction with the participants and to ensure their recall of our conversations and their responses. The transcripts were provided to them in Word document format, which is easily accessible for screen readers used by b/vi people. Upon provision of the interview transcript, interviewees were provided a two week window within which to review the transcript of their interview, and to advise of any edits or clarifications, prior to the transcripts being entered into a data analysis programme. Once confirmation of approval of the transcript, including edits, if any, was received from the interviewee, transcripts were entered into NVivo 12, the software tool for storage and analysis of interview data and for managing the transcripts during the analysis. A thematic analysis was undertaken, allowing the data to guide the coding themes and with themes developed over several weeks of interrogating the interview transcripts.

Data Analysis

Theories shape both how qualitative data analysis is undertaken and what is noticed during such analysis, so it is important to give due consideration to the theories chosen to frame this research, including those from critical disability studies as well as theatre and audience studies. Most notably, theories were chosen that supported the importance of foregrounding end-user voice, and the commitment to positively influencing social policy in regard to addressing civil and social barriers to full participation by people living with disability (Barnes 1992). As indicated earlier in this chapter, prior to this project there has been little research done in relation to AD end-user experience, so there were no specific pre-determined themes to guide the analysis. Rather, a high-level thematic analysis was undertaken to identify broad

and recurring themes as they relate to the core research focus on end-user experiences. A further pass of the data identified recurrent nuances, and overlapping or intersecting themes. This was initially done separately for each cohort in each research site, with recurrent and outlier themes identified for further analysis, comparison and contrast.

Further analysis was then undertaken to explore whether it was possible to determine whether those similarities and differences were site specific due to political, geographical, or socio-cultural specificities, or in any way related to the differing stages of development and maturity of AD practice in each location. Detailed analyses of the interview data will be presented in the next four chapters, beginning with the Professional Organisations.

Summary

This chapter has detailed the use of qualitative research methods, in particular semi-structured interviews with b/vi end-users of AD for live performance and staff working in organisations that either support b/vi people or support b/vi services, to collect the necessary data to explore the research aims. Using a high level thematic analysis of this data this research project will address the gap in the literature.

Chapter 4: Legislative and Socio-Cultural Contexts

Introduction

The legislative and socio-cultural context of disability is vital to understanding and addressing disability issues (Goggin 2010). This chapter identifies two elements which shape the contexts in which b/vi end-users in the three research sites experience AD for live theatre. These two elements are the legislative frameworks in place in London, Singapore, and Adelaide, and the professional organisations that support the provision of AD services. The legislative frameworks in place in each location are a combination of international convention and national legislation. In the first instance, this chapter identifies the international convention that provides an overarching framework of disability rights to which each of the three research sites is a signatory. Next, the chapter explores the different national legislative contexts operating in each site. Together, the international convention and national legislation contribute to the socio-cultural contexts in each site. These contexts provide a significant framework within which the professional organisations that support AD services operate. The chapter thus considers interview data from respondents who work with those professional organisations, namely staff from the BSOs and the venue/theatre companies. Staff from these professional organisations identify ways in which legislation constrains or supports the work of those organisations in supporting AD services for b/vi patrons attending live theatre performances.

Legislative Frameworks

Each one of the three research sites of this project is a signatory to the UNCRPD (UN 2006), the first international convention on disability rights. However, different national legislative frameworks operate in each site and varying national social policies support different

degrees of individual rights and/or community responsibilities. These legislative frameworks impact b/vi end-user experiences of AD for live theatre in each site because such legislative contexts result in different organisational structures and operations, different ways of engaging with b/vi communities, within different social and cultural contexts in which b/vi people experience access and participation.

International Convention

The UNCPRD is founded on the social model of disability which, as identified in Chapter 2, defines disability as a product of social injustice rather than a personal defect, and champions disabled people as the experts in their own lives (Oliver 2009, 2013; Shakespeare 2013). In theorising disability, Siebers (2008) suggests that "Disability … is a significant factor in the imagination of the right to have rights" (p. 180). The UNCRPD frames disability in terms of human rights, including the right of people living with disability to have equal access to participation in social life. It requires each signatory state to create their own legislation and social policies to support the outcomes identified by that Convention. AD is primarily conceived in this context as a service that b/vi people have a right to receive in order to support their access to visual information from which they would otherwise be excluded. As identified earlier in this thesis, much AD research has been undertaken in Europe, where the EU has adopted the principles of the UNCRPD in as much as disability access is considered to be a human right.

This human rights perspective has driven the development of access legislation in many European countries, albeit to differing degrees (Orero 2007). Although no longer part of the EU, the UK has legislation requiring the provision of AD on television (Office of Communications (UK) [OfComm] 2012), even though that requirement in the UK is less than

10 percent of all broadcast content. However, there are no such requirements for the provision of AD for live theatre. Singapore ratified the UNCRPD in 2013, but there remains an underlying political commitment to communitarian responsibility over individual rights (Aw 2015; Haskins 2011; Loh 1998; Low & Aw 2004). This runs counter to the social model of disability upon which the UNCRPD was developed, and although a signatory to this Convention, which enshrines the rights of disabled people to such access supports, there are also no legal requirements for the provision of AD in Singapore. In 2008, Australia also ratified the UNCRPD. However, in spite of various anti-discrimination and pro-inclusion legislation at the national and state level, there are still no laws that require the provision of AD for b/vi access in Australia (Ellis, Kent & Locke 2018; Ellis, Peaty, et al. 2019). The next section of this chapter considers the national legislative contexts and extent to which the UNCRPD has been applied in each research site.

National Legislation

The political environment provides the context that enables/constrains the services available, how they are funded and how they are delivered. It also influences whose voices are part of shaping those services, which in turn impacts on and shapes the individual's experiences. A European Commission report on television content accessibility noted that legislative requirements drive the development of access services (Kubitschke et al. 2013). However, inadequate or non-existent national disability legislation across the three research sites in relation to the provision of AD services has resulted in the uneven development of AD in regard to both quantity and quality.

United Kingdom

According to Colin Barnes, a leading activist and scholar in disability studies, "the UK has had a particularly vibrant disabled people's movement since the mid-1960s" with an "increasingly important influence on government thinking and policy in the disability field" (2007, p. 204). Activists called for, among other things, the empowerment of individuals towards autonomy through choice and control over their everyday lives (Charlton 2000; Morris 2006) and the desegregation of institutions that barred disabled people from "exercising the privileges and obligations of full citizenship" (Garland-Thomson 2016). The legislative framework operating nationally in the UK has been formed by disability activism (Barnes 2007), which has shaped how disability is understood and how it operates in the UK today. The social model of disability (Oliver 1983) contributed to a collective disability consciousness and helped to develop and strengthen the disabled peoples' movement, raising the idea of disability equality (Oliver 2009; Shakespeare 2013). It has been the impetus of much activity and activism within the disability community in the UK, and globally, for almost 40 years. The social model insists on the principle of participation, reflected in the phrase "nothing about us without us" (Charlton 2000) which has been leveraged for public protest, political action, and social change.

In 1994 Britain introduced the Disabled Living Allowance, an important milestone in recognising the individual, and developing autonomy and social independence for disabled citizens (Campbell & Oliver 1998; McCreath 2011). The UK's political environment fosters access and inclusion of people living with disability, including enabling participation in social and cultural activities, and the pursuit of disability equality (Campbell & Oliver 1998; Shakespeare 2013). However, almost 30 years later, b/vi people continue to face barriers to access and equity in relation to participation in social and leisure activities like watching television or going to the theatre. In the UK, television broadcasters are required to provide some AD. However, the Office of Communications (OfComm) only requires up to 10 percent

of all television programming to be audio described (OfComm 2012), which means that up to 90 percent of television broadcasts in the UK are not described. Disability equality is legislated in the UK to protect disabled people from discrimination and the British Equality Act indicates that AD is "a reasonable accommodation that providers such as theatres … can offer to make their services accessible" (Romero-Fresco & Fryer 2013). However, as William (2016) identified in relation to disabled people accessing employment, there is a gap between what is mandated in legislation and what happens in the marketplace. This is equally true in relation to arts policy where the stated goal is the "access and participation of diverse and disadvantaged groups" (Reinelt 2014, pp. 339-340). Yet, there is currently no direct legislative requirement for the provision of AD for the performing arts in the UK (OfComm 2012). AD for live theatre in London therefore remains dependent on the goodwill and active partnerships between professional organisations and describers.

There is a strong social awareness of the moral obligation to develop better pathways to ensure access and equity for b/vi people, which includes the provision of AD. This can be seen in the following longer extract from an interview with David, the Access Manager at The Globe

> *The job as Access Manager is to ensure physical and cognitive access to our site. [The] Social model [of disability], and the Equality Act 2010, the Gender Recognition Act 2014, and the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001, are the prevailing pieces of legislation … [and] there's the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, and there are other ones to be aware of, such as the Americans with Disability Act.*
>
> *So there's the legal framework and there's the disability model framework. Everyone at The Globe is taught the Social Model of Disability and asked to apply it to their work …. The Social Model is at the core of our access work.*

... My job is about the removal of barriers [and] I try to keep an eye on what can potentially create barriers and then remove them.

I think it's stupendously important for not just the Access Manager, but also the directors of the plays, to listen in to the audio description (Interview with David).

In this extract, David reiterates the commitment that The Globe has towards access, where all members of the team are made aware of prevailing legislation as well as understandings of disability and how it operates. This highlights the ways in which legislation and social policies contribute to the broader context in which this BSO approaches the provision of AD for live theatre. However, the fact that there are no legal requirements to provide the service cannot be ignored. This places AD services in a precarious situation, leaving b/vi people without legal assurances of the provision of services, nor legal recourse if the services were to be withdrawn.

Singapore

The way that disability is understood and how it operates in Singapore is complex and quite different to what occurs in the UK and Australia. In Singapore, social obligations underpin legislation and social policy, with the socio-political environment prioritising community, and social interdependence over individualised welfare (Chua & Kwok 2004; Raghunathan et al. 2015; Wong, ME et al. 2017; Zhuang 2010). The responsibility for providing care and support to disabled people sits firstly with the individual themselves, then with their family, and lastly with their immediate community. This emphasis on private and community responsibility frames all social policy about disability in the communitarian context of Singapore (Wong, ME et al. 2017). Although the socio-cultural environment of Singapore is founded on the principles of democracy, there is an underlying commitment to communitarian ideology (Chua 1995),

which shapes how citizens view themselves and their entitlements and obligations, and which runs counter to the social model of disability.

National identity shapes individual identity and much has been written about the discursive construction of national identity through Singapore's nation-building narrative, known as 'The Singapore Story' (Wodak et al. 2009). Developed by the People's Action Party, which has been governing since before Singapore's independence in 1965 (Loh 1998; Wong, ME et al. 2017; Zhuang 2010), the Singapore Story discourse has constructed Singapore's national identity, framing how citizens view themselves, both individually and collectively. In the Singapore Story an individual is valued for their self-reliance and economic contribution to the nation (Zhuang 2016), and all citizens are raised in the "crucible of individual responsibility" (Haskins 2011) where people are expected to contribute to the greater good and to not be a burden on the state (Low & Aw 2004).

Understandings of disability and how it operates in Singapore are further complicated by the fact that all three models of disability – medical, charity, and social – are in play, with what some have suggested is an over-reliance on the medical model (Raghunathan et al. 2015). In Singapore, communitarian ideology uses welfare sparingly as a political and economic tool for managing different classes within an increasingly stratified population (Chua 1995). Social policies and individual access to government support rely on the medical model where expert medical certification of a diagnosis is required in order for a disabled person to register for (limited) disability programmes and financial supports. Such financial supports are not paid directly to individuals but are rather accessed through the charity-based volunteer community organisations (Haskins 2011; Raghunathan et al. 2015; Wong, ME et al. 2017; Zhuang 2016). This further removes the individual from the decision-making process of choosing what supports are needed and how such supports can be accessed. This disability dependency is further exacerbated by Singapore's mainstream educational streaming policies that also limit

future employment, financial, and social opportunities. These opportunities are even further limited for people with disabilities who are often excluded from mainstream schooling. This is illustrated in data from the interview with Amanda from iC2 Prephouse, a BSO in Singapore. She said that "*getting into mainstream schools is difficult*" for b/vi students. As many disabled people are not adequately supported to engage with the higher educational streams, systemic limitations impact further on ongoing life options and independence (Disabled People's Association 2015; Enabling Masterplan Steering Committee 2016; Low & Aw 2004; Raghunathan et al. 2015; Wong, ME et al. 2017; Wong, R & Wong 2015; Zhuang 2010).

In Singapore, identity is shaped by a prevailing discourse that individuality should be sacrificed for the good of the collective. Consequently, there is no legislation supporting individual rights in Singapore (Disabled People's Association 2015). Nor are there mechanisms to support individual autonomy with free-market choice and control over disability supports. An individual's choices are limited to service and support options within government-sanctioned programmes which are delivered through community-based charity organisations (Wong, ME et al. 2017). The effect of such social policies is to limit options and pathways available to disabled people, casting them as 'other' and 'different'. Without access to the full range of choices and options available to non-disabled people, disabled people in Singapore are unlikely to realise full access or equity.

Social policy in Singapore is framed in terms of community integration and racial harmony. However, inclusion in regard to the disability community in the Singapore context, is about enabling disabled people to have opportunities to become fully contributing members of society (Zhuang 2016). This can be seen in successive Enabling Masterplans (2007-11, 2012-16, and 2017-21) which have focussed on enabling disabled people to be integrated into mainstream society through education and employment and to therefore contribute socially and economically to the nation. (Enabling Masterplan Steering Committee 2016). However, with

the government emphasis on one's responsibility of economic contribution, people with disabilities who are unable to work "appear to be not worth helping, as they cannot contribute economically to nation building" (Wong, ME et al. 2017, p. 176). Lee et al. (2018) identify that, after securing independence from Malaysia in 1965, Singapore's government was focussed on

> economic development, defence, housing, healthcare, and education … [to address] the immediate challenges of poverty, unemployment, and housing shortage. It was only in the late 1980s and 1990s that policymakers began to turn their attention to the arts and culture, and even then, only as a sector with economic potential. Generally, the arts are seen as a means to achieve economic and social goals defined by the state (pp. 104-5).

Social policies in Singapore continue to focus on the economic and social goals of the state, namely integration and contribution, and do not extend to ensuring disability access to the arts. This may be because there is no clear economic outcome from the provision of such access. In fact, the economic question in disability access discussions has not been resolved in any of the three research sites, but that sits beyond the parameters of this current research project. Attention now turns to the legislative environment in Adelaide, Australia and the ways in which that context supports or constrains AD services for b/vi people to attend live theatre.

Australia

In Australia, there are both national and state Acts which legislate for disability rights, including the national Disability Discrimination Act (CofA 1992) and in South Australia it has the Disability Inclusion Act (2018) which further informs the socio-political context in Adelaide, South Australia. The social model of disability operating in Australia is derived from both the British disability movement, and from the US disability experience (Goggin 2010).

From the 1960s in the US, the disability rights movement,

…encouraged legislation and policy that gradually desegregated the institutions and spaces that had kept disabled people out … into an increasingly rebuilt and reorganized world. That changed landscape is being reflected politically. Moving from isolation to community, from exclusion to access (Garland-Thomson 2016).

Legislation supporting the development of disability services in Australia was driven from disability activism in the US and this legislation has shaped the disability experience in Australia. For example, in the 1970s technology was developed that was capable of delivering both AD for b/vi audiences and captioning for D/deaf audiences for broadcast television in the US. However, with no legal requirements to do so, broadcasters did not provide those access services. D/deaf communities in the US took legal action against television programmers who did not provide captions based on access discrimination. Ultimately this action resulted in legislation requiring all television sets made or sold in the US to include a built-in closed caption decoder (Robson 2004). This legislation drove international uptake of captioning for broadcast television, which is now also mandated in Australia for all free-to-air broadcasts between 6am and midnight (ACMA 2021).

However, at the same time that D/deaf communities were pursuing legislative change to provide them with access to leisure and entertainment, b/vi groups focussed their energies on accessing education and employment (Snyder 2014). This has resulted in a significant disparity between the provision and awareness of services for D/deaf access versus b/vi access. In Australia the provision of captioning (primarily a service for D/deaf audiences) on all prime-time free-to-air television content is mandated in the Australian Broadcasting Services Act 1992 (BSA). Blind Citizens Australia (BCA) has lobbied the Australian government for more than 20 years to secure AD for broadcast television. BCA formally submitted a recommendation to the federal government that AD be implemented at the time that Australia transitioned to digital

television in early 2001, but this did not eventuate (Simpson in Ellis, Peaty, et al. 2019), in part because there was no legal impetus for this change. There is still no legislation in place in Australia mandating the provision of AD for broadcast television or streaming services. This disparity is further demonstrated in the fact that D/deaf interpreters have always been engaged on a professional fee-paying basis, and not the voluntary basis on which AD was first developed. Three national trials of AD on Australian broadcast television have been held in 2012, 2016, and 2020 (Ellis, Kent & Locke 2018; Ellis, Peaty, et al. 2019). Yet, despite all three of these trials indicating strong viewer support, and even with various national and state laws in force around disability equality, access, and inclusion, the provision of AD services for either broadcast or live performance is still not legislated in Australia (Ellis, Peaty, et al. 2019).

The medical model of disability, where government departments, disability institutions, and medical experts made decisions on behalf of disabled individuals was still prevalent in Australia until the introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) in 2013 (National Disability Insurance Agency 2022). The NDIS became the mechanism by which the national Government shifted the 'choice and control' of funding and services from medical experts and institutions to the individual, to reflect the social model of disability. Australia has acknowledged disability as an important political issue, and the adoption of a human rights approach to disability (Goggin 2010) resulted in the ratification of the UNCPRD in 2008. However, disability continues to be an area of great need (Deane & National People with Disabilities and Carer Council 2009; Goggin & Newell 2005), and disability access issues have not yet been adequately addressed in spite of the move to a market approach to disability services. This is especially evident in relation to providing AD for the b/vi community.

Summary of Legislative Context

The above section on legislative frameworks has identified that while there are limited legislative requirements for the provision of AD for broadcast content in the UK, none exist for the provision of AD for live performance. It was shown that the prevailing legislative frameworks in each research site (London, Singapore, Adelaide) shape the regulatory contexts in which the professional organisations that support AD for live theatre operate. Next, the chapter will consider the interview data from BSOs and venue/theatre companies, which thus have no legal impetus to provide such services and must often balance other priorities.

Professional Organisations

As it has been established above, despite a lack of legislative requirements for the provision of AD for live performance, AD services exist in each of the study sites. The professional organisations involved in providing or promoting AD services have a direct impact on the delivery and support of those services to the b/vi people who access them. Therefore, in order to better understand b/vi end-user experiences of AD for live theatre, select staff working for BSOs and venue/theatre companies in each of the three study sites were interviewed for this research.

Blind Service Organisations (BSOs)

In each of the study sites, BSOs are involved in the support of AD services to enable b/vi people to attend live theatre. Interviews from staff working with BSOs in each city were firstly conducted in London, then Singapore, and lastly in Adelaide.

London

Interviews with staff working with BSOs in London, RNIB Connect and London Vision, explored how AD for the performing arts fits within the broader remit of their respective organisations in supporting the b/vi community with daily life issues such as mobility, transport, employment, and social engagement.

London Vision is a BSO specifically focussed on "supporting blind and partially sighted people who live, work and study in London" (London Vision 2021), "with a focus on education, employment and engagement" (Thomas Pocklington Trust 2022). This extract from the interview with Liam presents the organisation and his role:

> *...as Project Coordinator, I administrate and facilitate some network events of people who are blind or partially sighted on different topics such as employment. We have working age forum, where we meet once a month to discuss different topics related to the world of work, and sight loss. And then I also coordinate the London Visual Impairment Forum, which is a professional network for people who work in the world of sight loss in different capacities. I organize speakers for that.*

> *I will take the lead in campaigning, in the form of joint focus groups or consultations for organizations that are looking to find out how blind or partially sighted people are thinking, their responses to things [such as] media, transport, equipment, that sort of thing, to make sure our voices heard* (Interview with Liam).

Liam said that London Vision focussed on issues of b/vi employment, but also promoted leisure, recreation, and cultural opportunities for b/vi people to engage with, through the monthly publication, *London Scene*:

> *We produce a monthly newsletter, which tries to get the word out there for what's available in terms of accessible leisure, recreation culture, [such us] visitor attractions, museums, galleries, that sort of thing. And of course, audio description, which comes into play with theatre, and [it's starting to be offered] in galleries and museums - some of them use description. So we do promote that sort of thing* (Interview with Liam).

Another BSO working in London is RNIB Connect. In this extract from the interview with Toby, he introduces the organisation and his role:

> *I'm one of the content producers on RNIB Connect radio, which is a mainly internet based radio station, but it does broadcast via smart TVs, and on FM in certain areas of the country. It's a nationwide radio station and we have listeners all over the world as well. It's basically a station providing information and support for blind and partially sighted people and their families and friends* (Interview with Toby).

According to their website the RNIB is "one of the UK's leading sight loss charities and the largest community of blind and partially sighted people" (RNIB 2022), and RNIB Connect has a broad remit of providing and supporting services for b/vi people across the UK.

VocalEyes is a BSO that focusses on providing AD for b/vi people. I interviewed Michael, the Theatre Program Manager of VocalEyes, and he explained that the organisation existed specifically for "*making the arts and heritage accessible for blind and partially blind people throughout the UK*". Michael said that VocalEyes provided AD mainly for live theatre, but also delivered AD training and had more recently developed a new service of delivering AD on digital platforms, including for museums and galleries, specifically in response to the global pandemic.

From the interview data, it is clear that these BSOs support AD for live theatre to different degrees, depending on their organisational remit. Interview data further suggests that services available to b/vi people will vary in their availability and their quality, depending on one's geographical location. Mark was interviewed for this study in his capacity as a b/vi AD end-user, but he is also the Leisure Access Officer for his local council authority. In his interview, he mentioned that there was a phenomenon in the UK known as the "postcode lottery", where both the services available and the standards of those services, are heavily dependent on one's geographical location, and the effectiveness of the BSO in that location. As this extract from Mark's interview illustrates:

> *It's very patchy, I think, as we would call it in the UK, it's a bit of a "postcode lottery". I mean, the governments do pass legislation to local authorities, to say what the statutory provision has to be, but a lot of it is left to the local blind societies to put more detail into things and to provide a lot more services. But sadly, because the local blind societies throughout the whole of the UK, they're all independent charities – and some are run really well, and others are a bit patchy – it depends on who has left legacies and wills and donations, and how well the charities are run. There's no kind of blueprint pattern for how local [blind] societies are run* (Interview with Mark).

The idea that disability services come down to the luck of location is supported by a UK governmental report entitled *Improving the Life Chances of Disabled People*, which states that disability service provision "can result in a 'postcode lottery' of provision [where] services are provided on the basis of where people live … rather than on an entitlement based on need" (PMSU 2005, p. 114). Barnes and Mercer (2006) also identify that "The quality of support received varied considerably … it was evident that participants resented the fact that the quality of support available was such a lottery" (p. 119). This 'postcode lottery', dependent on the

effectiveness of BSOs in the local area, often contributes to the low awareness of AD for live performances, which is something that pervades the AD ecosystem globally.

The three BSOs interviewed for this project each had different priorities and, without any legal obligation for the provision of AD services, the organisations had different levels of commitment to supporting those services. However, data from interviews with BSO staff further suggest that any promotion and/or support for AD services by the BSOs were dependent on the presence of an advocate or champion of AD within that BSO. Toby was one such advocate for AD. He hosted shows on RNIB Connect and explained that the station "*promotes arts and the accessibility of the arts as much as possible*" (Interview with Toby). Prior to joining RNIB Connect, Toby said that he had worked on arts programs on the BBC and had strong personal and family links to the arts. He explained, "*I'm somebody who's got a keen background in the arts, I try and get as much output on the station as we can about the arts*" (Interview with Toby). He championed AD for live performances primarily because of his own personal experience. He said, "*my first experience of AD for a live performance was in 2002 and I got so much out of it … I was going to every AD performance I could*" (Interview with Toby).

Liam was also a champion for AD, promoting AD services through his work with London Vision. His passion for AD also developed from his personal experience of AD for live theatre. In his interview, he said that he 'discovered' AD for theatre in the mid-1990s and after that he then attended every AD show he could find. However, after several frustrating experiences of theatre staff being ill-prepared to provide working AD equipment in a timely manner, resulting in him missing the opening of several shows, he "*got very disillusioned*" with AD. He explained:

> *I used to get very frustrated about missing the introductory description before*
>
> *curtain up. I would nearly always miss it. And that wasn't because of being*

late to the theatre... it was the queueing for the headsets and the lack of organisation within the theatre. [The staff] didn't seem to have a sense of urgency ... and this happened several times.

I think the organisational culture needs to somehow factor in what you need to run a description service ... to make sure the equipment was ready to hand out and the [headset] batteries charged" (Interview with Liam).

The barrier to Liam's AD experience was the venue/theatre staff, rather than any issue with the AD itself. In spite of those negative experiences which created such a barrier that he ultimately stopped attending theatre altogether, Liam continued to promote AD through his role with London Vision.

VocalEyes "works with theatres and museums to ensure that blind and partially sighted people can enjoy things that sighted people take for granted, and can share cultural experiences with friends and family" (VocalEyes 2022). Jess Beal is the Marketing and Audience Development Manager with VocalEyes. She explained that VocalEyes "*promotes AD for b/vi people to help them access all art and culture*" (Interview with Jess Beal). As well as brokering AD services by connecting live performance presenters and venues with freelance audio describers, VocalEyes is also one of the leading AD trainers in the UK. Michael Kenyon, the Theatre Programme Manager, explained that VocalEyes' internationally recognised AD training started in the early 1990s, specifically for AD in live theatre, as identified by Holland (2009). The organisation provides training and support to describers who deliver AD for various performances and events in London and across the UK.

As well as training for describers, VocalEyes also facilitated formal feedback from AD end-users, which VocalEyes used to provide professional development for the venues and the describers that they worked with. Michael Kenyon explained:

> *We have a user group that meets three or four times a year, and I'll sometimes attend those sessions for getting general feedback from people who've been attending our shows and using our services.*

> *We try to have all of our audio describers user-assessed every two years, and as part of the user assessment that also takes in the whole process from booking through to getting transportation home after the event* (Interview with Michael Kenyon).

Michael recognised that while this formal feedback is useful, it did have limitations in that it captured individual perspectives and required a significant commitment of time from the end-users, outside of the live theatre performance event.

> *While the assessments are great for getting detail, they're [only] one user's perspective ... [we tried] to get a breadth of perspectives on the same event. ... but of course, you will often end up with the same people attending those events, so you end up bugging them with the same questions.*

> *The aim is really for the user to just be going to the theatre. It's not for them to be part of some big experiment and have to relay their feelings about everything all the time.*

> *It's difficult to create a forum where people can get into it in depth, and actually hear what would be most useful for the describers, that constructive feedback* (Interview with Michael Kenyon).

It is interesting to note that when Michael talked about end-user feedback, it was from the perspective of how that feedback provided constructive feedback to the describers in terms of improving or professionalising the AD practice itself. As

discussed in Chapter 2 above, much of the formal scholarship has also focussed on the development of AD practice, rather than on exploring the embodied end-user experience of a live theatre performance, and the implications of those experiences. This is in spite of several scholars identifying that AD is about providing b/vi people access to the embodied performance experience (Holland 2009; Margolies 2015) to enjoy the performance (Holsanova 2016), and being mindful of not mediating that experience (Fryer & Freeman 2012). Indeed, in his interview Michael suggested that "*description has to be a part of the production, and it has to reflect and be in sympathy to that*" (Interview with Michael Kenyon).

VocalEyes further reported that end-users regularly indicated that live performance venue staff were not given much support or guidance on how to support b/vi patrons or AD services. This reflects Liam's experiences, discussed earlier, and further suggests that AD experiences are driven by individual advocates and champions. The provision or promotion of AD services may be contingent on an individual and if that one staff member is not well-trained, the b/vi patron's access to the performance may be impacted adversely, either in hearing about the AD performance in the first place, or in accessing the show at the theatre.

VocalEyes undertook a significant industry partnership with Royal Holloway, University of London resulting in the publication of *Describing Diversity* (Hutchinson, Thompson & Cock 2020). This project reflects some of the recent developments and sensibilities around equality and access, and barriers to access due to various identifiers such as race, gender, religion, capacity, and more. It recommends that actors should have input on elements of the AD script, such as their preferred pronouns, how they would like their ethnicity or presentation described, and more. This extends the work of Udo, Copeland and Fels (2011) who argue for the theatre director to have creative input to the AD script, as part of overseeing the performance as a whole, and reflects developing social sensitivities around identity. These issues point to the

complexities of the context in which the UK's BSOs that support AD services operate. They hold in tension the requirements of the legislative framework, the sensibilities of the socio-political environment, the demands of the performing arts sector, and the needs of the b/vi patrons. These tensions create an uncertain and uneven environment for the provision of AD. The data illustrates that services are 'patchy' (according to the interview with Mark), where the 'postcode lottery' determines the amount and quality of services available. The data has also shown that, without legal requirements which can be enforced, AD services are precariously dependent on being provided by charities, some of which prioritise issues of education and employment over leisure and entertainment. Lastly, the data illustrates that AD services are also dependent on the presence of an advocate or champion within a BSO to ensure that the service is promoted to the broader b/vi community.

Singapore

Although there are several BSOs operating in Singapore including the Singapore Association for the Visually Handicapped, Society for the Physically Disabled, the Guide Dogs Singapore, and other groups with a specific b/vi focus (such as Retinitis Pigmentosa, Glaucoma, and others), only one BSO responded to the invitation to participate in this research, iC2 PrepHouse. According to iC2 PrepHouse (2022), in Singapore support services for b/vi people are fragmented and inadequate. iC2 PrepHouse helps "children with low vision stay in mainstream schools … teaching them coping skills in everyday living … to prepare them for an independent and fulfilling future" (IC2PrepHouse 2022). Such a focus on fulfilling one's potential in order to integrate into, and contribute towards, broader society reflects the national discourse on disability and access as discussed above.

I interviewed Amanda, a staff member from iC2 PrepHouse in who identified similar context complexities as were identified by the UK data and discussed above. Amanda explained

that her work is shaped by the socio-cultural environment in which the BSOs operate and the ways in which that environment shapes the broader community expectations, which in turn may constrain the provision of AD services in Singapore. Amanda also explained that she is a vision teacher currently working with up to 200 students, and that iC2 PrepHouse is a small charity working in a small sector of the b/vi minority community. Government policy requires that charities working in the disability sector conduct assessments to determine individual client capacities. These assessments are based on a medical model of disability that identify the limits of an individual's capacity. The assessment outcomes determine the level and quantum of intervention and support services available to an individual. iC2 PrepHouse is also involved in raising awareness of b/vi issues through presentations at mainstream schools.

While Amanda said that she personally found AD for social and cultural access and participation "*very, very interesting*", she suggested that daily life challenges such as education and employment were of higher priority, both for the organisation and for those they support. This was reflected in the organisation's priorities for resourcing students through high school and to transition to tertiary education and employment. From this BSO's perspective, AD could offer an interesting cultural experience, but the serious challenges of daily life were more pressing and hence a greater priority for their organisation. This is demonstrated in the low uptake of free AD theatre tickets offered to iC2 PrepHouse through the SRT. In Singapore, the socio-cultural paradigm focussed resources on education and employment, prioritising the contribution by individuals over the contribution to individuals through arts and cultural access and participation by people with disability.

In her interview, Amanda mentioned that she used a process of 'filtering':

> *Depending on the content, let's say its mature content, and I'll have to filter*
> *out my students who are appropriate for the show.*

Once I receive info from SRT, the first thing I do is to take a look at what the show is all about. I'll go to the SRT website and read the introduction and watch the trailer ... to see if the content is suitable for children. For example, if it's a younger age group, based on my pool of students ... I will filter out [others] and send to a few parents ... I will put them in [a list] according to a ranking system.

The location [of the performance may] not be accessible, so we have to take that into consideration as well. [And] there are parents who are working on weekends, so it is unlikely that they will be able to attend this [show] with their kids.

For the older students, if they are not able to get someone to accompany them or the show ... they're most probably going to say no, even if the show is great (Interview with Amanda).

Amanda said that she ranked students firstly in order to match the content of the show with the appropriately aged students, then according to the venue location and the student's capacity to attend that location, and also according to the known availability of the student's parents. Although this process of ranking students, and passing on information based on that ranking, was a pragmatic approach, based on known information about students and their families, it does reflect an aspect of the 'gatekeeping' by BSOs, an issue being investigated by this research. Rather than making the opportunity available to all iC2 PrepHouse students and their families, to allow them to make their own decision about whether to attend or not, Amanda curated what information was passed on, and to whom. However, in a location where AD is not yet broadly known about and in an organisation with limited resources, it made sense to target those who might have been interested in attending a specific AD performance. Amanda further

explained that invitations for AD theatre that she received from SRT often included pre-show notes in a document and audio format, and that she would "*send it to [parents] so they have a rough idea of what the show is [about]*." This is how Amanda would often introduce the idea of AD to parents.

This reflects the socio-cultural context shaped by disability discourse which includes the expectation that disability supports are first and foremost the responsibility of family and then of community. The disability discourse also frames 'empowerment' in terms of enabling an individual's contribution to broader society through interdependence rather than in terms of autonomy and independence. Awareness of AD is currently quite low in Singapore, even among b/vi people. AD is experienced as 'special' or 'other' rather than as an equalising service which enables b/vi patrons to access the visual content which is otherwise immediately available to sighted audiences. The lack of a theatre-going tradition across the Singaporean b/vi community also contributes to the low rate of awareness and uptake of AD services.

Attention now turns to the BSOs operating in Adelaide which have different challenges with which to contend.

Adelaide

The BSO that supported and pioneered volunteer AD services in Adelaide was the RSB. This was done in partnership with the STCSA as part of a significant upgrade to facilities and services at the Adelaide Festival Centre in 2002. The venue upgrade included significant physical infrastructure to address access issues and also included the development and provision of AD services for live performance events. The importance of strong venue/theatre company staff engagement with the promotion and provision of AD services has been identified by Hutchinson (2005) and the importance of these staff champions is also reflected in the data collected here. As Hutchinson (2005) notes:

It was the leadership, support and commitment of [Adelaide Festival Centre] staff that made the Centre's access achievements possible. An important aspect of such strong staff involvement was the provision of Disability Awareness Training for all venue staff, including technicians and managers. As a result, the responsibility for access is distributed across all areas — no specific person is carrying it for the organisation and individual staff members have the confidence to manage and respond positively to a variety of situations (Hutchison 2005, p. 37).

This new approach to disability access challenges previous notions that disabled people's cultural experiences are 'special' and set apart from abled experiences. The integrated access approach, including establishing AD services, offers b/vi patrons access and participation in cultural experiences as part of the community experience (Darcy & Taylor 2009). Tony Starkey, Executive Officer of the Client Advisory Committee of RSB, explains that it was at this time that RSB started a voluntary AD service, both training and supporting volunteer describers to provide AD for STCSA performances at the Adelaide Festival Centre. There was a strong social aspect to RSB's provision of the AD service, with RSB arranging all aspects of the outing for their own members, including paying for the theatre tickets, creating a social group and having an RSB staff member attend on the night. RSB also arranged all transport to/from the theatre. The RSB staff member assisted the b/vi patrons to navigate their way to the venue entrance, to their allocated seating, and to the restrooms and bar.

In 2011, A2A, an organisation focussed on supporting disability access to the arts, received South Australian state government funding to develop a professional AD service. RSB ceased their voluntary AD service provision at that time. This transition, from a voluntary AD service championed by an in-house advocate to a professional service provided by a disability access service organisation, was expected to broaden the awareness and use of the service.

However, it actually resulted in an immediate and significant drop in b/vi patrons engaging with the AD services at live performances.

In the interview with Tony Starkey from RSB, this outcome reflected the disproportionate reliance on the presence of a champion or advocate within a BSO, to promote AD for live performance. Such an advocate has a significant effect on the engagement with AD services and whether AD is promoted to members of the BSO or not. In the process of moving the AD service support from RSB to A2A, there was no engagement with the volunteers who had championed AD for live theatre in Adelaide through their involvement with RSB. A2A did not support the b/vi patrons to purchase tickets, arrange transport, or ensure the presence of sighted guides to provide assistance within the venue. Without that continuity of contact for the b/vi patrons, attendance dramatically decreased. The barriers identified by the b/vi patrons were external to the AD service, yet significantly curtailed their access and engagement with AD for live theatre.

As with interview data from the other research sites, data from the Adelaide BSOs indicated that there were more pressing issues which took a higher priority in individual b/vi people's daily lives than access to live theatre. Issues such as mobility, transport, and employment, were of higher priority than leisure or entertainment for the b/vi clients. This focussed the limited resources of organisations that supported the b/vi community. Local, state, or national policies that directly impact on those same daily life issues were also given a higher priority than AD for the performing arts. BSOs identified that AD for the performing arts was of interest to their clients/members and provided an excellent opportunity to be involved in community and society. However, in a resource-poor sector, AD for the performing arts was not prioritised by the organisations. This is illustrated in this extract from the interview with Tony Starkey from RSB, when he explained that:

We started audio description in Adelaide… and we ran audio description with volunteers up until … we transferred that responsibility to A2A.

Access2Arts got some money to carry on the AD, that's where it fitted technically, and we were reorganising a bit of our staff at RSB. So it was probably a good time to transfer it over. It was what we called an 'unfunded service' – which is a service that we thought we had to cover, but we did not get funded to do that.

The service was always provided after hours by our staff, so it was always taking one person out of the system to do it. But it was quite successful.

There was quite a group of people who used to go (Interview with Tony Starkey).

According to Tony Starkey, when the AD service was transferred to a professional service provided by A2A in 2011, RSB refocussed their limited resources into other services. Those RSB staff members who had championed AD for live theatre had done so on a voluntary basis and out of office hours. However, when A2A took over the running of the service, no further support for AD for live theatre was given by RSB. The sudden loss of any 'staff champion' to advocate or RSB's b/vi clients to engage with AD for live theatre, resulted in a sudden drop in b/vi patronage for live theatre. This goes some way to explain why Grant and Barry Lock (see Chapter 1) were not informed by RSB in 2018 that AD for live theatre was readily available in Adelaide. However, it also suggests that RSB's decision to no longer even mention AD for live theatre to their clients may have not been in the best interests of the b/vi community, and does not answer the question of why RSB stopped telling their b/vi clients about AD for live theatre.

In the interview with Tracey, the Southern Services Coordinator for BB, another BSO working in Adelaide, she said that she had been working for BB for five years, arranging social

outings and group events, before she even heard about AD for live theatre. She said that in 2019 she heard that RSB was regularly receiving free tickets to attend STCSA performances, so she contacted STCSA and requested tickets to take along BB clients. She also spoke of having to arrange public transport and a meeting place to gather prior to having a meal together before the show, which added "*a whole other layer of organising for me because I have never done that before.*" She said that a group of 20 BB people attended that AD show and really enjoyed the whole experience.

Overall, it is clear from the data collected from the interviews with the BSO workers in Adelaide that BSO organisational priorities, including policies on whether or not to pass on information and the allocation of limited resources, directly impacted on the b/vi end-user experience of AD for live theatre.

Venue/Theatre Companies

In each location, venue/theatre companies are involved in the support of AD services to enable b/vi people to attend live theatre. Interviews with staff working in one venue/theatre company in each location, identified that each of these companies supported and promoted the provision of AD services and they also contributed to the broader context in which b/vi people experience live theatre. That broader context included access to the physical venue/theatre space, and also the investment in training for describers and support for BSOs who arranged for their members to attend AD shows. Interviews with staff working with venues/theatre companies in each city will be considered in turn, starting with London, then moving to Singapore and concluding in Adelaide.

London

The one theatre in London that was recruited to participate in this research was Shakespeare's Globe Theatre. According to its website, Shakespeare's Globe Theatre is "a space where the audience has always been a vital component of the performance" (Shakespeare's Globe, 2022). In an interview with David Bellwood, the Access Manager, he explained that his job was "*to ensure physical and cognitive access*" to the site for all audiences. David Bellwood indicated that such access was informed by the prevailing UK disability and diversity legislation, supported by the UNCRPD, and informed by the Americans with Disabilities Act. According to David Bellwood, everyone at The Globe was taught the social model of disability "*because it is the core of our Access work [which] is about putting the service user first.*"

This correlates with data from the interview with b/vi end-user Toby, who also works for RNIB Connect, who said in his interview for this research that in his experience the Globe Theatre is one place "*where access is really part of the core of the organisation.*" The Globe is also involved in industry partnerships, working with both VocalEyes and the Royal College Academy of Dramatic Arts to provide training for audio describers and for testing AD equipment. The venue access staff are involved in delivering the AD Touch Tours.

This extract from the interview with David Bellwood explains a shift in the understandings of access and equity:

> *In earlier days, [Touch Tours] looked like an act of charity, because it looks like the [b/]vi patrons are getting something extra – especially if you imagine it alongside a regular tour of the Theatre. A regular tour group won't get to touch the costumes. So how does it appear when there's a group on stage touching the costumes? I think everyone now understands that it's not an act of charity, it's actually about access again. We're providing those [b/vi]*

patrons with some things [which are] immediately available to the sighted

audience and that information is this real privilege. For the visually confident

it is a real privilege to have that access (Interview with David Bellwood).

Interviews with staff working with professional organisations, VocalEyes and The Globe Theatre, demonstrated three things: the importance placed on training; the importance of partnering with others across the Arts sector; and their commitment to access and equity. This is illustrated below in another extract from the interview with David Bellwood:

The court here doesn't actually lay out that you need to provide [any] audio

description in theatre. OfComm, who is the television and film watchdog,

have guidelines on the amount of AD that any video on demand platform is

meant to give out, but it's quite small ... compared to captioning, which is

massive. So the legislation doesn't always help force people to provide AD.

And it is more expensive than almost any other form of access assistance for

[live] performance (Interview with David Bellwood).

The interviews also demonstrated the extent to which individual champions and advocates drove and sustained the development and delivery of AD for live performance in London. In both London and Singapore, the venue staff were directly involved in facilitating the pre-show Touch Tour and supporting the AD service delivery for the live show. This was in contrast to the situation in Adelaide, where these duties were performed almost exclusively by the describers themselves, separate to the duties of venue staff. This broader context is quite different from that in Singapore, which will be described next.

Singapore

Singapore's professional AD service was launched in late 2018 by AD trainers from Adelaide. The training was based on best-practice from VocalEyes in the UK. The development of AD services in Singapore was largely driven by Paul Adams, the Learning and Engagement Manager at SRT. Paul worked in a similar role in the UK and was familiar with the various access services provided there, including AD for live performance. Paul and SRT had invested in partnerships across the Access Arts Hub consortium (Access Arts Hub 2020) to engage b/vi AD advocates and champions to promote AD for the performing arts. Interviews with two SRT theatre staff showed the extent to which the lack of access and equity legislation, and the lack of awareness of AD in Singapore had on the limited end-user expectations and challenged the broader promotion, awareness, and uptake of AD services to date. Paul reported during the interview with him for this research that there is a growing interest in disability access research through LaSalle, one of Singapore's major arts colleges, and through the National University of Singapore where Paul lectured business students about "*access inside their business models*". Paul further stated in the interview that, "*we now know that this younger generation of students are starting to get interested [in access], get excited and may be starting to realise that they've been missing a slice of their community.*" However, Paul suggested that in Singapore "*people really don't fully understand AD generally.*" He said that, "*even those in the [b/vi] community don't really know about it in terms of theatre [or] for live events. [It's still] our biggest hurdle.*" Prior to the 2020 global COVID-19 pandemic, there had been some traction with schools, particularly through iC2PrepHouse's students and families, and as Paul added,

> "*I think that's where it gets exciting in terms of planting that seed early in terms of audience development. So that this generation hopefully grows up with this access [to AD], then they start making choices as adults to seek this service out and purchase [tickets]*" (Interview with Paul Adams).

Paul said that AD services for live performance in Singapore were "*a 15-year long-lead audience development*" project, where SRT was looking for a "*social return on investment, as opposed to a financial return*". SRT reached out to key disability associations to build audiences but as Paul said, "*that's a very slow process*" and "*take up is very low.*" Paul stated that the shift in the national "*access agenda is fascinating because [SRT] are tackling it very specifically at an industry level*" but he conceded that the big issues continued to be 'national awareness' and 'infrastructure'. He said SRT and the Access Arts Hub could "*chip away at the bottom of the Arts, and we shouldn't stop, but we do need to effect bigger change.*"

The AD service providers in Singapore, SRT and Access Arts Hub describers, partner with BSOs and other disability service organisations to promote AD. Changes in disability legislation and social policies may be needed to realise the 'bigger change' in national awareness and infrastructure that Paul identified as necessary. The interview data for Singapore suggests that there is a direct link between the lack of legislation and the slow development of access services in Singapore.

Attention now turns to the governance and service delivery constraints that contributed to the broader context in which b/vi end-users experienced AD for the performing arts in Adelaide.

Adelaide

The STCSA is a professional organisation supporting AD for live performance in Adelaide. In the interview with Shelley Lush, Artistic Program Manager at STCSA, she identified importantly that "*there's no way that the cost of the ticket can cover the cost of the [AD] service*", nor is STCSA paying the real cost of the AD service. The following extract from Shelley's interview captures the commitment to access and equity:

People are doing a lot more work than they are being paid for ... [AD is] about making sure that as many people as possible can access the shows. ... It's just part of our general Access Program. It's about making provision for people with different abilities to still access the theatre (Interview with Shelley Lush).

This echoed the interview data from staff at both The Globe Theatre in London and at SRT in Singapore. All three theatre companies emphasised the importance of providing access services, even though they were aware that they did not have a legal obligation to do so, particularly in relation to providing AD for live theatre.

Shelley explained how she was working for STCSA when AD services in Adelaide transitioned from a volunteer service run by RSB to a professional service run by A2A. Shelley indicated that STCSA preferred having the professional AD service because it provided an assurance of a solid describer skill base which ensured that, "*you know what you're getting, and you know what you're providing for patrons.*" She also said that having a professional relationship with describers through A2A "*feels more secure and stable*" compared to working with volunteers.

The professionalisation of AD services in Adelaide was expected to produce an improved service to the b/vi audience in terms of consistency and quality. Professional description was designed to provide an improved service, and it was expected that the improved quality and consistency would support more b/vi people to attend live theatre in Adelaide. However, the opposite happened. B/vi attendance actually dropped dramatically when RSB ceased their involvement through the voluntary AD services.

When I asked Shelley about this sudden and unexpected outcome, she wondered if there may have been 'gatekeepers' in some of the BSOs who influenced what, and how much, information was passed on to b/vi members. She felt that there was a competitive and political

environment where BSOs promoted their own services, but did not help their members tap into other services beyond their own organisation. Shelley also stated that she felt that "*the whole access community is quite complex and political and competitive*" where those involved prioritise their own organisations rather than prioritising the b/vi people whom they serve.

Shelley's experience of this apparent 'gatekeeping', or the withholding of information on services available to b/vi people, echoed Grant Lock's experiences of a 'gatekeeper' barrier to the engagement with AD for live theatre (as detailed above in Chapter 1). Nonetheless, the AD service has been part of STCSA's access commitment for the past 20 years. As Shelley explained:

> *The [AD] service is absolutely value for money for [b/vi patrons]. It's not value in terms of the time and effort for the describers, or for the work that they do. But it's an imperative that we provide these kinds of services [to ensure that] everybody is able to access all kinds of things within the community, not just theatre, [but] live description for things like parades, which I think is really, really important.*

The STCSA, and the other AD services and/or support organisations discussed above in this chapter, provide AD for live performance at a loss, and do so out of a commitment to the principles of equality and access. This further highlights the precarious nature of disability services that are provided without the support of legislative requirements. While the STCSA, and other venue/theatre companies continue to invest in AD for live theatre, it will continue to be available for b/vi patrons. However, if there are no legal implications for withdrawing the service, then if economic priorities change at those venue/theatre companies, this may result in the service being withdrawn. If that were to happen, the barriers to accessing AD live theatre could end up being financial, and thus have nothing to do with the quality of the AD practice.

Summary

This chapter has argued that there are significant factors, beyond AD practice, that impact on end-user experience of AD for the performing arts. The chapter has demonstrated that, in spite of a strong politicisation of disability issues, and support from the international community through the UNCRPD, to which UK, Singapore and Australia are signatories, there remains limited or no national legislation in these respective countries requiring the provision of AD for the performing arts. This chapter also identified the broader socio-cultural context in which AD is supported, including the BSOs and the venue/theatre companies operating in each of the research sites. A number of issues raised in this chapter have highlighted that the provision of AD for live theatre remains precarious due to a number of factors.

The interview data analysed above demonstrated that BSO support for AD for live theatre was uneven across the three sites. Staff from BSOs identified that AD services rely on several points of support, including: whether or not a BSO knows about AD; whether a BSO places a priority on supporting AD services, including whether they tell the b/vi community that such a service even exists; and the presence of an advocate or champion within a BSO, who will promote AD services to the broader b/vi community. Several BSO staff respondents identified that their organisations prioritised employment, education, transport, and other physical access issues, above social and cultural access and participation. As a result, the provision of AD services is not necessarily prioritised by the BSOs or even by the b/vi communities which they serve, which may be due to a lack of awareness of AD services in general, and a lack of awareness of or interest in AD for live theatre in particular. Interview data also suggests that AD services were reliant on venue/theatre organisations continuing their support, even though it was known to be a 'loss leader' service, currently provided in all three sites out of a commitment to the principles of access and inclusion, rather than for any financial benefit to the organisation.

End-user experiences in London, Singapore, and Adelaide, will be explored in the next three chapters through an analysis of data from interviews with end-users in relation to their experiences of AD for live performance.

Chapter 5: End-User Experiences of Audio Description Services in London

Introduction

The previous Chapter has illustrated how AD services in the UK developed in a political environment that fosters access and inclusion for people living with disability, to enable the pursuit of disability equality (Campbell & Oliver 1998; Shakespeare 2013) and participation in social and cultural activities (Reinelt 2014) such as attending live performances. This chapter considers AD services for b/vi people attending live theatre in London and end-user experiences of those AD services. The London AD services are the most established and mature of those available in each of the three research sites, and have been professionalised to a high degree. One marker of high quality AD services is the inclusion of end-user feedback mechanisms which inform practice, describer development, and service development.

This chapter explores the experiences of end-users who attended live theatre performances in London and used AD to support that experience. In their interviews, respondents articulated their experiences in terms of their embodied experience of being part of the audience, and being able to follow the live action on stage, through the support provided by the AD service. While the AD practices in London are the mature and professionalised, end-users nonetheless identified a number of barriers which constrained their AD experience, such as technical issues with equipment, or when AD itself became intrusive and interrupted their immersion in the live event itself. Several end-users also identified a number of barriers which had a significant impact on their AD experiences, which sit beyond AD practice, such as challenges in travelling to/from the venue, and situational or environmental factors. This

chapter thus considers the implications of these barriers identified by the respondents and the extent to which AD practice has understood or addressed those barriers.

As I argued in Chapter 2, AD scholarship to date has typically considered end-user experience in relation to questions of AD practice, such as how end-user comprehension of the AD or the source text can be used to improve the process and delivery of AD. This chapter argues that, while end-user experiences of AD for live theatre can be immersive and inclusive, AD scholarship has not yet been sensitive to the complexities of factors which are external to AD practice but which impact on end-user experiences. Therefore, this chapter demonstrates that end-user AD experiences articulated by the London respondents are not solely a direct outcome of AD practice and process, and that improving the quality of the AD practice, otherwise known as professionalisation of practice, will not adequately address the barriers to end-user experiences of AD. The interview data shows that the end-user experience of AD sits within a cluster of contexts and supports, including AD practice, and is also impacted by factors external to that practice. This chapter thus argues that if an end-user encounters a barrier in relation to any one or combination of those elements, even if those elements are external to AD practice, their AD experience is disrupted.

Audio description services

The UK has the oldest and most mature AD service for live theatre available in the three research sites. The first known AD for live theatre in the UK in the so-called 'modern era' was in 1983 (Orero 2007). A professional service providing AD for live theatre performances was then established in the late 1980s (Holland 2009), whereas AD services were not established in Adelaide until 2002 (Seeley 2022), and in Singapore in 2018. AD services in London were developed as an access support service, and are now underpinned by international convention and national legislation, albeit with quite a limited scope of requirements. However, this

somewhat limited legal framework is supported by professional organisations, such as BSOs and venue/theatre companies, to provide some AD services. Chapter 2 identified that the majority of formal scholarship in this field has focussed on improving the practice and the process of the provision of AD services, with a view to increasing AD quality, thereby enhancing end-user experiences. One aspect of the professional AD services in London has included the development of formal end-user feedback processes, which have continued to be facilitated by VocalEyes. As Michael, the Theatre Program Manager of VocalEyes explained in his interview: "*We have a user group that meets three or four times a year… for getting general feedback from people who've been attending our shows and using our services*".

Feedback from user groups over many years has been used by VocalEyes to improve AD practice and to inform disability access support training of venue/theatre company staff. However, Michael identified that the BSO was aware of end-users' desire to attend a live performance for its own sake, and that leveraging the end-user feedback data about their experience as a means to improve services was something that needed to be held in tension. Michael articulated his awareness of that tension in this way: "*[However,] the aim [of AD] is really for the user to just be going to the theatre.*" This reflected the understanding of Pfanstiehl and Pfanstiehl (1985) who identify that a live performance has an "emotional atmosphere" (p. 91), and that AD should support end-users to enter that embodied theatrical experience. That is, AD services are not primarily about obtaining end-user feedback on that service. The focus of AD is to be on the play itself and making it accessible to b/vi audience members. While end-user feedback is important, in as much as end-users should have input to shaping the services they receive (Ellis et al. 2017), end-user feedback on AD practice does not capture the embodied experiences of end-users attending live theatre, and the implications of those experiences.

Focus now turns from London's AD service to the experiences of London AD end-users in using that service when attending live theatre.

End-user experiences

The London cohort is the largest group of end-users involved in this research project. This reflects the size of the population in that city, the length of time that AD services for live theatre has been available, and the volume of AD theatre shows available for b/vi audiences to access. The number of end-users recruited also reflects the well-established connections between users and the professional organisations that support AD services. Those connections have been developed through the established end-user feedback mechanisms which have been part of the professionalisation of the AD service in London. Those connections were instrumental in assisting in the recruitment of AD end-users to participate in this research project.

Most of the London end-user respondents reported having had extensive experience of attending live performances with AD. All had attended more than 10 AD performances, and some had attended hundreds. For example, both John and Steve had attended live theatre between "*15 and 20 times a year*" for the last 20 years. Debi had attended plays, musicals and pantomimes regularly for more than 10 years. Mark had attended "*10 to 12 shows a year*" for the last 15 years, and Paul had attended an AD show "*about once a week over the last twenty years*". Toby attended "*every audio described performance [he] could*" for about five or six years in the early 2000s. Liam started attending AD theatre shows in the early 1990s, attending every AD show available at the Barbican Theatre for about five years. The London respondents reported having had broad live performance AD experiences upon which to reflect in their interviews. This contrasted with the other respondents in this project, who had significantly fewer AD live performance experiences. This greater number of experiences may reflect the prevalence of theatre attendance in London, and nationally across the UK, where there is a strong tradition of attending theatre, whether in the West End theatre district of London, renowned for high quality theatre productions, or simply attending local community Christmas

pantomimes. As will be discussed below in subsequent chapters, and by comparison, Theatre attendance is more stratified in Singapore and Adelaide, and this is seen in the extent of end-users' theatre experiences.

Several of the London b/vi respondents recalled that their first AD theatre experience was very intense. Paul described it as "life changing" while Debi used the word "crucial" in describing how important AD was to her. Steve shared that his love of attending theatre started at school in the late 1970s and became a real passion, which has continued into adulthood. He said that:

If I want something pre-recorded, I'll sit at home and watch the television and be bored witless. If I want to be really entertained with something, and feel the experience of it, then I'm going to go do it at the theatre, because it's a live and real performance (Interview with Steve).

Steve talked about his feeling of being in the theatre, where "*the physical space [had] a real resonance*" which he experienced when attending a theatre event in person. This data suggests that the embodied experience of attending a live performance is important for Steve's overall enjoyment of the theatre event. Steve engaged with the live performance experience in terms of being part of the audience, as experiencing the resonance of the physical space, and that there was something intangible but nonetheless real in being present and in attendance. Steve said that even as his sight loss increased, he "*kept going to the theatre ... until [he] couldn't see the stage anymore*". He said he "*just found it so hard. It was horrible*" (when he could no longer see the stage), so he stopped going to the theatre altogether. He said that he had "*actually experienced grief ... because of [his] sight loss*" and that part his grief was because of the loss of the experience of attending live performances in person, being part of the audience, and sharing that event together in a physical space. It was the loss of that embodied

experience of live theatre that he grieved. Steve's first experience of AD for theatre was in 2007 and this extract from his interview captures his deeply emotional experience of this service:

> *...it was just fantastic! We got to the end of [the show] and people were leaving [the theatre] and I just sat in my chair and cried, because, Oh God, this gave me back something that I thought I'd lost forever. AD has given me back something that I thought I'd lost for the rest of my life. Yeah, it's given me back the chance to be part of the world that just brings great joy to so many people* (Interview with Steve).

Steve was very aware that because of his decreasing sight, he was missing more and more of the visual information necessary to engage with the on-stage live theatre performance. Then when he stopped going to theatre altogether, he grieved the loss of the embodied experience of being part of the audience. His first experience of AD for live theatre returned to him the embodied experience of theatre that he had lost. This sense of rediscovery, of reclaiming theatre and the physical response to the experience of being part of the theatre audience, was a deeply emotional experience for him. It literally moved him to tears.

Steve knew that AD was the vehicle that delivered this profound opportunity to experience theatre again. However, it is interesting to note that he was so pre-occupied with the joy of rediscovering and reconnecting with the embodied experience of the live theatre event that, even as he articulated his experience, he did not mention any elements of the AD practice itself. This suggests that elements of the AD practice were not a priority for Steve. Indeed, it was the embodied experience that AD provided him that was more important for Steve. He was aware that it was the AD that had provided this renewed opportunity for an embodied experience of attending live theatre, but it was the experience in itself, and not the AD practice, that occupied his recollection of that event. This is important because it has been the elements of AD practice that have occupied much of the focus of AD research to date, yet it was the

embodied experience of the live performance that was 'top of mind' for this end-user as he articulated his AD experience. Other respondents also mentioned this embodied experience, rather than elements of AD practice, in relation to their first experience of AD for live performance.

Jess shared that she "*love[d] going to theatre and all things audio description*". However, in this extract from her interview Jess explained that her first experience of AD for live theatre was actually a bit unexpected:

> *It was something I didn't expect to enjoy quite so much [as I did]. It was probably about 12 years ago, and my sight was quite a lot better than [it is] now, and I really didn't think I needed audio description for the theatre. I mean, I still had great vision, but I was a bit in denial about it. I guess I didn't really know that much about audio description [because] I'd never used it. And then I met some new mates when I moved to London [who invited me] to go to the theatre... I just remember getting the [AD] headsets and sitting there and just watching [the show]. It's quite visual [with] the dancing and the costumes and everything. [The AD] just made such a massive difference. And I remember I just got so much more from the show than I would have done just sitting there without [AD]. [This was] something that I could then go to and enjoy, and it was, 'oh wow, theatre is back on for me'* (Interview with Jess).

Although not as deeply emotional compared to Steve's first AD experience, Jess's experience echoed Steve's experience in that they each discovered the ways in which AD allowed them to reclaim something that they had lost. Steve said that AD gave him back the opportunity to be part of the theatre experience again, and Jess realised that it made a huge difference to the extent to which she could access to the visual elements that she had previously

missed. Until they experienced AD, they had not understood or expected what AD was able to offer them in terms of accessing vital visual information or engaging with the social aspect of attending theatre.

Glen said that because he had been born blind, "*[he had] never felt like [he'd] lost anything because [he] never had anything to lose in the first place*". Yet he described his first experience of AD for live theatre as "*enlightening [and] fascinating*". Like Jess, he shared that he had not "*realise[d] how much benefit AD [would] add*" until he actually experienced it for himself. In talking about his first experience of AD for live theatre, he said that when he tried it, he was surprised at just what AD added to his experience of the live performance. He said "*getting the audio description really helped immerse me in the world [of the performance] and just place[d] me on a level playing field with everyone else [in the audience]*". He said that his first experience of AD also encouraged him to try new things, as indicated by this extract from his interview:

> *I've been to shows that I never would have thought of going to before. I've tried a ballet, for instance, which I never would have gone to [without AD], because I wouldn't have [had] a hope in hell of seeing what was going on otherwise. ... [having AD] encouraged me to experiment, really try more things out…. Previously, not having AD had put me off going to as many shows as I [would have liked] because I was unsure about how well I'd be able to access them. But [now], knowing that [AD] is there, has really helped* (Interview with Glen).

Glen appreciated the way that AD enabled him to engage in the embodied experience of attending live theatre, of being immersed in the on-stage world in a way that he felt was the same as other (sighted) audience members. For Glen, AD took away the profound sense of otherness that people living with disability often experience (Goggin & Newell 2005). It gave

him a sense of being the same as everyone else, and being "*on a level playing field*". This experience echoes the work of audience studies scholars who identify the desirability of the collective and social experience of being part of an audience at a live performance (Pitts 2005; Radbourne et al. 2009). Glen also found that AD gave him confidence to try different genres of live performance – some that he had previously wanted to attend but felt he could not because of his sight loss, and some that he had not even considered attending, but chose to attend due to AD being provided. These experiences of AD have demonstrated ways in which AD has strengthened and broadened Glen's embodied experiences of live theatre.

Toby also spoke about his deep engagement with live performance as a consequence of his first AD experience, as illustrated by this interview extract:

> *I went to an audio described performance and got so much out of it, that then*
> *for five or six years I was going to every audio described performance I could*
> *because I was getting so much out of the show ... out of the whole service ...*
> *not just the live AD, but the touch tours and the pre-show notes* (Interview
> with Toby).

Toby's first experience of AD for live performance was so profound that he said he then attended every show he could possibly attend over a period of several years. He mentioned that AD provided him a lot of the information he had previously been missing, and that he particularly engaged with the touch tours and pre-show notes. These activities are elements of professional AD services that are provided prior to live performances, and both prepare audiences for their live performance experience, and extend the embodied experience beyond the time of the on-stage performance in the theatre. This longer engagement with the theatre experience is something that sighted audiences have also sought as a means by which to build their anticipation of the embodied experience of the theatre event (Brown, AS & Novak 2007;

Johanson 2013; Walmsley 2011). Toby's embodied experiences of live theatre, supported by AD, quite literally transformed his access and participation in attending live theatre.

Each of these above interview extracts have demonstrated that AD for live theatre is certainly about the 'access and inclusion' afforded by the provision of a professional AD service enabling deep and broad engagement in the embodied experience of live performance. However, there was far more to these end-user's experience of AD than the AD practice and process. In the experiences of these London respondents, beyond providing aural access to visual information, AD provided direct access to social and cultural participation through the embodied experience of attending a live theatre performance in person. Several of the London respondents had experienced this embodied theatre experience before their sight loss and they identified that AD had restored their opportunity to experience that engagement with theatre again.

London end-users identified that their AD experience of live performance has been intense, emotional, inclusive, and immersive. Scholars of audience studies also suggest that the live experience is not only what is going on during a performance (Reason 2010) but that the audience experience extends beyond the time and place of the performance, as part of a longer experience (Barba & Fowler 1990; Heim 2016; Radbourne et al. 2009). This longer audience experience is reflected in the following interview extract in which Liam spoke about his first AD experience for live theatre:

> It was novel, it was something new. It was something I'd heard about even
> going back ... about three years earlier. ... They actually did a piece of
> Scripture theatre, which is great. [It was] refreshing that they did that… It
> was a novelty, but I don't remember an awful lot about the description
> commentary. I was very interested and very enthusiastic ...there is something

about theatre, because I used to adore it, you know, absolutely adore it

(Interview with Liam).

Liam specifically identified that in this first experience he was not focussed on the description itself, but on the novelty of the new experience. Although he was unable to articulate exactly what it was that he loved about theatre, he identified that there was "*something*" about the theatrical experience that he deeply enjoyed. This again highlights that, although much AD research has focussed on practice, the end-user respondents in this project were more focussed on the embodied experience of the live performance event than on AD practice. For example, as Steve's identified, his experience of AD for live performance was also about the social aspect of a shared theatrical experience, of "*coming out [of the theatre], sitting on a bench in a café or bar and discussing with someone about what actually happened on stage – what it meant, what it was all about.*"

Therefore, the participants' accounts have illustrated that the AD delivered during a live performance is just one aspect of the embodied experience of live performance. The embodied experience extends beyond the "sphere and space of a performance itself" (Walmsley 2019, p. 5). In articulating their live theatre experiences, some of the b/vi participants spoke about their deeply emotional experiences, including grieving the loss of access to the embodied experience of live theatre which their sight loss had taken from them, and which they felt AD had restored to them. Respondents did not speak about comprehension of the performance content, which is an aspect of end-user experience that has been most often explored in terms of AD 'reception'. Rather, the London end-users articulated their live theatre experiences in terms of their embodied experiences. Some also spoke of a longer experience beyond the on-stage performance, including the before-show activities (such as touch tours and pre-show notes) and discussing the performance with other audience members after the show.

The London end-user respondents also articulated deeper experiences of AD for live theatre, beyond simply being assisted in understanding the *content* of the performance. They also felt included in its embodied experiences and the experience of being part of the audience cohort. In particular, AD supported them to feel 'the same as' sighted audience members. A feeling of being included was common in the following accounts from London end-users who spoke about their AD end-user experience as being an 'inclusive' experience. This was clearly an important aspect of Mark's experience as he repeated this idea several times in his interview. Mark stated that AD ensured that "*you can be a lot more included in what's going on*". For Mark, access to the AD for live theatre meant he could "*feel a lot more included*" in terms of understanding the on-stage action, such as body language, facial expressions, costume colours, lighting effects, scenery changes, and individual gestures. He explained further that, for him, having access to AD meant that "*every minute of everything that's happening on stage, you're fully included*". This extract from Mark's interview captured the importance he placed on inclusion, and even participation, as part of his theatre experience:

> *[AD is] a far more inclusive process when you're going out to theatre. And you can enjoy the full aspects of the performance, you're able to participate, the same as sighted members of the audience in the auditorium. So, you can feel you are physically included a lot more ... there's so much more inclusivity. ... With AD, you can feel a lot more included...* (Interview with Mark).

Mark framed his experience in terms of the whole live performance event and in terms of being included in the experience of that event. He felt he was part of the audience, "*the same as ... other members of the audience in the auditorium*". His understanding of what AD afforded him, in terms of being "*the same as sighted members of the audience*" and being "a*ble to participate*" as an audience member, was very interesting. In exploring experiences of sighted

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audiences, Pitts (2005) identified that engagement with the "collective experience of being part of an audience" (p. 260) is an important part of the social experience of attending live performance (Radbourne et al. 2009). Data from Mark's interview suggests that he felt that it was the AD service that enabled him to feel included and to actively participate as part of the collective audience, as an equal alongside sighted audience members. He identified that without AD he would probably be left in the dark, just "*sitting there, wondering what's happening*". AD for live theatre enabled Mark to feel that he was no different to the sighted members of the audience. Glen shared a similar feeling about his own experience of AD for live theatre. He stated that AD placed him "*on a level playing field with everyone else.*"

John explained that his experience of AD had been that it had helped him to be "*normal*". He returned to London in 2003, after volunteering overseas for several years, having progressively lost his sight to the point of being totally blind. John stated:

> *[I] went to a theatre just around the corner, and really discovered audio description, which I'd never heard of, or experienced before, and since then I've been going to live theatre regularly ... between 15 and 20 times a year. I spend most of my life trying desperately to be 'normal'. I am not primarily a blind person. I am not defined by my impairment, and therefore when I go to the theatre, I don't suddenly change. I want to experience a play to as great an extent as I can, as a sighted person would experience it* (Interview with John).

For Mark, Glen, and John, their experiences of AD were about the way in which it enabled them to be 'normal' and 'the same as' sighted members of the audience in a theatre. Being physically present in the theatre auditorium with others, was an important part of their experience of the performing arts. This was also the case for Steve who explained:

A huge part of the theatre is physically being in the theatre. It's the experience in the theatre [that] is the most powerful, important thing for me… [with] everybody that is sitting in the auditorium [or] in a theatre… (Interview with Steve).

Other respondents also spoke about the shared experience of being part of the audience during an event, which was often articulated as a feeling of being included. Jess spoke about her experience of attending live theatre, and "*going out and being amongst people*". Mark spoke about the "*tremendous atmosphere*" and the shared experience of being "*with several hundred other people in an auditorium and you're all cheering and clapping, you tend to get carried away.*" Steve shared that if he wanted "*to be really entertained with something and feel the experience of it, then [he would] do it at the theatre, because it's a live and real performance.*" When Alison attended a Christmas pantomime with her extended family, she said it was "*one of the best*" AD experiences for her because it meant that she could "e*ngage with the family afterwards*" to discuss their shared experience of the show and the whole outing "*becomes part of [our] collective memory.*"

These b/vi end-users' insights reflect understandings of the experience of live performance delivering a 'collective engagement' which, in the field of audience studies, has also been explored with sighted audiences (Pitts 2005; Radbourne et al. 2009). The experiences articulated by the b/vi respondents in this study extend understandings of AD beyond a disability access service that provides visual information from which the b/vi audience would otherwise have been excluded. In the experiences articulated above, AD certainly did do that, but it also did more. In the experiences of the participants, AD was a leveller. It enabled them to access the collective and embodied audience experience that sighted audiences also encounter as part of attending a live performance event. The persistence of the importance of end-user respondents feeling that they have been included and are part of a shared audience

experience suggests that these aspects of the live theatre experience are important to b/vi end-user respondents, and are as equally important to sighted audiences. However, these aspects of AD are not specifically part of current training or practice, nor have they been explored in AD scholarship to date.

Another important part of inclusion, as articulated by the end-user respondents in London, was being made to feel welcomed and supported throughout the AD experience. Glen spoke about the theatre staff being:

*...so helpful and friendly. When I first started going to shows it was quite daunting because I didn't know what to ex*pect (Interview with Glen).

In Glen's interview, he repeated three times that the theatre staff were helpful and welcoming. This was obviously an important aspect of his AD experience. He also spoke about the cast being "*welcoming*" at the touch tours. Brown and Novak (2007) identify that for sighted audiences, the opportunity to meet the cast before the show adds another level of engagement in the embodied experience of live theatre. London b/vi respondents in this research also indicated that meeting the cast during the pre-show activity of the touch tours increased their engagement in the whole experience. Sarah (pseudonym) met "*quite a few of the [Harry Potter] cast*" at a touch tour, and she reported in her interview that the cast "s*pent quite a lot of time with [us – we] didn't have to rush*." She felt included in something very special which was extra to what the rest of the (sighted) audience would have experienced. In her conversations with the cast she was not made to feel like an inconvenience that had to be rushed out the door, and it was more like a backstage VIP experience.

Similarly, Glen, who got to meet the cast of the stage production of 'Wicked' on the touch tour, enjoyed being able to "*talk to them as well as exploring the set.*" Beyond the information he was able to glean from exploring the set, Glen described:

The fact that [the cast] do take time out to come and say hello, to come and welcome us, to actually talk to us, and engage with us, so we understand everything that's going on even more fully, is absolutely fantastic (Interview with Glen).

Glen emphasised that this pre-show activity made him feel welcomed and included, but even more than that, he was made to feel very special. For Steve, part of being welcomed was being made "*to feel part of it and to feel safe and supported and engaged with*". Steve said this was "*the most wonderful experience.*"

John identified that he would have found it very difficult without the theatre staff to welcome him, guide him through the lobby and to his seat, if he had of attended the theatre on his own. In fact, he felt that this level of support from theatre or venue staff would be "*absolutely essential*" to enable him to attend. John also shared that the interaction he had with the theatre staff in booking his ticket and preparing to attend the AD performance was also an important element of his overall enjoyment of the live theatre experience. He shared an example of a regular interaction that he has when booking tickets to attend an AD show. When the staff ask if he will be bringing a guide dog or if he will need a sighted guide on his arrival at the theatre, he responds with the following:

'No, don't worry, I'm totally blind, but I'm coming with my wife. So I'll have a guide with me, but I don't have a guide dog. If you can provide my wife with a bowl of water at the interval, she'd probably be happy. But she'd be much happier with a glass of wine!' The joke seemed to amuse the staff I talked to (Interview with John).

This light-hearted interaction was part of John's regular preparation for attending a live show. It was his way of creating a longer theatre experience by building an easy rapport with theatre staff before arriving at the venue for the show.

Mark also spoke about the theatre staff. He mentioned them several times in his interview. He spoke of them "*going the extra mile*", being "*very willing*" to help him. He said that there was usually "*someone to give me an arm and show me to my seat*" when he arrived at the theatre. The attitude of performers and theatre staff are perhaps so obvious as to be overlooked, yet they mattered, and they mattered deeply to the b/vi participants in this research. Staff and performers that are welcoming are a vital part of the b/vi audience feeling "*safe and supported and engaged with*" (Interview with Steve), and therefore included in the live theatre event. The attitude of the venue/theatre staff supported the b/vi end-users to engage deeply in the embodied experience of the live performance. Alison also shared her experience of a touch tour where she had the "*chance to meet some of the people who were going to be in character, and they were dressed in their particular costumes, and you could touch their costumes and meet them, which was nice.*" Beyond simple information, the pre-show activities prepared the b/vi AD end-users for a deeper engagement in the performance itself, and this mirrors research with sighted audiences.

Meeting the cast and creatives before the show provides a "rare connection to actors and creatives" (Walmsley 2011, p. 347) and supports Pitts' (2005) idea of building empathy between (sighted) performers and audiences. These experiences all reflected high quality AD services where the describers and the venue/theatre staff were well prepared to deliver the services required by b/vi patrons. The theatre company brief their cast, who readily engage with the b/vi patrons during the pre-show touch tour. The venue trains and briefs their staff who provided a welcoming environment for the b/vi patrons. The positive end-user experiences articulated by these respondents did not focus on how well they comprehended the performance,

but on how effectively they were welcomed and supported. These aspects of an end-user 'customer journey' were complementary to the AD practice and were part of creating the broader context that impacted on the end-users' AD experience.

Accounts from participants illustrated that for some, AD gave them back the social and cultural participation they had lost, and grieved for, with the loss of their sight. For others, AD enabled them to again participate in a live performance experience 'the same as sighted audience members' and as if the theatre experience was not mediated at all. Several respondents spoke about the importance of being included and feeling welcomed into the theatre space, while others particularly enjoyed the fact that AD provided them something extra, like a 'VIP experience' that only a few members of the audience got to experience. All of these accounts discuss elements of the embodied live theatre experience supported by AD that contributes to a deep end-user engagement in the embodied live performance itself.

In their interviews, participants also described their experience of AD as being immersive. The state of being immersed in a performance is a concept developed by Csikszentmihalyi (2000) in the field of positive psychology. The concept of flow has been applied in the study of the experiences of live performance audiences by Brown and Novak (2007), where they refer to immersion as being the extent to which individuals are engrossed in a performance. They identify that high levels of engagement are closely linked to satisfaction or enjoyment. In AD research this phenomenon has been referred to as 'presence'. Adapting this concept from its use in psychology (e.g. Biocca 1997; Freeman et al. 1999), AD researchers use the idea of "being there" (Barfield et al. 1995; Fryer & Freeman 2012) or "experiencing the mediated environment as though it were unmediated" (Fryer, Pring & Freeman 2013, p. 65). In his qualitative study of the impact of theatre with sighted audiences, Walmsley (2013) notes that "flow was regularly discussed in terms of … immersion". Several of the London end-users also talked about their AD experiences as being immersive and of getting so involved in the show

that they became unaware of the AD. This 'flow state' can be seen in a number of respondents' interviews. For example, Jess talked about being "*so into the show, maybe I don't always think about the description as such*". While she was aware that it was the AD that gave her access to the live theatre experience, in the moment, she was deeply immersed in the world of the performance, and was unaware of the AD service.

The state of 'being in the flow' (Lombard & Ditton 1997; Walczak 2017; Walczak & Fryer 2017) may be interrupted by unexpected things happening on stage. However, Steve spoke about an instance where, rather than interrupting his flow, the AD supported his deep engagement with the performance. He shared that the on-stage interruption actually built a stronger sense of a shared audience experience and a deeper connection with the performers (Barker 2013). Steve explained that he was at an outdoor theatre performance when an unexpected interruption occurred:

> *[It was] at The Globe on the South Bank. It was Faust. [The actor]'s laying on the stage and talking about what he's going through, and the end of the world, and how it's going to come and it's going to destroy everyone. And there's this massive thunderbolt. And he just turned and looked at us and just said, '...maybe sooner than we think!' And he went back to what he was saying* (Interview with Steve).

The immediacy of this interaction – between the performer on stage, the weather in the sky, and the audience watching the performance – could only be experienced live and in the moment, and became a singular experience shared only by those who were actually present in the theatre for that specific performance. It contributed to Steve's embodied experience of the live performance event and added to his enjoyment of that experience that had been shared with the audience present at that performance, but which would most likely not be repeated at other performances.

In her interview, Debi talked about another way in which the AD added to her embodied experience of the live performance, and which enabled her to contribute to the experience of sighted people in the audience seated around her:

> *An incident [happened] on stage ... [but] we couldn't see around the corner, and the rest of the sighted audience [near] us couldn't tell what was going on. We were getting the information in our description, so we were telling them what was happening. Otherwise, they were missing out too* (Interview with Debi).

Such interactions between the actors and the audience, or between the sighted and the b/vi audience were unique to the respondents' interviews in London, and rather than interrupting flow, these live incidents were reported as having added to the overall immersive and shared audience experiences of these respondents.

Visual metaphors were one way that flow states were expressed by respondents, as a way of explaining their experiences and capturing their feelings of immersion/flow in the embodied experience of live theatre with AD. For many of the b/vi end-users the aural process is actually described as a visual experience. The aural information of AD enables them to build images in their mind's eye which are vivid and experienced visually, suggesting the concept of "experiencing a mediated environment as if it was not mediated" (Fryer, Pring & Freeman 2013, p. 65). Glen talked about his AD experiences in terms of how it "*opens up*" the world and of himself being "*immersed in the world*" of the performance. He repeated this concept four times in his interview: 1) "*getting the AD really helped immerse me in the world*"; 2) "*it's really opened up the world*"; 3) "*the AD really helped to open [the show] up*"; and 4) "*[AD] opens up a whole world, really*". Glen enjoyed the experience of AD and the way it helped him to be immersed in the world of the play, but also the ways in which AD had helped to "*open up the world*" to him. Through AD he could access the world of the performance, but his explanation

that AD 'really opened up the world' suggested that his experience of AD had brought more to him that just the on-stage content of a show. This is significant because, just as seeing a play can change one's perspective or view of the world, Glen's response suggests that the AD experience of live performance can also change an end-user's perspective or world-view.

This point is also significant for this research because as noted above, AD scholarship has largely been focussed on AD practice and end-user comprehension of the text being described. It has not explored the impact on an end-user's world-view perspective as a result of 'seeing' a theatre performance. Therefore, this research both fills the gap in the literature and demonstrates the significance of end-users' experiences.

Jess also derived great enjoyment of her experience of AD for a live performance, in this instance of an opera, but she found it difficult to pinpoint exactly what it was that she enjoyed. The following extract from Jess's interview captures her level of immersion in the flow state as she was just so caught up in the live performance experience:

> *The music was just amazing. And there was just something about the whole thing. I can't even put it into words. It was just something that you came away from thinking, 'oh, wow!' And because the costumes they described all seemed very beautiful somehow. Yeah, I don't know, really. But I did just come away thinking, 'Oh, I really enjoyed that.' … This was a new experience* (Interview with Jess).

It is interesting to note that when articulating their AD experiences, neither Jess nor any of the other participants, specifically mentioned the AD content itself. In this example from Jess's interview, she seemed to be unaware of the presence of the mediation tool (AD) that ushered her into the immersive state of flow (Fryer, Pring & Freeman 2013). For Jess, the describer became quite invisible, and their description was unnoticed. The hiddenness of the AD contributed to Jess's engagement in the show itself. Indeed, scholars suggest that AD

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"works best when… the describers are invisible" (Fryer & Freeman 2012, p. 16) and that this 'invisibility' draws the b/vi audience in, to deeply engage with the experience (Barfield et al. 1995), in this case the live performance. Brown and Novak (2007) indicate that although the pursuit of flow may not be a conscious part of deciding what shows to attend, the experience of flow is linked to one's sense of enjoyment. John took the idea of the invisibility of the describer even further as he explained that:

> *I try to experience a play, to as great an extent as I can, as a sighted person would experience it." To him, AD was primarily to "fill in the bits… that are essential to the narrative, that I can't see, and without which, I won't understand the flow of the dramatic line." "what I am looking for is [AD] that is eminently forgettable. What I'm interested in is the play … I think the best sort of AD is sort of minimalist. If I come out of the theatre and have no memories at all of the quality of the AD, that's a very successful occasion* (Interview with John).

This feedback echoed similar responses in other studies with end-users that identified that not only are the describers 'invisible' but that the descriptions are unnoticed – where "the best AD is when you don't really notice it's there" (Fryer & Walczak 2021, p. 16). The hiddenness of the AD gives the perception that the necessarily-mediated AD experience is not mediated at all, and is an example of being immersed in the embodied experience of the theatrical event.

Another aspect of the feeling of being immersed in the AD experience, and a persistent theme in the interviews of the London end-users, was the use of visual metaphors to describe their immersive AD experiences. Several studies have mapped eye movement of AD end-users (Holsanova 2022; Igareda & Matamala 2012; Orero & Vilaró 2014; Walczak & Fryer 2017) and presented evidence of this visual/aural connection. However, the data in this current project presents the articulation of the end-users' experiences of AD as being akin to an *actual* visual

experience. This is seen in the persistence of the use of visual language and metaphors by the London respondents and highlighted below with underlined text.

For example, Mark talked about the verbal description helping him to "*get a lot clearer idea in your mind's eye*" and being able to "*build up a better picture in your mind*". He also talked about the body language of the actors, their facial expressions, the colours of their costumes, the lighting effects, scenery changes, and even individual gestures. All of these finer details are visual elements of the show that Mark could only access through the aural delivery of the AD. However, as with other respondents, his aural experience was actually a very visual experience. The aural information was experienced as pictures in his mind. Mark talked about "*going to see the performance*" and hearing about "*the colours of the costumes... body movements, and visual gestures*". Mark seemed to assimilate the information as if physically seeing these details himself. His explanation indicated that for him, the images in his mind's eye were vivid and experienced visually, suggesting the concept of "experiencing a mediated environment as if it was not mediated" (Fryer, Pring & Freeman 2013, p. 65). Jess talked about actually "*seeing*" the visual information that the audio describers are providing aurally. She did not talk about hearing the show or having heard the information, but rather about seeing the show and having seen particular details.

Debi talked about having "*watched*" musicals, pantomimes, and plays, and not as having 'heard' them. She also shared her unusual theatre experience where the audience sat on chairs placed at odd angles within the performance space. She explained that she was "*sat at the back of the stage, looking straight out at the audience space*" and feeling it was a bit "*wrong ... [because] I should be looking this way.*" Debi's explanation of the audience being situated within what is usually the performance space and facing 'the wrong way' was again expressed in terms of looking, rather than hearing. Her orientation to the space was directional in terms of sightlines. Debi also spoke of her experiences of pantomime and shared that "*the panto Dame*

... actually <u>showed</u> us his costume ... we [got] to <u>see</u> all the tricks." She explained about touch tours where cast members were "*<u>showing</u> us things*" and how she "*wanted to <u>see</u> how it would work*". While it is possible to be 'shown' something by touch, Debi repeatedly referred to <u>seeing</u>, but never to hearing, and only rarely to touching. Debi explained her experience of the aural description as if it was a visual experience. In fact, the experience actually was visual for her, as demonstrated in her explanation that the AD guided "*your <u>eyes</u> in the right direction.*"

Debi's experience of the AD as a guide to looking, is echoed in the work of Home-Cook (2015) who, in his work on theatre and aural attention, identified that the act of listening is closely linked to looking:

> Listening, moreover, is never alone: vision, or the act of looking, even in the case of radiophonic reception, plays a key role in shaping the phenomenology of auditory perception. Indeed, it is by means of looking that listening is *activated*. Lastly, to experience the *play* of listening is also to be aware of a sense of movement (Home-Cook 2015, p. 168, emphasis in original).

Although his work was in relation to sighted theatre audiences, Home-Cook references the audience experience of a radio play, wherein the audience does not see the stage, actors, or action, yet the process of looking, plays a key role in hearing and understanding. In the case of b/vi end-users attending a live theatre performance, they have low or no sight and therefore cannot see the on-stage action, much like a radio play audience. However, the above interview data shows that the AD guides those respondents to know where to 'look' and in so doing, it thereby 'activates' their listening. That is to say that, beyond 'just' hearing, the AD helps them to understand what they are 'looking' at by hearing. This correlation between the auditory experiences of sighted theatre audiences and b/vi theatre audiences is a new way of thinking about AD and the embodied experiences of b/vi audiences at a live theatre event.

Glen explained that on a touch tour "*you get to go on stage and <u>look</u> at the sets and props and costumes*" and he talked about these tours being "*an <u>enlightening</u> experience*" and at another time as "*really <u>insightful</u>*". He even shared that his sighted friends are always "*quite impressed by the fact that I am '<u>seeing</u>', as it were, what's going on [up] on the stage*". When Sarah said that touch tours helped her to "*<u>see</u> the set*", to "*really get a <u>picture in my mind</u>*" of "*what things <u>look</u> like*" and "*where [things] are on stage*". She also spoke about going to "*<u>see</u>*" Harry Potter and other shows. For Sarah, the experience of attending a live performance was still a visual experience, even though she had lost her physical sight. Paul also talked about going to "*<u>see</u> a show*" and "*<u>watching</u>*" a show and thinking he'd "*like to <u>see</u> that again, just to <u>see</u> it and work out what was happening*".

These accounts point to AD experience as something visual rather than (only) aural. The persistence of the visual language suggests that although AD end-users received the information aurally, they processed it in visual ways, and stored those experiences 'in their mind's eye'. Capturing this use of visual language by end-users to explain their AD experience extends our understanding of the aural/visual connection present in AD. It is not only a physical response, as explored in various studies mapping eye movement in response to audio information (Holsanova 2022; Igareda & Matamala 2012; Orero & Vilaró 2014; Walczak & Fryer 2017). This is a further example of how the flow state is experienced and described, and extends the concept of immersive AD experiences being supported by the hiddenness of the AD. Once again, the respondents spoke about their experiences, not in terms of AD practice, but in terms of the embodied experience. Furthermore, the AD experiences articulated here reflect the work on aural attention of sighted theatre audiences as Home-Cook (2015) explains, "the act of listening, as a dynamic embodied act of attending-in-the-world, manifests modes of experience and states of being that might be described as *theatrical* [and] listening, as a dynamic act of

attention, is … not only theatrical, but theatre is arguably the place where this theatricality is most vividly played out" (Home-Cook 2015, p. 169, emphasis in original).

The persistent use of visual language by the b/vi respondents to explain how flow states are experienced and described suggests that these experiences are an important part of their overall embodied experience of a live performance event.

Several of the London end-user respondents identified another aspect of their deeper engagement with AD services, which also highlights another element to the broader context which impacts end-user experiences. This deeper engagement was through their involvement in formal feedback panels that were set up by VocalEyes in the early days of establishing AD services (Holland 2009). End-user feedback gathered through these panels is used for ongoing describer professional development and practice professionalisation. This process impacts on the longer experiences of the b/vi end-users who participated in the panels, and it also impacts on future end-user experiences shaped by the panel feedback. VocalEyes' end-user groups meet quarterly to provide feedback on their experiences. John explained the following:

> *Each AD experience was assessed both professionally by [another] describer … and by a blind or visually impaired person who was attending. [The assessment] looked at the whole experience, not just the quality of the audio description that was given, but the whole experience of going to an audio described show… from booking my ticket, arriving at the theatre, finding my way to my seat, the touch tour, and any other [things we] thought worth reporting on* (Interview with John).

Glen had also been invited to join the user feedback panel run by VocalEyes. He explained that VocalEyes "*then provide[s] our feedback to the theatres… [so they] get a good idea of what visually impaired people are experiencing.*" Glen was happy to be involved in these collaborative processes to "*try to improve [AD], not just for me, but for everyone else.*"

Similarly, Debi encouraged theatre ushers to "*take a headset and listen*" so they would understand "*what we're hearing… It's about us helping them [to] help us all*." However, Toby's experience running the end-user feedback panel while working with VocalEyes was that "*it was very difficult to get real critical feedback from people, because there are a lot of volunteers doing AD … and blind people … don't want to criticize too much, because the service might get pulled.*"

While Steve had not been involved in a formal feedback process, he said that he provided informal feedback "*after every single performance*." He rang the theatre to "*say how grateful [he] was*" and he identified the people who were "*particularly supportive and helpful*." Steve described what happened the first time he rang the theatre and spoke to a member of staff on the phone:

> *When I was saying how good it was, [the staff member] went quiet. I said, 'what's wrong?' and he said, 'I'm not being funny, but there's nowhere on my form where people can say it's good.' I've rung [that theatre] again, a couple of months later, for another performance, and the same bloke answered and said, 'right, Steve, you can say good stuff now!'* (Interview with Steve).

This is an excellent example of how end-user feedback resulted in changes to service processes.

Mark is an AD end-user as well as the Leisure Activities Coordinator for his local blind association. He said he had "*always had a good dialogue with the Access Officer at the [local] theatre*". They met once or twice a year and "*email each other frequently, to pass on any feedback.*" Mark said the theatre had "*always been very open to how they can improve the service*". This following extract from Mark's interview captures the local collaboration of b/vi services, AD services and the local theatre:

We've got a database of everyone who we know is visually impaired, and we regularly send out quarterly newsletters in all formats – large print, braille, audio, and email. And word of mouth gets out. … We've got contact with all the visually impaired people [and] the local Theatre Royal [which] has an Access Officer [as well as] an inclusion policy. [T]here's the combination of the theatre's willingness to go the extra mile and having contact with everyone who's visually impaired (Interview with Mark).

These are all examples of what Susan Bennett refers to as "collaborative engagement[s] genuinely useful to … user communities" (2006, p. 229). The AD end-users' engagement in the collaborative process of providing feedback on the services they use seems to have also resulted in improvements to those services.

Interviews with staff from London BSOs and venues/theatre companies (see Chapter 4 of this thesis) identified that the end-user feedback was used for staff training as well as developing stronger partnerships for audience and sector development. The success of the end-user panels was due in part to there being enough end-users willing and available to participate in those panels in London, to ensure that the feedback drew responses from across diverse cohorts within the b/vi community, as well as across performing arts genres. The process was also dependent on end-users who were sufficiently familiar with different genres of the performing arts and with AD to be able to provide informed feedback. Such end-users provided constructive feedback for developing the AD ecosystem, which in turn contributed to improving future end-user experiences.

These accounts from participants also illustrate their longer engagement in the end-user experience through involvement in this aspect of AD practice. This 'longer experience' has been identified in studies with sighted audiences (Barba & Fowler 1990; Johanson 2013; Reason 2010). Scholars suggest that theatre experiences of sighted audiences starts well before

a performance starts and extends well beyond the time and place of that performance. They also suggest that this 'longer experience' is something that theatre audiences are seeking (Walmsley 2019). The end-user data from the b/vi respondents in London indicates that they also appreciate an extended engagement of the theatre experience, particularly the activities of AD practice delivered prior to the performance. As Paul indicated in his interview, "*the pre-show notes … help an awful lot to help you take in lots of information before the show.*" Toby also stated that these notes really help to make the experience better by "*setting the scene*" and thus preparing him for the performance. John was able to prepare for his theatre experience by listening to "*a good verbal introduction in the introductory notes*". Mark also appreciated the pre-show notes and felt that they provided a number of advantages over touch tours. Mark stated the following:

> *I think the advantage with them is that in the day or two before you're going to see the performance, you can get some idea of what's going to happen on the day. And you haven't got quite such an information overload on the actual afternoon of the performance"* (Interview with Mark).

The respondents identified that the pre-show notes are an important vehicle for expanded visual information for b/vi audiences, and for preparing them for their theatre experience. The information starts them to build mental images of the characters, costumes, and colours, as well as facial expressions and movement, before the performance commences. Pre-show notes contribute to the extended theatre experience, which audiences (sighted or otherwise) are keen to enjoy. Although the AD pre-show notes and touch tours are provided specifically to give b/vi audiences access to visual information from which they would otherwise be excluded, this experience is more than simply the transfer of information. The pre-show activities become part of their embodied theatre experiences, it builds their anticipation before they enter the theatre (Johanson 2013), echoing outcomes of studies with sighted participants (Pitts 2005; Walmsley 2011). This is important here because this research reveals that the AD experience extends well

beyond the 'actual' performance itself and that the pre-show activities contribute to deeper b/vi end-user audience engagement. Walmsley (2019) suggests that audience engagement is an under-utilised and under-researched area in the performing arts and therefore, as this current project highlights, it is as equally important in relation to b/vi AD end-user audiences.

Although there is extensive disability activism globally, and in particular in the UK for almost 40 years (as discussed in Chapter 4 above), it is surprising to encounter the charity model mind-set is still prevalent in responses from several of the b/vi respondents. This perspective was articulated well by Toby in this extract from his interview:

> *Many blind or partially sighted people would be grateful for whatever they*
> *get. And blind or partially sighted people are not as forthcoming or maybe*
> *militant, one might say, as other disability groups. I think it's the case where*
> *blind or partially sighted people don't want to upset the applecart, or don't*
> *want to criticize too much, because the service might get pulled from them,*
> *and then that access is gone.*

This 'grateful for whatever they get' attitude is reflected by several respondents from the London cohort of this study. Debi felt that "*there'll be less complaints from blind people*", and as Jess points out from her experience, the AD was "*not always great, but I'm just so pleased it's available ... just so grateful that it's there in the first place*". These comments reflect the history of disability in the UK. The attitudes expressed here suggest that there is something further to be explored in relation to the expectations of both b/vi people receiving a service, and in relation to those providing b/vi services.

Barriers to end-users' experiences

One barrier to end-users' experiences of AD for live theatre that was identified by end-users in London, was the AD itself when it impeded the b/vi end-user's access to the on-stage performance. The interview data earlier in this chapter indicated that for several end-users the best AD was "*forgettable*", "*hidden*", "*invisible*" or "*unnoticed*". However, there were times when the AD became too obvious and this distracted end-users from deep engagement in the live performance event that was being described. The following interview extracts illustrate examples of when AD services became memorable in ways that were not desirable for b/vi end-users.

Steve recalled an AD experience for a live performance when the describers "*were talking regularly over*" the on-stage dialogue. He explained that, as he sat in the audience, he then had to decide whether to concentrate on the AD or to try to listen to the on-stage dialogue and try to ignore the AD, which was far from invisible and unnoticed. In fact, the AD was distractingly noticeable, which detracted from Steve's experience of the on-stage performance. Debi shared that, when attending musicals, she would "*turn off the description when the music's on*" in order to enjoy the music, because the AD was "*interfering*" with her experience. Paul shared that "*there was one particular show where honestly, by the end of halfway through the show, I had to take the headphones off because the description was so bad. ... [it] ruined the whole play*". John echoed this in his interview, when he said, "*there are very, very few occasions when I come out of the theatre saying, 'the bloody audio description was awful'*". However, he said it was particularly "*bad*" when the describer was "*talking all the time. They weren't sensitive to the dialogue in the play, and the sounds of the play, which I want to hear*".

Andrew Holland, one of the pioneers of AD for live performance in the UK, insists that "a crucial skill for the describer … [is to ensure] that it does not interfere with the words being spoken by the actors from the stage" (Holland 2009), and this has been a foundational principle

of contemporary professional AD training. All of these barriers to the AD experience could be expected to be adequately addressed by improving the quality of AD practice through professionalisation.

Sarah said that a positive experience of AD depends on the amount of information that is communicated in the description. On different occasions, she has experienced either too much information or just enough information. When attending a musical in New York, Sarah felt overwhelmed by the "*information overload*" in the AD. She said that she was "*exhausted keeping up with the pace ... I was knackered*". She said "*it wasn't relaxing to enjoy [the show] because it was just full on. Full on!*" Conversely, her experience of the AD she received when attending live theatre in London was "*enough to follow the story quite comfortably and to enjoy it more*". In Sarah's experience, she felt that the describers in London "*give you just enough information without information overload. It's a very fine balance*". The AD itself became the focus of her attention when attending a musical in New York, rather than the on-stage action. In that instance, the AD impeded and interrupted her experience of the show. The impact of too much information in the AD was also raised by other end-users in London. Paul spoke about an experience where "*the AD actually made [him] feel dizzy, because of the sheer amount of detail and effort that went into it*". He said he was "*actually grateful that [he'd] not had to look at what's happening on stage*" because he felt it would have been overwhelming. Debi spoke of getting "*too much description*". Her solution to receiving an overwhelming amount of information through the AD was to "*turn off the description*". She explained that if the AD was "*interfering*" with her experience of the live performance itself, then she simply disengaged the AD and relied on the aural information from the show itself.

These above accounts illustrate that for these end-users 'too much' AD distracted them from enjoying the live performance. These experiences of the AD content being 'too much' also reflect earlier research on AD reception. However, beyond preferences for words or styles,

the end-users' experiences identified in this study illustrate the experiential outcome of elements of AD practice. In this instance, the end-users reported that the AD content resulted in a physical interruption to their engagement in the live performance. Too much AD even caused anxiety, to the point where the live performance event was no longer an enjoyable experience. When an audience member is engaged in a live performance to the point of being immersed in the world being enacted on stage, this is known as 'flow'. The respondents in this research suggest that their engagement with the embodied experience of attending a live theatre show, or the flow, was adversely impacted and/or interrupted when the amount of information in the AD content was too much to process.

Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (2014) identify that flow is "intrinsically fragile" (p. 90). They say that flow can become unbalanced when the challenge of following the aural information (which in the case of AD, includes both the on-stage action and the description) exceeds the individual's capacity to process that information. Sarah said that she could not keep up with the sheer volume of information provided by the AD when she attended the musical in New York. She identified that as she became conscious of her own perceived incapacity to absorb the information, she was overwhelmed and she disengaged with the embodied experience of the theatre performance. Paul said too much information made him feel quite dizzy and Debi simply turned the AD off when it became too much. In these accounts, the end-users' focus shifted from the performance on stage to a perception of their own short-comings, "creating a self-consciousness that impede[d] engagement" (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi 2014, p. 92). The sheer volume of information provided in the AD became a barrier to engaging in the embodied experience of the live performance. Once again, the barrier to end-users' engagement here relates to the AD content and may have been adequately addressed by improving the quality of the AD service.

Another barrier to end-users' engagement that may be considered part of the quality of AD services, are technical issues with the equipment used to provide AD. Although not specifically part of the description content, the equipment is the means by which the description is delivered to end-users, and an equipment or technical failure can also negatively impact on end-users' experiences of AD. This is illustrated by Glen when he shared that his "*most frustrating experience*" was due to a problem of reception of the AD signal in the auditorium:

> *It was cutting in and out and you had to sit at a certain angle to get it to work.*
> *If you moved to the wrong position, it just stopped working. ... It didn't help*
> *that at the start of the show, the batteries were running out as well* (Interview
> with Glen).

Debi also spoke of the challenges of an intermittent signal: "*the AD only worked [if you were facing] in one direction ... If you turned your head, you lost the AD*", and Toby summed it all up by saying "*if they don't have the right equipment ... it just makes the experience really bad for you.*" These practical issues all interrupted the b/vi audience's state of flow and their AD experience. The otherwise hidden AD, which often enables live performance to be experienced as if unmediated (Fryer, Pring & Freeman 2013), became visible by its intermittent absence due to these technical issues or equipment failure. Those barriers may be adequately addressed through improving the quality of the AD services.

However, there are a number of issues that the end-user respondents in London identified that would not be adequately addressed by improving the quality of the AD service. One of the first barriers identified by a number of respondents in London, which was not directly an issue of practice, was the lack of awareness that AD existed. The respondents spoke of the fact that they were not aware that AD for live performance was even available. This is illustrated by Glen who explained that when he first moved to London, he:

"... didn't know that audio described theatre was even a thing. I thought, well, I'll just go to the theatre, and I'll manage as best I can [because] I wanted to see a few shows anyway. But then I discovered there was this whole audio description thing going on and started trying it out and I've been loving it ever since. It really opens up the world (Interview with Glen).

Steve also explained that he didn't know that AD for live theatre was available and even grieved being unable to attend live theatre for many years, until he was introduced to AD for live theatre by a local BSO.

Although awareness is not specifically an issue of AD practice, this barrier suggests that AD end-users' experiences are impacted by a cluster of broader contexts. In this instance, the wider promotion of AD services by BSOs and venue/theatre companies may go some way to raising the profile of AD in the broader community and providing this service with much-needed visibility for further b/vi engagement. Legislative requirements may also drive awareness alongside the development of services (Kubitschke et al. 2013).

There were several other barriers to engagement that end-users identified that also sit beyond issues of AD practice. Situational or environmental factors, such as "the comfort of the seating" can negatively impact on the immersion of audiences and interrupt their experience of flow (Brown, AS & Novak 2007, p. 11). Some of the AD end-user respondents in London also identified situational factors that impacted on their experience of flow. Liam's reflections on a live performance illustrates this:

I've incarcerated myself in a seat that's really uncomfortable. I can't move much, and there's little room. But I've forced myself into this for three hours. Why am I doing this? (Interview with Liam).

Liam chose to describe his discomfort by using the terms 'incarcerated' and 'forced'. This language demonstrates the intensity of his uncomfortable experience and he explained that this experience was why he had since "*gone off theatre in a big way*". He said that he "*used to adore it … absolutely adore it*" but as he got older he had "*become slower, more cautious*" and had started to have "*difficulties around the journey*" to and from the theatre itself. This suggests that Liam's experience of the live theatre event was shaped by two significant external factors that sit outside of the AD service itself. Firstly, the intensity of his experience of the physical discomfort of being seated in a cramped seat for a significant period of time with little capacity to move or relieve that physical discomfort. Secondly, his journey to and from the theatre had added a further challenge to being able to attend the theatre. Liam identified that this challenge relates to his diminishing physical capacity (he had become slower), and that this was also linked to his diminishing confidence (he was more cautious) in getting to the theatre and home again. The physical discomfort in the theatre seat, the physical challenge of ageing, and the psychological challenge of become more cautious, are all significant barriers to Liam's experience of live theatre. However, none of these barriers directly relate to the AD service itself, and none of them would be adequately addressed with a higher quality AD service.

Other end-user respondents in London also talked about transport as being a barrier to their engagement with live theatre. When interruptions to flow occur it can cause audience members to become "vigilant and then anxious" (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi 2014, p. 90). Alison experienced this vigilance and anxiety when her flow state was interrupted by her concerns about her journey home after the show and, as this extract from her interview shows, this interrupted her engagement in the performance itself:

> *I was very worried about getting home. I used to spend the last half an hour*
> *[of the show] panicking, thinking, Will I be able to get a bus? Will I be able*
> *to get a hold of a taxi? How do I get a hold of a taxi? And so there's that whole thing*

about the journey, and feeling a bit insecure in that. And there's the journey

on the premises, and prior to the [show] and afterwards (Interview with

Alison).

Being distracted by the practical arrangements of getting home after the performance impacted negatively on Alison's flow during the live performance. She said she was not able to focus on the performance because she was anxious about how she would manage her journey home after the show. Alison's experience suggests that AD practice is not the only consideration of b/vi audiences when deciding whether to attend a live performance or not. Nor is the AD itself the only contributing factor in whether or not the end-user enters into the embodied experience of the live theatre event and experiences the flow.

Paul identified another aspect of transport that was a significant barrier to his participation. He explained that when he booked a theatre ticket, the venue staff advised him of the closest Tube (underground train) station. However, he explained to them: "*that isn't the station I could use because the dog wasn't escalator-trained*," so he would need to find the closest station that had a lift or stairs, so that his guide dog could provide the access support he needed to get himself to the theatre. Then he would have to navigate from the station that suited his dog's capacity, to get to the theatre. He said that "*it's all these extra elements that go into making sure someone is getting the inclusive experience*". The transport barrier was clearly not an issue of AD practice, but did pose a significant challenge to Paul's engagement with the live theatre experience.

Mark also identified that local transport was a barrier for b/vi patrons. However, in his experience the barrier was addressed by local volunteer car drivers and a community minibus, all rostered by the local theatre. This level of collaboration and support to enable the b/vi community to engage in the live theatre experience is well beyond issues of AD practice, and would not be addressed by the professionalisation of the AD product or process. However, the

response of the local BSO volunteers and the theatre company suggests an understanding of AD being part a cluster of access and support services and contexts required by the b/vi community in order for them to engage with the live theatre AD experience.

In London, end-user respondents identified that some of the barriers to engagement may be adequately addressed by improving the quality of AD, but that other barriers sit beyond AD practice. The experiences shared by several of the end-user respondents in London suggest that AD is just one element in a cluster of services and contexts that impact on the b/vi AD end-user experience of live theatre performance.

Summary

The London AD services for live theatre are the most mature of those available in each of the three research sites. The London AD service has been professionalised to a high degree, and includes end-user feedback mechanisms to inform ongoing describer and service development. This chapter explored interview data from end-users in London who articulated many of their experiences of AD for live theatre, which were described as immersive and inclusive. The interview data also explored end-users' experiences of barriers to engagement and participation. In some instances those barriers related to elements of AD practice which may be adequately addressed through further professionalisation of the AD services. However, the chapter further explored interview data from end-users in London who identified a number of barriers to participation that sit beyond AD practice and therefore would not be adequately addressed by improvements in AD practice.

Therefore this chapter has argued that, in spite of having a mature and highly professionalised AD service in London, and end-users reporting a large number and broad range of live theatre experiences, barriers to participation and engagement were identified which sit beyond AD practice. This complicates previous understandings of end-users' experiences and

challenges the assumptions that AD practice and process will address the barriers to end-users' participation. To date, AD research has not understood or adequately addressed barriers to participation which sit beyond practice. This chapter thus identified that AD end-users' experiences sit within a cluster of AD practice along with external services and broader contexts. Other elements identified by end-users that contribute to the broader context include BSOs, venue/theatre companies, transport challenges, and other environmental factors. This chapter has demonstrated that if any element of that complex cluster of contexts becomes a barrier to participation, the end-user experience is interrupted.

The following chapter explores b/vi end-user experiences of AD for live theatre in Singapore, and compares those experiences with the London data. While the end-users' experiences are similar, the socio-cultural context of Singapore is very different to London, and the next chapter explores how this context impacts end-users' experiences. End-users' experiences in Singapore are also different in relation to a specific element of AD practice which, as it will be shown below, has resulted in the unexpected outcome of disengagement of end-users from AD experiences.

Chapter 6: End-User Experiences of Audio Description Services in Singapore

Introduction

This chapter considers AD services for b/vi people attending live theatre in Singapore, and their experiences of those services. Chapter 2 of this thesis showed that the prevailing political environment in Singapore is one of communitarianism, where social obligations prioritise interdependence over individualised welfare. Professional AD services in Singapore were only established in late 2018. This chapter explores the experiences of end-users in Singapore who attended live theatre performances and used AD to support that experience. Respondents articulated their AD experiences in terms of being able to follow the live action on stage, through the support provided by the AD service. An aspect unique to end-users' responses in Singapore was the way in which they firstly situated themselves in terms of the socio-cultural environment when talking about their AD experiences. Interview data further identified that end-user feedback responsibilities in Singapore have had the unintended consequence of end-user disengagement from the AD experience. However, the end-users did speak of one element of their AD experience as being immersive, which was the touch-tour experience.

This chapter also explores a number of barriers that the Singapore end-users identified which constrained their AD experience, such as situational, environmental, or economic factors, all of which sit beyond AD practice. This chapter thus considers the implications of these barriers identified by the respondents and the extent to which AD practice has understood or addressed those barriers. This chapter argues that, while end-user experiences AD for live theatre can be immersive and inclusive, AD scholarship has not yet been sensitive to the

complexities of factors which are external to AD practice but which impact on end-user experiences. The chapter concludes that end-users' AD experiences sit within a cluster of contexts and supports, including AD practice and factors external to that practice. Further, if an end-user encounters a barrier in relation to any one, or combination of elements of those contexts, even if those elements are part of AD practice or external to AD practice, their AD experience is disrupted.

Audio description services

AD services in Singapore were established in late 2018 through a partnership with Adelaide-based BSO, A2A, and the SRT, and are underpinned by international convention, but not supported by any national legislation. The professional organisational support offered through BSOs and venue/theatre companies is uneven in Singapore, in part due to the socio-cultural environment (as discussed in more detail above in Chapter 4) that prioritises community over individualised welfare, where the responsibility for providing care and support to disabled people sits firstly with the individual themselves and then with their family. However, neither b/vi individuals nor (untrained) family members are able to provide professional AD services. Social policy in Singapore is focussed on supporting disabled people to engage with education and employment, for the purposes of being able to contribute economically. Scholars working across arts and disability in the Singapore context identify that:

> Singapore's arts and culture policies evolved from treating the arts as an instrument of economic development and nation building, towards one that emphasises community participation. Generally, the arts are seen as a means to achieve economic and social goals defined by the state (Lee et al. 2018, p. 108).

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Focus now turns from the AD services in Singapore to the end-users' experiences of those services when attending live theatre.

End-user experiences

The end-users' experiences in Singapore are impacted by the prevailing socio-cultural context, affecting them in different ways than the end-users' experiences articulated by respondents in either London or Adelaide. The way disability interacts "with other systems of representation clarifies how all the systems intersect and mutually constitute one another" (Garland-Thomson 2002, p. 9). The way that disability is understood and how it operates in Singapore is complicated by the ways in which the charity, medical and social models of disability are all invoked through social policy. Singapore's communitarian imperatives of self-reliance and contribution to others (Chua 1995) are illustrated by the end-users' interview data collected for this research. The communitarian context also seems to predispose end-users to identify cohorts beyond the b/vi community that may benefit from receiving AD for live performances.

Socio-cultural contexts

Disability discourses are determined within social and cultural structures (Shakespeare 2014). Respondents from Singapore experience disability, particularly as articulated in relation to AD, in ways which reflect traces of the discursive structure (Hermes 2009) of identity which "simultaneously responds to and constructs [their] social reality" (Sedgman 2016, p. 11) and underpins their disability experience (Goodley 2017). Respondents situate their AD experiences of live theatre by adopting "strategies to manage expectations of, engagements with and responses to culture' (Sedgman 2016, p. 11).

Communitarian Responsibility

The first semi-structured interview question was designed to encourage interviewees to share their AD experiences. End-users' responses in Singapore suggest that they both anticipated and challenged others' low expectations of them as disabled people. This is illustrated in the ways in which each of the b/vi respondents framed themselves in terms of their employment status before sharing details of their AD experiences. For example, when Jim was asked about his experience of AD for theatre, his immediate response was to first ground himself in terms of his professional career: "*From the AD perspective I mean, the thing is this ... I'm a clinical psychologist doing counselling*". This initial response from Jim demonstrated that it was important to frame himself in terms of being employed, and also of holding a professional qualification. In doing this, Jim established himself as an active participant within the national discourse of capacity, employment, integration and self-reliance (Enabling Masterplan Steering Committee 2016). His disability status/identity was subsumed in his citizenship capacity of personal responsibility, of contribution, and of not being a burden on the nation (Haskins 2011; Low & Aw 2004). Jim's first response runs counter to the findings of a study conducted by the Lien Centre for Social Innovation entitled "People with Physical Disabilities in Singapore" (Raghunathan et al. 2015). Most respondents in Raghunathan et al.'s (2015) study indicated that they "were not financially independent, and relied on family members to supplement their income from work" (p. viii). Jim's self-identification as a professional signalled his consequent capacity for self-reliance and contribution to others, rather than being reliant on others or on government welfare. Similarly, when Melissa was asked about her experience of AD for live theatre, she stated: "*I am a career coach*" and then spent several minutes explaining her professional work before sharing her AD experience. Both

Jim and Melissa situated themselves in terms of their respective professions and being in paid employment.

Melissa also talked of her capacity to successfully undertake her job, in spite of sighted colleagues challenging her capacity to do so. It was important to Melissa that she considered herself as having equality with her sighted colleagues in her role and professional capacity. It was also important to her that her colleagues recognised her equal professional capacity. Jim and Melissa situated themselves within the social obligations attached to the privilege of paid employment, which itself adds further responsibility of contribution (Haskins 2011; Low & Aw 2004; Parmenter 2014). Melissa stated that her professional work, conducted online due to COVID-19 restrictions, was "*the same as*" and "*equivalent to*" the work of her sighted colleagues.

Respondents from London also talked about being 'equal' and 'the same as' sighted people, however it was in terms of the ways in which AD allowed them to experience a live performance 'the same as' sighted people and thus being 'equal' with sighted audience members, rather than in terms of their employment. While some respondents from London mentioned their work in the course of their interviews, none of these respondents nor those from Adelaide led their interviews by framing themselves in terms of their professional qualifications or employment status. This approach is therefore unique to the respondents from Singapore, and reflects the specific socio-cultural context of this research site.

The Disabled People's Association in Singapore claims that people with disabilities in Singapore are more likely to be "invited to attend cultural performances … than to contribute to or participate in them" (Disabled People's Association 2015, p. 42). The following two interview respondents challenge that social expectation, as performers and creators themselves. Lee Lee and Wai Yee framed themselves as participants and contributors to cultural performances, and not merely attendees or recipients. It was important to them that they speak

about those experiences in those terms. In that way, they located themselves in the discourse of national identity and interdependence, rather than as part of the disability discourse that cast them in terms of dependence. The interview data reveals a persistent pattern of establishing one's professional 'credentials' as a precursor to discussing one's personal experiences of AD for live theatre.

When asked about AD for live theatre, Lee Lee said she had seen several shows with AD, but then she immediately framed herself first in terms of her work: "*I also make AD films*". This statement established Lee Lee as a producer and not just a consumer of AD. Lee Lee's response reflected her experience of disability in the Singapore context, where disabled people may be thought of as being dependent and incapable. Lee Lee anticipated others' low expectations of her capacity for employment, and therefore contribution to others, due to her disability. She challenged those assumptions by stating her professional achievements in creating AD films, and not simply being a recipient of the disability support afforded by AD.

Similarly, when asked about her AD experiences of live performances Wai Yee stated her identity in terms of her capacity, not her incapacity: "*I am a performer*". She clarified her arts work, explaining that she was an actor and a singer, and then spoke about her performances, and her online presence through work that appears on her YouTube and Facebook pages. By identifying herself as a working performer and producer, with an online presence, Wai Yee established her place as an active participant, thereby embodying the ideals within the national disability discourse of capacity, employment, integration and self-reliance (Enabling Masterplan Steering Committee 2016). She also spoke of her collaborative interaction with other performers and with a (sighted) director. This is especially significant because, like Lee Lee, it was evident that Wai Yee was neither a passive recipient nor a subordinate participant, but rather an active contributor in the artistic environment. Both of these respondents framed their professional arts work in terms that reflected their active participation and collaboration

with others, producing work and not simply receiving disability support services. In these ways, their experiences challenge Singapore's prevailing disability discourse (Disabled People's Association 2015).

The distinctive tendency of establishing one's employment and active participation before articulating one's personal experiences of AD is common across the end-user interviews from Singapore. Such responses may reflect the way respondents perceive disability as being (mis)understood by others, and how it intersects with, and challenges, the national discourse on identity. This perception shapes how end-users situate themselves in their daily lives, as well as in relation to their experiences of AD for live performance.

Communitarian Contribution

The increasingly stratified population of Singapore is "held together by loosely observed mass loyalty to the nation" (Chua 1995, p. 5). This loyalty is seen in the ways in which the Singapore cohort of b/vi respondents articulated their experiences of AD as shaped by their sense of personal obligation to contribute to broader society, without being a burden on the state, and for the benefit of all. The end-user respondents in Singapore frequently reflected on how AD may benefit other cohorts beyond the b/vi community. This seems to be an important part of how AD was understood and discussed by the respondents in Singapore. It also seemed to reflect their experience of the discursive complexities found at the intersection of disability and communitarianism. The respondents identified broader cohorts, beyond the b/vi community, who may benefit from AD for live theatre. This may be explained in the context of the prevailing disability discourse that encourages integration and interdependence. The respondents also expressed their personal responsibility to be involved in developing the AD service for broader community benefit. This reflects the underlying socio-cultural imperative for all citizens to contribute to others, rather than to simply receive services for themselves.

Those who receive have a responsibility to give back. In identifying other cohorts, beyond the b/vi communities, the respondents from Singapore enacted their socio-cultural obligations of contributing to the greater good.

This is illustrated by the interview data from b/vi end-users in Singapore. For example, Melissa talked of her (sighted) daughters' experience of AD where "*some of the shows can be pretty abstract [and] the AD actually helped her to understand it.*" She explained that "*you might be able to see, but you may not be able to comprehend it.*" Although AD is a targeted disability support for b/vi audiences, Melissa identified the potential for AD to benefit sighted audience members by providing an explanation of visual elements that they may be able to physically see but are unable to understand. This reflects a broader perspective of the use of AD, beyond audiences who are b/vi, to comprehend visual information.

Jankowska (2019) identifies that "claims, both within academia and outside it, that services such as AD … have potential for users without sight loss are not uncommon [but] many of them seem to be based on anecdote[al] evidence" (p. 28). She proposes that AD could be used to provide senior citizens access to foreign language films, particularly when they experienced "discomfort or difficulties when reading subtitles" (Jankowska 2019, p. 28). More recently, Starr and Braun (2021) have extended the investigation into expanding the cohorts for whom AD can be helpful. They do this by exploring the 're-versioning' of AD to assist children with autism to more easily recognise emotions. This later work resonates with Jim's experience of attending an event with his sighted wife who was not aware of the cultural significance of various elements of the performance. Jim reported that even though his wife did not have impaired vision "*she was able to comprehend what was going on*" because she had also received the AD during that cultural performance event.

In light of this experience reported by his sighted wife, and in the context of his professional work, Jim felt that AD is a crucial service that is not only relevant for the b/vi

community. He said that AD "*could facilitate in bridging that gap*" between visual information and comprehension. He briefly identified and discussed several different cohorts beyond the b/vi community, which he believed, from his professional clinical practice perspective, could benefit from AD. The following extracts from Jim's interview illustrate this: "*AD can be also useful for children under 12, especially those in the primary schools, because they don't understand what they are looking at.*" Jim believes that young audiences may find AD a useful tool in helping them to process visual information they receive at a live performance, but which they may not understand. This is reflected in Melissa's experience with her young (sighted) daughter. Jim also commented that, in his opinion, AD would support people with a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), particularly helping in their engagement with visual content:

> *I will say people with ASD would benefit from AD because it clarifies certain aspects of what they are looking at. Due to the nature of the neural pathways not synchronized … the AD could help bridge the gap and make a discerning difference for them to appreciate what they're observing* (Interview with Jim).

While Jim's first suggestion relates to children in mainstream primary schools, both that idea and his next thought were reflected in some recent studies considering AD as part of a cluster of tools that could be used to support people outside of the b/vi community. Two recent studies consider repurposing AD as a learning tool for primary school children, with and without cognitive disabilities, and also consider using AD with students with an autism diagnosis in order to help them with processing visual information and support their learning (Moreno Montano 2023; Zabrocka & Kata 2023).

Jim indicated that adults with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and attention deficit disorder (ADD) may also find AD helpful because he believed it would support

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them in focussing and re-focussing their attention. In the following extract from Jim's interview, he identifies that, in his professional opinion, those diagnosed with anxiety may also benefit from AD:

> *You know, in the nature of my work, I will say AD can be also helpful for someone who has a condition called anxiety. Someone who has an anxiety disorder ... AD would be very helpful for them because it will be helping them to reaffirm the stimuli, in a sense that whatever they're watching, they also have AD support to concretize what they are watching. Persons with anxious dispositions are very unsettled, because they have the perceptive mind, and their subconscious is somewhat not very well synchronized. That's why they become anxious. So having an AD could help that regulation, in terms of audio/visual [input], and they may be able to absorb and appreciate the moment a lot better* (Interview with Jim).

Jim's professional opinion in relation to the support that AD could offer to people with various diagnoses other than impaired vision also reflects new understandings of AD in the Australian context (Ellis, Peaty, et al. 2019). By situating these broader cohorts of beneficiaries of AD within in his professional understandings, Jim signalled and confirmed his capacity in relation to the communitarian values of self-reliance, integration, employment, and contribution, which permeate the Singapore context.

Lee Lee talked about other (sighted) arts workers that could broaden their arts experience and understanding by listening to AD for a live performance, such as "*a stage manager or an assistant stage manager, who doesn't have duties on the day [of the performance]*". She suggested that they would gain "*a brand-new appreciation [of how] it provides so much more than they [perhaps] thought*". Thinking of others within the arts worker cohort who could benefit from the AD reflects the socio-cultural bent towards contribution to others. It may also

have been a natural extension of Lee Lee's collaborative arts practice to consider ways of including others and contributing to their professional development in the process.

Wai Yee also talked about AD for others, but in terms of including it in her own performance practice, and how that may help others within the b/vi community. Wai Lee reflected: *"I was thinking about if I did this [moves arms in a grand motion] in a performance, would my blind friends know what I'm doing?"* In this instance, Wai Yee thought about AD in terms of the accessibility of the content of her own performances for use by other b/vi people in the audience. This is an interesting perspective that did not arise in the interviews in London or Adelaide. None of the respondents in those locations identified themselves as being arts makers, therefore their AD experiences of live performances were all from the audience perspective. As a performer and arts creator, Wai Yee reflected on the place of AD in her creative process, and how that contributed to her audience's comprehension of her work. This challenges our understandings of AD because it is often considered to be a disability service that sits alongside, but separate from, the creative work that is described (Udo & Fels 2011). AD is also usually created by sighted people for b/vi audiences. In this instance Wai Yee, a b/vi performer and creator, reflected on creating and providing AD for her own work. As a performer herself, this consideration of AD being an element of her own performance practice may be a further illustration of the underlying communitarian discourse of the need for all citizens to contribute to others and to social inclusion and harmony. By performing her role as a good citizen, Wai Yee may be confirming her capacity to contribute to others. This may also be part of Wai Yee extending her professional practice to be more inclusive for a broader audience. In any case, her response framed her as both a creator and a consumer of AD for live performance and further reflected the pervasive presence of the socio-cultural imperative of contribution in the communitarian context of Singapore which seemed to be ever-present in the respondent interviews.

This nominating of other potential AD end-users from outside of the b/vi community others was often spoken of within a framework of the respondents' personal and professional perspectives. In doing this, they each reiterated their initial situating of themselves within the communitarian imperatives of self-reliance and contribution to others through their professional qualifications and roles. The respondents talked about AD as being valuable, but not only because of the access to live performance that it gave to the b/vi participants themselves. AD was seen as being valuable because it could also benefit others across the broader (sighted) community. The end-users identified that AD had benefits for broader society and that this broader application, beyond the disability community, demonstrated its importance, contributing to the broader social good.

This pattern of identifying cohorts beyond the b/vi community seemed to be an unconscious and automatic default for the end-user respondents from Singapore. The pervasive presence of the communitarian context which shapes the intersectionality of the discursive constructions of identity and disability in Singapore may explain this persistent outlook of the respondents from Singapore. However, this understanding of a broader application of AD for different cohorts was not identified by the interviews with staff from the professional organisations supporting AD in Singapore (See Chapter 4), which suggests that the BSOs may be focussed on their organisational imperatives which may not extend to seeking ways to provide b/vi access for arts and leisure or for cohorts beyond their remit. This may also reflect social policies that prioritise disabled people's engagement with education and employment in order for them to be able to contribute to the state. Even though the National Arts Council of Singapore had a mandate to 'bring arts and culture to everyone, everywhere, every day', scholars agree that "the arts are seen as a means to achieve economic and social goals defined by the state" (Lee et al. 2018, p. 108). AD is a means by which arts and culture can be experienced by b/vi people, but it is not yet seen as a means to achieve economic outcomes.

Communitarian Mindset

An aspect of the Communitarian context of Singapore is that responsibility for the care of people with disability sits firstly with the disabled person themselves, and then with the immediate community (as discussed in Chapter 4 above). There is no legislation directly ensuring the rights of people with disability in Singapore. In this context, the expectation that disabled people should be willing to simply appreciate whatever supports are provided continues to be prevalent. This attitude is illustrated in data from Melissa's interview, where she highlights that after losing her sight, but before having access to AD for live performances, she was very aware of missing out and being excluded from the live performance experience. However, she accepted that she just had to take responsibility for her sight challenges and to 'make do', with little expectation of being able to be fully engaged in an experience that relied upon visual information, such as a live performance. She explained that after her sight loss, when she went to a live performance without access to AD it was challenging:

> *I just have to try to make sense of the shows that I'm hearing. I have to guess, what do those silent moments mean? Sometimes I couldn't participate along when the audiences were laughing, and I have no idea. What are they laughing at?"* (Interview with Melissa).

Without AD, Melissa experienced live performances from the periphery, being unable to join in, while being aware that sighted audience members had access to more information than she had. The visual information enabled the sighted audience to understand what was happening on stage, but her sight loss excluded Melissa from the embodied experience of that live performance event. She spoke about attending shows with her sighted daughters but "*not enjoying the show*". Melissa's feeling of exclusion may have been heightened by her own sight

loss journey from having had sight to then losing it as an adult. She contrasted her feelings of exclusion when attending a show without AD, with her experiences of inclusion when attending shows with AD. This is illustrated in the following extract from her interview:

> *... it has changed, because I can follow along. And I don't have to do a lot of guessing work. And it's much easier for me to comprehend what is happening. And also, I can laugh along with my family members. The best experience of the AD is really when you are able to laugh along and able to enjoy the show because of the descriptions. I think that's the best* (Interview with Melissa).

The AD provided Melissa the opportunity to understand what could be seen, and that seemed to have enabled her to participate in the live performance experience itself. She said she was able to share the live theatre experience more fully with her family members. The ability to laugh along with the audience (and connect with family and friends in this shared experience of being together in the moment) was also a common theme that emerged from the interviews in both London and Adelaide. Respondents in London and Adelaide identified that sharing the same emotional response, experienced and expressed at the same time as the sighted audience, was a mark of being truly included, of being 'equal' and of experiencing the show 'the same as sighted people'.

However, in contrast to Melissa's experience, Lee Lee's experience of attending live performances without AD suggested that she felt she was able to follow most of what was happening in the show by only accessing what was audible from the live performance itself. Although she was aware that she was missing information that sighted audiences accessed visually, Lee Lee said "*if [the show] is too abstract, then I'll ask a friend*" for an explanation. She went on to explain:

Most of the time, you're relying on the sound effects, as well as the movement

and actions of the performers. ... So actually, you may not truly understand,

or if what you are gathering is right, but at least I will have some sense of

what is going on, on stage (Interview with Lee Lee).

This is different to Melissa's experience of live performances without AD, and it may reflect Lee Lee's experience of having been blind from birth, coupled with the prevailing expectation in Singapore that disabled people will accept whatever support is (or is not) offered. This also reflects the national discourse of integration and self-reliance, where people with disability are encouraged to integrate into mainstream social and cultural experiences, even without adequate disability supports. The discourse claims that "community involvement is the cornerstone for building an inclusive society" (Enabling Masterplan Steering Committee 2016, p 29). However, disability support such as AD for b/vi people, which would enable the desired community involvement and integration that is espoused, is not yet widely available in Singapore.

Lee Lee's preference to sometimes interpret her live performance experience for herself, without AD, contrasted with Melissa's preference to have AD available to support her live performance experience. Lee Lee's response challenges our understandings about AD for the performing arts. In this study, an absence of AD is usually experienced as being inferior and in direct contrast to the positive experience of attending a live performance with AD. However, Lee Lee indicated that there were times in her experience that an absence of AD was actually preferable - "*sometimes I rather interpret it myself*". She further explained that "*... if [my interpretation] is wrong, it's fine ... and then there will be a talking point later on when we discuss the show.*"

Wai Yee also spoke about her experiences of live performances without AD. She explained that she was:

... just going there and listening to what's happening on the stage. Trying to

fill in the blanks with my own imagination (Interview with Wai Yee).

She did not indicate whether this was a positive or negative experience, but her response demonstrates a willingness to endeavour to engage with the performance, even without access to the disability support that AD provides. This may also be explained in terms of the disability discourse of self-reliance and independence. However, Wai Yee's experience of attending live performances without a formal AD service was very different when sighted friends tried to 'help' her, as she explained:

... the problem with friends explaining is that some of them are pretty good,

but some of them just tell you one word – just very simple, nothing I can really

use, because they are telling me things I already know. So they're not trained

and it is quite challenging (Interview with Wai Yee).

Wai Yee's experience of AD provided by her untrained friends suggests that it was an inferior experience to her experience of professional AD. This reflects another finding from the Lien Centre study, where respondents in that study identified that "getting help from a professional was preferable to relying on family or friends" (Raghunathan et al. 2015, p. 31). Wai Yee's response suggests that she did not want to simply accept whatever was offered, but had a preference for professional support in relation to AD in order to engage in a live performance experience.

Immersive end-users' experiences

However, despite the ever-present communitarian context, and the ways in which it shapes the b/vi end-user respondent experiences of AD for live performance in Singapore,

interview data suggests that there is at least one aspect of AD for the performing arts in Singapore that is experienced in an individual way, where respondents are immersed in the embodied live theatre AD experience: the touch tours. End-users involved in formal feedback on the AD services understood that the process is a critical element in the ongoing development of the describers. As the pre-show notes and the delivery of the AD during the live performance itself are the areas of most audio describer activity, these areas form the focus of the formal feedback that end-users provide to the describers. However, the touch tour aspect of the AD service sits in between the delivery of the pre-show notes and the description during the live performance. Most of the b/vi end-user responses from Singapore illustrate that their engagement in touch tours is more individualised and experiential, and not as analytical as their involvement with other elements of AD practice.

When respondents articulated their experiences of other elements of AD practice, that is the pre-show notes and the description during the performance, their experiences were largely mediated by their constant awareness of elements of AD practice, coupled with the communitarian imperative of a personal responsibility to contribute to others for the greater good. However, when talking about the touch tour, respondents did not discuss this experience in the same way. When interview participants spoke of their experience of a touch tour, they spoke in terms of their own individual, immersive experience. It was the one part of the AD service where accounts from the end-users in Singapore suggest they are able to deeply engage in the embodied experience of the live theatre event itself.

This is demonstrated in the following examples from end-user interviews. Lee Lee enjoyed attending the touch tour before the show because she said "*you can visualize in your mind that this prop is how it looked and how it is used*". She said that after the touch tour, when elements of the production were described during the show, she could remember "*okay, this is what [I] touched earlier on*". Melissa said that for her the touch tour "i*s the most interesting*

part" of her AD experience. The following extract from Melissa's interview illustrates the extent to which she engaged with the touch tour as an embodied experience:

> *And it will help me a lot in the actual show itself. For example … when I get to touch the props, the tables and the chairs, it gives me some perspective about the orientations of the whole show … [It] is really very helpful and I really, I enjoy it. … And also, what I really like is also to touch the costumes, because some of the description, the words and the terms are very difficult for me to visualise, even though I had sight before. For example, 'undulating curves or lines' - it's very difficult to understand or visualize it, but when I get to touch it, this is where I am able to go, oh, okay, so this is what [that description] meant. They guide us around the stage to better understand the setting out and the dimension. That's nice because on the stage, it gives us more of a 3D kind of experience, the spatial experience* (Interview with Melissa).

In reporting her experiences of the touch tour, Melissa was not preoccupied with having to provide any formal feedback or constructive criticism for the describers. She was simply engaged in the experience for its own sake and enjoying the opportunity to map the space, feel the costumes, and clarify some of the more abstract terminology used in the pre-show notes description and also enjoy this as an immersive, 3D, spatial experience. Both Melissa and Lee Lee engaged with the touch tour element of the AD practice on a personally pleasurable level, rather than the formal and analytical levels reflected in their responses to other elements of the AD practice. They both spoke about the touch tour as an opportunity to enjoy the AD experience without being preoccupied with having assessment/feedback responsibilities. Wai Yee also enjoyed the touch tours before the show because she said they:

... help to kind of paint a better picture of the scene. You might give me a

bunch of [spoken] description ... but for me, I need to go in and feel it so I

know where everything is (Interview with Wai Yee).

Lee Lee, Melissa and Wai Yee all felt that the touch tour enhanced their understanding of the live performance setting, props, and costumes. In articulating their experiences of touch tours, they were not preoccupied with reporting on the quality of description or the word choices of the describer. For Wai Yee the tactile experience was what helped to ground her AD experience as an embodied experience. The physical walking of the performance space was a very important aspect of her being able to map the subsequent action on stage during the theatre performance. Participation in the touch tour did not seem to hold the same sense of responsibility and obligation that other elements of the formal feedback engagement held. The end-user experience of touch tours in Singapore is closely aligned to those experiences articulated by respondents in London. Participants in both research sites talked about the touch tour as an immersive experience that greatly enhanced their understanding of the performance space, the props, and the costumes. Some end-users also experienced the touch tour as a 'privilege' in which the sighted audience does not get to participate. Similar to the end-user experience in London, the data suggests that most b/vi participants from Singapore enjoyed the touch tour activity and found that it extended the information provided in the pre-show notes, and prepared them to engage in the live performance itself. However, in the Singapore context, it seems that the touch tour experience provided an escape from the responsibilities of providing formal feedback, like an island of immersion in a sea of responsibility.

Barriers to end-user experiences

An element of AD practice with which several of the end-users in London are involved is that of providing formal end-user feedback, and they report that this involvement deepens

their engagement with the longer AD experience. However, the end-users in Singapore engaged in this same element of AD practice reported a very different outcome.

End-user engagement of b/vi theatre audiences is an important aspect of the UK's exemplar AD service (Holland 2009; Margolies 2015), where that has included the engagement of end-users in formal feedback processes (Hutchinson, Thompson & Cock 2020). The Singapore AD service has included this aspect of practice since its inception in late 2018. However, end-user responses in Singapore suggest that this formal engagement in the feedback process on AD services, considered best-practice, may be having unexpected and unintended consequences. This challenges expectations that end-users' experiences will be improved by the professionalization of AD services. These consequences further complicate understandings of the AD end-user experience in a way that has not been reported in other sites.

Although well-intentioned and even grounded in current best practice, the data suggests that engaging end-users in the formal feedback process in Singapore may, paradoxically, result in a degree of end-user *dis*engagement from their AD experiences. This is demonstrated in examples where participants critiqued elements of the AD itself, rather than speaking of the AD enabling an immersive experience. Singapore respondents identified that, when they are required to provide feedback (which, for these participants, was for all or most of the performances they attended) they are focussed on the AD practice and/or content itself, rather than on the embodied AD experience. Their focus on AD practice was in order to ensure that their feedback was helpful and contributed to the describers' development. The responsibility to provide formal feedback became the end-users' focus and it is this focus on the AD practice that seems to prevent participants from being fully immersed in the live performance for its own sake.

Participants spoke about their participation in formal feedback processes in terms of it being both a privilege and a responsibility, as illustrated in the following examples. Melissa

framed her experiences of AD, not in terms of her experience of the performance, but in terms of her involvement in attending the performance in order to provide feedback on the AD. She said she had been engaged to provide formal feedback on AD at all but one live performance that she had attended. She said,

> *I was invited to give feedback for an AD for a live dance performance. I was also invited to give feedback for AD at a museum [on their] virtual tools for exhibits* (Interview with Melissa).

Melissa was also the only blind person in Singapore, to date, to have undertaken formal AD training, and she believed that this gave her a particular set of skills to be able to discern the quality of the AD. She said she was "a*ble to look out for gaps in dialogue ... where audio description could come in*". Her detailed feedback was invaluable to the describers. However, these insights may come at the cost of her being able to engage deeply with and simply enjoy the embodied experience of the live performance for its own sake. With the perceived obligations attached to her AD training, and her socio-cultural responsibility to contribute to the b/vi community, broader society, and the AD service development, Melissa's experience of AD for live performance may contribute to her *dis*engagement from the embodied AD experience itself. She has attended "*live dance and the museum*" but in every case, except one, she has attended specifically for the purpose of providing feedback and we can discern that from her responses. She listed the performances she attended, but did not articulate anything about her experience of the performance events themselves.

For all the end-user respondents from Singapore, the experience of AD for live performance was framed by their involvement in the formal feedback process. They seemed to consider this duty as part of the responsibility of the contribution to others that is so much a part of the communitarian socio-cultural context of Singapore. This has had a significant impact on end-user experiences of AD for live performance in Singapore. Interview responses indicate

that end-users are always aware of the formal duties attached to their attendance at AD shows. For example, Both Melissa and Lee Lee framed this responsibility of involvement in formal AD feedback processes as 'a privilege', whereas Jim said there were times that he would have preferred to 'just attend', without having to attend with the added responsibility of providing feedback. He stated that sometimes he felt like asking, "*Can I just go in to enjoy the play?*". This formal engagement in feedback, which is an element of a professional AD service, impacts and shapes the end-user experience of AD for live theatre in Singapore, in particular and significant ways that contrast with the experiences of the respondents in both London and Adelaide. This formal responsibility distances the Singapore end-users from the embodied experience of AD for live theatre. As Jim indicated in his interview, the responsibility of having to provide formal feedback on every AD event he attended became a barrier to enjoying the embodied experience of the live performant event itself.

When Lee Lee talked about her experience of listening to a description of a person doing calligraphy, she said that the performance was "*a combination of calligraphy and dance … music, singing, everything*". She said that "*the description captured the process: Stroke one on top; stroke two below*", and she could follow the description of "*the simple strokes*". However, "*when the strokes got too complicated it was a little bit hard to grasp*" and in the end she said that she "*didn't understand what [the artist] was drawing*" at all. Her experience of this performance was that the artist's calligraphy strokes got 'too complicated' to comprehend rather than being aware that the describer was unable to articulate the movement with enough precision to enable Lee Lee to comprehend. This suggests that there is a degree to which Lee Lee experienced the audible information as if it was visual, and that she was deeply engaged in the embodied experience of the performance. However, in her experience, the point of interruption was that the performance became too complicated, not that AD was inadequate. She was deeply engaged in the embodied AD performance until the inadequacy of the AD

practice interrupted that engagement. Yet she experienced this as the performance becoming too complicated. This response may illustrate that Lee Lee had censored her critique of the AD practice so as not to be seen to be critical of the describer. Earlier in her interview she said, "*I will not dispute their script because they have the advantage, they can see whereas I do not*". She further said that "*they were doing their best to ensure that the visually impaired in the audience were not left out, which I really appreciate*". Her response that "*the descriptions captured the process: stroke one on top; stroke two below*", suggests that she felt the description was adequate. However, she then said, "*I didn't understand what he was drawing*". On the one hand she talked about this experience in terms of the description which 'captured the process', but on the other hand she talked about the experience in terms of the performance ('what he was drawing'). This highlights the challenges of duality that the end-users in Singapore have experienced where they have not been able to simply engage with the performance itself without being aware of their ever-present feedback responsibilities. This is an element of end-user experience that is unique to Singapore, and highlights that this element of professional AD practice has itself, to some degree, become a barrier to end-user engagement.

As she talked about her experience of an AD performance, Lee Lee quickly switched from sharing about her own immersive experience of the AD performance to critiquing the AD itself. This is illustrated in her reflection that "*if you get too abstract with the description, you may not understand anything in the end*". She further explained that while she was listening to the AD she was "*trying to think how could the AD have been more helpful*". This is clearly a significant experience for Lee Lee. She was thinking of her responsibility to provide formal feedback, and thinking of how she could provide a constructive critique to improve the describer's practice, rather than simply enjoying the performance. This is another example of how the end-user experience of AD was shaped, and perhaps interrupted, by their engagement in the formal feedback process. Lee Lee was thinking about providing the describer feedback

at the same time that she was experiencing the performance itself, and her analytical language signals the extent to which she was focussed on her feedback responsibilities rather than being engaged with the live performance and enjoying the embodied experience of that live event for its own sake.

Wai Yee also switched between talking about her experience of AD at a live performance and critiquing the AD itself. She started off by talking about an AD show as being "*one of the best ones I've attended [- it] was Sweeny Todd*". She immediately shifted to critiquing the describer, stating that: "*The describer was the best*". This discursive turn frames her experience in terms of the describer, and her own perception of the quality of the description, rather than in terms of her embodied experience of the live theatre event. She went on to explain that there were "*multiple things happening at the same time ... [and the describer] did quite a good job*". Wai Yee was constantly framing her experience of the live performance in terms of the describer and description. She spoke in terms of the AD practice, rather than the experience of the performance itself. She explained that the description by the first describer helped her follow what was going on because of the describer's vocabulary. She explained that the describer "*had a big range of words to use ... her description ... was quite, quite spot on*". However, Wai Yee then described being distracted from the performance by what she perceived as deficiencies in the second describer's work, as the following extract from her interview illustrates:

> *Sometimes they say some of the actions, and then sometimes they don't say anything. I think it's a vocabulary problem, where they cannot find a word to slot in. They don't know what to say, or sometimes we can hear long stretches where there is no description at all. Of course, things are happening, but they don't describe. These are things that sometimes you are left wondering what's happening* (Interview with Wai Yee).

Rather than being immersed in the on-stage world of the live theatre performance, Wai Yee reports on the challenges that the describer was having with matching actions with vocabulary and timing of the action. This experience was reported from her perspective of observation specifically in order to critique the AD and to help the describer learn their practice and improve the quality of the AD service.

Jim's experience of AD also referenced his perception of AD quality. His divided focus is evident from the following extract from his interview when he reported that he was listening to the performance while noting the AD, and identifying opportunities for the describer to improve their practice:

> *There are gaps in between [the description] where sometimes I'm left wondering whether the composition ended one way or another. Were you trying to think of a word that is clear enough to describe? Or was that supposed to be an intentional gap in between? I'm uncertain. I could hear movement, I could hear steps ... but the description doesn't seem to match it ... I had that sense of doubt in the [description] ... I was more preoccupied with assessing the [description] rather than the whole drama* (Interview with Jim).

Wai Yee and Jim were both distracted by describer inconsistencies and their own perceptions of what could have been improved in the quality of the AD that was provided. The AD was experienced negatively, impacting their engagement and mediating the overall performance, rather than the AD being an 'invisible' presence that enhanced the performance.

Although Singapore has the lowest number of opportunities to engage with AD for live performance across the three research sites, the respondents from Singapore were more likely to comment on the AD quality. This may be explained by the engagement of all respondents

from Singapore in the formal AD feedback process, predisposing them to consider quality alongside, and sometimes even ahead of their personal experience of a performance itself. This was likely due to two significant factors. Firstly, the AD service in Singapore is in its infancy and therefore does not yet have wide b/vi community awareness or uptake. Secondly, the fact that all of the Singapore respondents are engaged in formal feedback processes, also reflects the way in which I recruited participants for this project. B/vi respondents were recruited through SRT, the organisation which introduced AD for live performance in Singapore in 2018. All of the b/vi respondents in Singapore were already engaged by SRT to pioneer and champion AD to the broader b/vi communities in Singapore. Therefore the end-user experiences reported by these respondents may not reflect a universal experience of AD for live performance in Singapore. However, it is nonetheless revealing how certain 'best practice' mechanisms of professional AD services can have unintended consequences in different socio-cultural contexts.

The end-user experience in Singapore also challenges our expectations that end-user discernment of AD quality follows end-user engagement in AD quantity. That is to say, it would be expected that the more AD shows a b/vi person attends, the more they will develop their capacity to discern the quality of AD services. However, the end-user respondents from Singapore had some of the lower numbers of AD experiences of the b/vi cohort across the three research sites. Yet, the b/vi end-users from Singapore spoke more about the quality of the AD than any of the other b/vi respondents. This reveals that the extent to which AD end-users are repeatedly engaged in the formal feedback process can result in their disengagement from the embodied experience of a live performance in order to provide a formal critique on the AD practice as a way of contributing to the professional development of the describers providing that service.

Disability services shaped by those who use those services is an important principle in service development and delivery. In AD, the end-user feedback is a mechanism that is very important to the professionalization of the service because this is the means by which end-users are able to shape the services which they receive. However, the Singapore end-user data suggests that this element of AD professionalization may be constraining and impacting negatively on end-user engagement in the embodied experience of the live performance event. When engaged to provide formal feedback one attempts to remain apart in order to be objective, to observe and provide constructive criticism of the experience, rather than deeply engaging with the world of the performance. Being engaged to provide formal feedback at almost every event they attend has resulted in end-users reporting that they are often more focussed on their official feedback duties than simply enjoying the live performance itself. Engagement in formal feedback in Singapore seems to set end-users apart from, rather than immersing them into, the live performances they attend. This distancing experience contrasts with the experiences of end-user respondents in London who talk about the ways they experience the mediated process of AD as if it is unmediated. These respondents from London said that the best AD was when they left the show talking about the show, not the AD. However, that is not the experience of AD end-user respondents in Singapore, where, paradoxically, their formal engagement in the feedback mechanism, an element of professional practice designed to enhance end-user engagement, seems to have had the unintended consequence of end-user *dis*engagement from deeply experiencing the live AD performance itself. This complicates our understanding of this element of professional AD practice which, in this instance, has itself become a barrier, suggesting that AD end-user experience may be complicated by elements of AD practice.

Summary

This chapter has considered Singapore's AD services for b/vi people attending live theatre, and their experiences of those services, which have been shaped by the unique socio-cultural paradigm of communitarianism. This socio-cultural context shaped end-user responses in unique ways. Each end-user from Singapore first situated themselves in terms of the prevailing communitarian context before speaking of their personal AD experiences. This chapter has argued that one of the barriers to end-users' engagement in the embodied live theatre experience in Singapore has actually been caused by an element of professional practice, namely the formal end-user feedback process. However, the chapter also identified other aspects of the end-user experiences of AD practice, such as touch tours, that were unencumbered with the responsibility and obligation to remain detached in order to provide formal feedback on AD services. End-users reported that the experience of the touch tours was engaging and immersive. Other barriers to end-user AD experience were also explored through respondent interview data and many of those barriers were shown to sit beyond AD practice. This chapter has argued that, while some end-users' experiences of AD for live theatre can be immersive, AD scholarship has not yet been sensitive to the complexities of factors which are external to AD practice but which impact on end-user experiences. The chapter therefore concludes that end-user AD experience sits within a cluster of contexts and supports, including AD practice and factors external to that practice. Further, if an end-user encounters a barrier in relation to any one or combination of elements of those contexts, even if those elements are part of AD practice or external to AD practice, their AD experience is disrupted.

Chapter 7: End-User Experience of Audio Description Services in Adelaide

Introduction

The previous two chapters have explored the AD end-user experiences in London and Singapore. This chapter considers AD services for b/vi people attending live theatre in Adelaide and end-users' experiences of those AD services. The chapter identifies that the uneven support of AD for live theatre by BSOs, along with the absence of formal end-user feedback processes, has resulted in low awareness of AD in the b/vi community. This is reflected in the low uptake of AD services for live theatre in Adelaide, and in the lower number of Adelaide end-users able to be recruited for this project (as discussed in Chapter 3). Interviews with the b/vi end-user respondents in Adelaide identified a significant difference between end-users who had a lot of live theatre experience and those who had very little. Thus, this chapter will compare and contrast the experiences of these two groups within the end-user cohort in Adelaide.

Several end-users in Adelaide articulated how AD highlights for them just how much visual information they were missing before using AD, such as facial expressions. All of the end-user cohort in Adelaide identified that the pre-show activities were very important to their overall engagement with the live theatre experience. They also identified a number of barriers which constrained their AD experience, including technical issues which interrupted their immersion in the live event. Other barriers that impacted end-user engagement in Adelaide included social anxiety, transport to/from the venue, and the availability of sighted companions to attend the AD performances. Some of those experiences were unique to the Adelaide end-user cohort.

This chapter demonstrates that the end-user experience of AD sits within a cluster of contexts and supports, including AD practice, and is also impacted by factors external to that practice. Interview data suggests that, if an end-user encounters a barrier in relation to any one or combination of those elements, even if those elements are external to AD practice, their AD experience is disrupted. The chapter further concludes that end-user AD experiences articulated by the respondents from Adelaide may not be adequately addressed by the professionalisation of AD practice.

Audio description services

AD services in Adelaide were first established in 2002 as a volunteer-run service supported primarily by the RSB before transitioning to a professional service delivered through A2A (discussed above in Chapter 4). One marker of high quality AD services is the inclusion of end-user feedback mechanisms which informs both practice and describer development. End-user feedback is part of the AD services in both London and Singapore, although this has resulted in contrasting end-user experiences in each location. However, even though the AD service in Adelaide has been professionalised since 2011, the formal end-user feedback aspect of has not been instigated. As a result of the absence of the formal end-user feedback process, and as this chapter identifies, there is low awareness of AD in the b/vi community, and this is reflected in the quite low uptake of AD services for live theatre in Adelaide, and in the lower number of Adelaide end-users recruited for this project.

AD services in Adelaide are underpinned by international convention and supported by professional organisations such as BSOs and venue/theatre companies. However, there is no national legislation that supports AD services at all, and the support of BSOs and professional organisations in Adelaide is uneven (discussed above in Chapter 4).

Attention now turns to the five b/vi end-users recruited for this project.

End-user experiences

In a study of disabled media audiences Ross (1997) identified the imperative to respect the diversity within disability and to value lived experiences. It has been suggested that the diversity of disability is endless (Ellcessor 2016) and that AD end-user audiences are "as diverse as any sighted audience" (Fryer 2016, p. 42). This diversity is starkly apparent with the b/vi end-user respondents in Adelaide. Although sight loss is common across all respondents, an individual's experience of that disability is uniquely personal and shapes one's individual viewing position in different ways. Not only are the personal experiences of disability unique, but the number of live performances experienced by participants in this study varied widely. There was a stark division between respondents who had many live performance experiences, and those who had very little exposure to live performance at all. In their interviews, Sue and Rachael both identified that they had regularly engaged with live performance over many years. In contrast, Charmaine, Siew, and Craig, each reported far fewer live performance experiences than any of the other end-user respondents across all three research sites of this project. Charmaine and Siew had only experienced one live theatre AD performance. Craig reported about 10 live theatre AD experiences. To further explore the diversity among the Adelaide participants, this chapter will now consider the individuals, and their respective performing arts experiences.

Sue and Rachael have both had hundreds of live theatre experiences. Sue has attended live theatre "*about ten times a year for 40 years*". She said she had an annual subscription to the STCSA and together with her late husband, she had also regularly attended several performances each year of the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra and the State Opera of South Australia. She reported that even after her husband's passing, she had continued to attend many of those performances, as well as shows presented by a local amateur community theatre company. Sue also said she had strong family ties to professional theatre, with a sister holding

an artistic role with a Sydney theatre company. This often resulted in performers on tour being billeted with Sue during their Adelaide seasons. This deep connection to the performing arts world, beyond the place and space of any one performance, contributed to her longer experience of theatre (Barba & Fowler 1990). This demonstrated both the social and cultural aspects of Sue's engagement with the performing arts (Bourdieu 1984; Brown, AS & Novak 2007; Walmsley 2011).

Rachael also reported extensive live performance experience, although she grew up performing on stage, rather than being in the audience. Her usable sight diminished significantly in her early teens, in contrast to Sue's gradual sight loss later in life. Rachael's sudden sight loss is significant because, until then, Rachael had not experienced the 'othering' of disability (Goggin & Newell 2005). She says "*[I only] started using a cane when I was 15, and that's when I felt different. From then on, I always felt a bit in the dark and left out*". These feelings of being left out and being different are contrasted with Rachael's experiences of AD, which are explored in the next section of this chapter.

In the meantime, Charmaine, Siew, and Craig reported far fewer live performance experiences than Sue and Rachael. Siew grew up in Malaysia where she said that live theatre was "*not that popular*" in her social and cultural circles. She said, "*it depends on the circle you mix with*", and her friends preferred to go to the movies, which may reflect the way in which personal tastes are socially structured (Sedgman 2016). The movie theatre is "now a valued setting for arts programmes" and "one of the dominant settings for entertainment outside of the home" (Brown 2013, p. 57). However, in this project Siew reported that she now preferred to engage with entertainment experiences within the home, including listening to radio broadcasts and audio books. She said that if she watched television or movies, she only did that when members of her family were available to describe things for her that were on the screen. She did not use formal AD for either television or movies at home. Siew's screen-based

entertainment activities were mostly mediated or supported by family members. This reflects the individual contexts and environments in which each respondent's experiences are shaped (Freshwater 2009).

Charmaine said that she regularly attends movies at her local cinema, either going to AD sessions with other b/vi friends, or to general sessions with (sighted) family members who sometimes provide informal descriptions for her. Charmaine said that she had attended a theatre show before her sight loss, but said that even then she "*struggled to understand what was going on*" because she had "*mild autism*" which made it difficult for her to understand facial expressions. This is significant in light of Charmaine's observation of how the AD addresses this issue for her, as will be discussed shortly. Both Siew and Charmaine have only experienced one live theatre performance with AD, whereas Craig has experienced AD for about ten live theatre performances.

In their interviews, the end-users in Adelaide spoke of their participation in the social and cultural aspects of their AD experiences. Freshwater (2009) suggests that there are a "range of cultural conditions which inform an individual's viewing position" (p. 28). As established in Chapter 4 of this thesis, issues of social and cultural participation are very important for the disability community, especially as they are often excluded from these spheres. Through social participation, people can build 'social capital', which Morris (2005) explains is where networks of shared values develop co-operation and build diverse yet cohesive communities. This concept may help us to better understand the connections that both Sue and Rachael have built within the performing arts, through their regular involvement as audience members and as participants. Rachael is also a performer, which has built even stronger 'social capital' within the broader performing arts communities.

Bourdieu's (1984) understanding of 'cultural capital', which identifies "what is worthy of being seen and the right way to see it" (Sedgman 2016, p. 18) adds a further dimension to

the importance of involvement in the performance arts, and particularly for live theatre, for both Sue and Rachael. Leroux and Moureau (2013) suggest that there is a link between early experiences of culture and later consumption of culture which may also help us to understand the cultural capital that Sue and Rachael have built over many years. Sue and Rachael spoke of their network of family and friends who supported them to attend live theatre so as to engage with the AD services. Siew and Charmaine spoke about family members providing informal descriptions for television or movie sessions.

This division seen in the participant cohort in Adelaide contrasts with the cohort of b/vi AD end-users interviewed in London where live performance experiences are more common. Whether attending community pantomimes or professional West End productions, the tradition and experience of attending live performance is shared across the study participants in London. Furthermore, the respondents in London developed a 'cultural capital' in relation to live performance experiences that was not evident in several of the Adelaide respondents. The end-user cohort in Adelaide also contrasts with the end-user cohort in Singapore in that most of the end-users in Singapore had experienced fewer than ten live performances with AD. This is similar to three respondents in the end-user cohort in Adelaide. However, it contrasts with two of the Adelaide cohort who reported many live theatre experiences, which was more akin to the London respondents. However, in spite of the significant division between the end-users in Adelaide in terms of their respective live theatre experiences, the data suggests some commonalty across the experiences of all of the Adelaide end-user respondents.

AD for live theatre is reported by all of the Adelaide end-user respondents to be a positive experience, regardless of the extent of one's live performance experience. However, only one Adelaide respondent directly discussed their theatre experiences in terms of AD quality. This is significant given the number of years that high quality AD has been available in Adelaide, and that all respondents have experienced that high quality AD. If quality was a main

determining factor in b/vi engagement in AD for live performance in Adelaide, then one could expect that more than one Adelaide respondent would mention the quality of the AD as they share their experiences of AD for live performance. One would also expect greater overall uptake of the AD service, which has been available in Adelaide for more than 20 years.

The interview data indicates several elements of end-users' experiences which are common to all Adelaide respondents. In the first instance, all of the Adelaide end-users reported that AD for live theatre was a positive experience. Participants spoke about their enjoyment of the live theatre AD experience and the ways in which AD supported their engagement in the theatre experience. This was regardless of the number of times the interviewees had attended live performances.

These positive experiences of AD for live theatre are illustrated in data from the following end-user interviews. Sue's AD experience is located at the intersection of sight loss and the performing arts, and began "*about 20 years ago*", soon after she was diagnosed with degenerative sight loss. When Sue first engaged with AD for live theatre, she had already had extensive experiences of live performances over the previous 40 years. Such extensive audience experience is unique across the Adelaide cohort. This suggests that Sue had built an extensive 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1984) from which to process, understand, and reflect upon her AD experiences. She also said that she often got "*very wrapped up in the performance*", which reflects AD scholarship on flow and presence. Sue's experiences also echo reflections from several of the end-users in London who had also had extensive live theatre experience of AD. They all spoke of their deep engagement in the embodied experience of the live theatre event as a result of having access to the AD services.

Rachael described her first experience of AD for live theatre as a distinct "*before and after*" experience. As she reflected on her first AD experience, she said that this was when she "*discovered*" just how much the mediation of AD helped her to access the visual elements she

had previously been missing. This is illustrated in this extract from her interview when she spoke about her first AD experience:

> *'Wonder' is the best way I can describe it. I feel like my eyes were opened, in*
>
> *a sense, like I felt less blind. … [the AD] just added an element of inclusion*
>
> *… I was a bit in shock – it was amazing! … I felt like I fit in a bit better*
>
> (Interview with Rachael).

The AD enabled Rachael to feel more included, to the extent that she said she felt she belonged. Rachael's first experience of AD is similar to Cronin and King's (1998) b/vi viewer's description of the experience of watching television with AD for the first time, as they stated that, "… it was like somebody had opened a door into a new world, in which I was able to see with my ears what most people see with their eyes" (Cronin & King 1998). Rachael's experience was also similar to Glen's, when he described his first experience of AD for live theatre in London. He said that AD helped to "*open up the world*" to him. A number of other respondents in London also had similar experiences, for example: Steve felt that AD had given them "*back the chance to be part of the world*"; Mark said that AD was an "*inclusive process*" that allowed him to "*enjoy the full aspects of the performance*" so that he was "*able to participate, the same as a sighted member of the audience*"; and John felt that AD meant that end-users could enter the embodied experience of theatre as "*both a social occasion as well as an artistic aesthetic occasion*" in much the was sighted audience members.

AD for live theatre provided a new level of access and inclusion to the on-stage visual elements for both Rachael and Charmaine. Rachael said, *"[until I tried AD] I didn't know what I was missing"*. When Charmaine tried AD she also became aware of the extent of the visual information that she had missed without AD. She explained: "*I thought the guy was sitting on a log [but the AD said] he was sitting on a boat*". She further explained that in the live theatre setting she "*could sort of see what was going on [but] could not see [the actors'] faces or*

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expressions". With the AD explaining facial expressions, Charmaine said that she could understand "*if someone [had] a huge smile*". This was significant to Charmaine because she identified that, even before her sight loss, she had found it difficult to understand faces, which she said was specifically due to her autism. Charmaine's experience of the AD for live theatre was that it interpreted the faces of the actors on stage and enabled her to engage more deeply in the live performance experience. This is an example of an unexpected outcome of AD which has traditionally been understood to provide verbal access to visual elements, but has not been primarily used as a tool to 'explain' the performance. In fact, best practice asks describers to simply 'say what you see', without interpretation (Fryer 2016; Snyder 2014). However, Charmaine used the AD to access an interpretation of the faces that, apart from the AD, had previously been unavailable to her.

This also reflects recent AD research considering the 're-versioning' of AD for use by people outside of the b/vi community (Starr & Braun 2021). It is not clear whether Charmaine could not physically see the actors' faces, or simply could not understand their faces. However, what is clear is that whatever was portrayed on the actors' faces in that performance was information that was not readily available for Charmaine to comprehend without the AD. Charmaine's experience of the live performance was shaped by her autism, one of the "multiple contingencies" Freshwater (2009, p. 5) refers to in relation to (sighted) theatre audience experiences. The intersection of Charmaine's autism and her sight loss shaped her unique experience (Walmsley 2019), and suggests that end-user experiences are shaped by contexts and contingencies that sit beyond AD practice.

The group of Adelaide end-users with far fewer live theatre experiences were also positive about their first AD experiences. Siew found the description during the live theatre show was helpful and a "*good experience*", Craig found it to be "*really good*", and Charmaine said it was "*quite beneficial*". Although these were positive responses, the interviewees in this second

Adelaide cohort did not articulate their experiences as being either engrossing or revelatory in the way that Sue and Rachael had. There are several possible explanations for the more reserved responses of this second group. These responses may reflect Siew's, Craig's, and Charmaine's lack of 'cultural capital' in terms of their limited live performance experiences. Their more limited theatre experiences may have made it harder for them to articulate their experiences, or their responses may simply illustrate the challenging task of articulating that which some have suggested is an ineffable experience (Pitts 2005; Sedgman 2016). Once again, this suggests that AD experiences are contingent upon more than elements of AD practice.

Another area of a positive experience common across all end-user respondents in Adelaide was in relation to the pre-show activities. They reported that these activities allowed them time to access the venue before the sighted audience, to sort out AD equipment, and to get oriented to the set and performance space via the touch tours provided before the performance. Craig said the tour before the show, including being able to walk around the performance area, helped him to map the set in his mind and to "*keep track of what was happening*" during the show. Being able to touch the props helped him "*to appreciate the details, the carving of the chair, by actually touching it*". Rachael also felt that the pre-show activities were very important. She said,

> *You can describe an object, but touching it is a different story. And I can actually picture it in my mind ... the size and feel of it. Knowing how big the stage is, as well, and where the actors are going to be, helps me get a spatial awareness. You can't really get [all] that from your seat* (Interview with Rachael).

This articulation of the experience using visual language, such as 'picture it in my mind' reflects the visual experience of AD also reported by several end-users in London.

The tactile elements of the pre-show tour also added to Craig and Rachael's respective embodied experiences of the theatre performances. Similarly, Sue enthused that the touch tours were "*wonderful*". For one theatre show that Sue attended she explained:

> *We went around the whole stage and felt everything. Some extra things you notice with that. I can remember being told, 'if you'll notice the brown carpet, it's got tears in it' – that gave us its age. They said 'It looks worn here' and that sort of thing. Or they let you feel the costumes, we even feel the hair dos of the people. And the actors tell you … the accent [or] the voice they're going to use, which is very useful* (Interview with Sue).

The pre-show tour allowed Sue to step into the performance space, to get extra information about the set, and also to feel the costumes. The description of visual elements, coupled with the tactile elements of the pre-show tour, and the opportunity to hear character voices, provided important information about the set, setting, costumes and characters. These elements, together, added further depth to Sue's engagement in the performance and provided access to visual information which was otherwise readily available to sighted audiences (Holland 2009). All of these elements assisted Sue to engage more deeply with the embodied experience of the live theatre performance.

Charmaine also appreciated the pre-show activities, but for very different reasons. She found that getting to the theatre early made the whole experience "*more relaxing*" because she could get to her allocated seat in the theatre without being rushed by other (sighted) patrons. With the house lights up, she could distinguish the floor and steps to more easily navigate to her allocated seat on her own without needing assistance. This is significant because these experiences may reflect her autism condition, where being prepared helps to alleviate hypervigilance and encourage a sense of calm and wellbeing. They may also reflect her anxiety due to her sight loss and the consequent 'disabling' experiences of negotiating movement and

built spaces in a sighted world (Garland-Thomson 2016). Charmaine's experiences of the pre-show AD activities have little to do with AD practice, which suggests that we need to consider all of elements to understand people's experiences of engagement or disengagement with the AD experience.

Siew also reported that it was helpful to be able to arrive at the theatre earlier than the usual show. She said, ,

> *...[the describers] took the time to walk us around ... onto the stage, and show us the props [and the set] like, where's the stairs, where's a lounge, and a table. ... For me [that] is really useful ... I get to have a feel of the layout .. .what it's like on stage ... that was very useful. Yeah, that was good. It was a good experience. Every little bit helps, because people like us who have seen before, it's easy for us to imagine* (Interview with Siew).

Siew found the pre-show activities really helpful, and she was surprised these activities were part of the standard AD service which is made available for each STCSA show. As reported in Chapter 4, it was Tracey, a staff member working with BB, who had organised this experience in 2019 for several of her clients, which included Craig, Siew, and Charmaine. This illustrates the direct impact that BSOs can have on b/vi experiences of AD for live theatre. As in Tracey's case, it had taken her 5 years working in the sector before she heard about AD for live theatre, but when she did find out she organised the experiences. Thus, if the BSO is not aware that AD is even available, they cannot inform their b/vi clients about it, and those clients cannot experience AD for live theatre. This reflects the experiences of Grant and Barry Lock in 2018 (as discussed in Chapter 1). However, when Tracey organised a once-off experience of AD for live theatre through BB, the clients then thought that the pre-show activities were only offered at this one outing, as a special extra element arranged just for them as clients of that BSO.

The role of BSOs in supporting and promoting AD for live theatre is very significant (as discussed in Chapter 4), and this is supported by the interview data from the group of Adelaide end-users who reported very few live theatre experiences, in particular from Siew and Charmaine, who relied on the BSO to provide them with information about social and leisure activities. However, despite the limited exposure of three of the Adelaide end-user respondents, all five indicated their interest in AD services for live theatre being more widely promoted. This is demonstrated in examples where respondents either talk about how they personally tell others about AD or advocate for raising awareness and making AD more widely available.

Rachael was very keen to see awareness of the service increased across the b/vi and sighted community. She explained,

> *[AD is] still not very well known. People don't know what they're missing.*
> *Like my experience. I went to shows and thought I knew what was going on,*
> *but with AD I understood so much more. ... I just hope AD really grows in*
> *terms of awareness* (Interview with Rachael).

Rachael repeated her perspective that "*People who don't know about it, or haven't experienced it, don't know what they're missing*" emphasising that b/vi people in Adelaide may not be engaging with AD for live performance simply because "*they might have heard about it but not tried it, and they think they don't need it or won't like it*". This is significant because AD for live performance has been available in Adelaide for more than 20 years yet the uptake of those services remains quite low, even among the b/vi community. In the 20 years that Sue had been using AD to access live performance she said she had,

> *... encouraged a lot of people to go to the plays and to listen to the AD. I tell*
> *them that audio description is there that they can listen to* (Interview with
> Sue).

Charmaine said she was happy to do "*anything that helps*" to promote services and opportunities for the b/vi community.

There are several aspects of AD experience of live performance that are common across the b/vi interview cohort in Adelaide. Three of those areas of experience compared in this chapter are the positive experience of AD for live theatre, the importance of pre-show activities, and the end-user interest in seeing AD services being more widely available and more widely promoted to more b/vi people. These shared but different experiences of the b/vi cohort in Adelaide highlight the diversity and complexity of the experiences of each individual (Ellcessor 2016; Walmsley 2019) and point to "the multiple contingencies of subjective response, context, and environment which condition an individual's interpretation of a particular performance event" (Freshwater 2009, p. 5). The shared AD experiences reflect Bourdieu's (1984) observations of taste and culture, and Sedgman's (2016) suggestion that people's tastes are "socially structured [and] defined by their possession of 'cultural capital'" (p. 18). Sue and Rachael each draw on the 'expert knowledge' enabled by the 'cultural capital' developed through their extensive live theatre experiences (Tulloch 2009, cited in Sedgman, 2016). These shared aspects of live theatre experiences of AD are individualised by multiple contingencies which, for the most part, have not been considered in previous AD research.

These experiences of the b/vi end-user cohort in Adelaide are reflective of experiences reported by the b/vi end-users in London and Singapore. Sue spoke of her experiences as being deeply immersive which was highlighted when the flow was interrupted by technical issues. Similar experiences were shared by others in the b/vi cohort in London. Similarly, Rachael's first experience of AD reflected those of end-users in London who were surprised at just how much AD added to their embodied live theatre experience. All of the end-users in Adelaide indicated that they enjoyed the pre-show activities, as did the vast majority of the other b/vi end-user respondents in the other two sites. The use of visual language to explain an aural

experience was also noted in interviews from several respondents in London and from Rachael in the Adelaide cohort. While end-user experiences are individualised and contextualised, the common themes and experiences reported by b/vi end-users in Adelaide illustrated many of the outcomes of a high quality AD service that enable engagement and participation in live performance.

There were also a number of common themes reported by the various b/vi end-users in Adelaide which highlighted different experiences. For example, support to attend live performance was raised by several respondents, either as enablers or barriers to attendance. Both Sue and Rachael spoke of family members or friends who regularly accompanied them to live performances, and provide ad hoc AD if none is provided professionally. Sue has had annual subscriptions to theatre and other live performance experiences in place for some 40 years. She was a busy professional until her sight loss, and had maintained many of her regular live performance attendances since losing her sight, with support from family members. Sue said that she was familiar with and confident in using public transport to get to and from live shows, or could call on family members for transport. Unlike Siew, Sue said she was not reliant on a pension or other government support for her daily necessities, and had the capacity to plan regular outings. Sue's adult daughters were rostered to accompany her to various live performances and often read the printed program or described the set for Sue before a live performance show. These supports enabled her participation in AD for live theatre.

Rachael's experiences also contrasted to Siew and Charmaine's. Rachael had been involved with the performing arts since she was very young and said, "*I just love going out and going to the theatre and seeing a show. I think it's a lot of fun*". Rachael shared that for her, "*the worst is the fear of missing out*". Rather than staying home and missing out, she actively sought out shows that had AD so that she could attend and access the visual elements of the performance, alongside her sighted partner. Craig's experiences also did not reflect those of

Siew and Charmaine. He explained that he "*regularly engages with the sighted world through business*" and had a "*wider circle of friends beyond the b/iv community*". This is significant because Sue, Rachael, and Craig spoke about having access to family and friends which enabled their engagement with live performances. Siew and Charmaine identified that the lack of such supports constrained their engagement with AD for live performance.

Walmsley (2011) suggests that theatre is "a social, situational and experiential phenomenon" (p. 336), and the respondents in Adelaide reveal both commonalities and differences of experience across the cohort, as has been illustrated above. The differences identified by the data support the hypothesis that there are many factors that shape the individual contexts of the daily lives of end-users and their engagement with AD experiences. Research about end-user engagement with AD services has not, to date, explored the broader context of familial and social networks that support b/vi end-users, and the ways in which those networks enable or constrain the end-user experience. The experiences reported by the Adelaide b/vi respondents illustrate that the end-user experience is contingent on a complex cluster of supports and contexts. The impact of those contexts has not been well understood by previous AD scholarship. Neither does a focus on the professionalisation of AD practice adequately address these contexts which the end-user interview data suggests may become a barrier to end-user experience of AD for live performance.

The Adelaide b/vi end-user respondents also identified a number of barriers that constrained their participation and engagement with AD for live theatre. This chapter now explores those barriers and considers ways in which AD practice has/has not understood and addressed those barriers.

Barriers to end-users' experiences

One of the barriers identified by Sue was in relation to a technical issue. Sue said that she had only realised the extent to which she had come to rely on the AD "*when the [AD equipment] battery went flat*" during a theatre show and she could no longer hear the AD. The 'invisible' mediation that AD provides for end-users (Fryer & Freeman 2012), and which several of the end-user respondents in London identified as an important aspect of their embodied experience of live theatre, had suddenly became 'visible' to Sue in its absence. This interruption of the AD experience highlights that equipment and technical issues can become a significant barrier to the end-users' experience. However, barriers such as equipment and technical issues, may be adequately addressed as part of improving AD practice.

Siew and Charmaine identified that the lack of a number of supports became a barrier to their attendance and therefore to them experiencing AD. Their one live theatre performance experience with AD was arranged entirely by a BSO which provided extensive supports including: booking tickets; arranging sighted volunteers to provide support for accessing public transport; guiding the b/vi end-users from transport to the venue; guiding them into the venue for the pre-show activities; helping them to their seat for the performance; and supporting them for the whole return journey. In their interviews, Siew and Charmaine said that they did not have family members who could provide that level of support to engage in live performances and they were therefore dependent on such supports to be provided by the BSO in order for them to be able to attend live performances. Paradoxically, then, it seems that the very support provided by the BSO to enable b/vi end-user engagement in one live performance experience had itself become a barrier to both Siew and Charmaine's further engagement with AD for live theatre. They felt that if any of those elements of support were not provided they would not be able to attend.

While issues of transport to and from the venue/theatre was mentioned by a few of the end-user respondents in London, it was reported as a significant barrier for several of the Adelaide cohort. Public transport networks in Adelaide are not as efficient as those available in London or Singapore. Metropolitan Adelaide stretches more than 50km to the north and the south of the central business district, and public transport takes between one and three hours, depending on the time of day and the day of the week. It took more than one hour for Siew to travel from her home into the city for a theatre performance, and this combined with the distance and the limited timetable for public transport proved to be quite a significant barrier for her to overcome, especially when coupled with other barriers such as arranging for a sighted companion and booking tickets. Siew did not work outside the home and was reliant on a government pension. Therefore a further consideration for Siew was her limited financial capacity to arrange and pay for those supports without the BSO making all those arrangements at no charge to Siew. She did not have access to sighted volunteers and free theatre tickets, both of which were provided by the BSO for the one AD theatre performance that she attended. Full price STCSA tickets usually run between AUD$65 and $95 per person, plus booking fees. However, STCSA provided AD tickets for b/vi patrons at around $30 per person, as well as a free ticket for a sighted person to accompany a b/vi patron. Although this effectively reduced STCSA tickets to around $15 per person, for a b/vi patron and their sighted companion, it still added another layer of complexity for Siew to consider in relation to engaging further with live theatre experiences. This once again highlighted that AD theatre experiences were impacted by contingencies and contexts which may have sat beyond elements of AD practice, and improving the quality of AD may not have adequately addressed those barriers to enable end-user participation.

Some of the barriers that Charmaine identified related more to her social anxiety than to issues with time and cost, yet those barriers were no less significant in the way that they

negatively impacted on her being able to experience AD for live theatre. She said she would "*definitely*" like to go to see AD theatre again but declared, "*I would not go on my own*". When asked why, she explained that she was anxious about undertaking activities that may subject her to what she identified as the "*judgement*" of sighted members of the public. The following extract from her interview explains further what she meant by 'judgement':

> *I get judged. Whereas when I'm in that group [of other b/vi audience members], I do not get judged by any of them, because we're all in the same boat. If you go [to the theatre] as just another person, you get judged. That's how I feel. [P]eople judge you a lot, out in the community. There's a lot of judging. Which is sad. But yeah, it's out there. But that's the reality. If you bump into someone, even if you've got your cane, you get abused. But if you're in a group, and the volunteers are there, they help you* (Interview with Charmaine).

Charmaine's experience was similar to the social judgement experienced by audiences in Lois Foreman-Wernt and Brenda Dermin's (2013) study of (sighted) audiences attending an unfamiliar genre of live performance, who reported that a sense of social judgement and peer pressure were barriers to their enjoyment of a live performance. Charmaine's experience may also reflect the observation that venues can "elicit profound feelings of unworthiness and incompetence" (Walmsley 2019, p. 34) for those unfamiliar with them. These feelings may be based on actual experiences or learnt through social networks (Brown, 2013). No other respondents across all three research sites raised the judgement of others as being an issue they considered in regard to engaging with live performance, perhaps further reflecting Freshwater's "subjective response, context, and environment" (2009, p. 5) which shape individual theatre experiences. The barriers that Charmaine identified in articulating her apprehension of what she perceived as others' judgement, would not be accounted for nor adequately addressed by

improving the quality of AD practice. This further illustrates that AD end-user experience sits within a complex cluster of contexts, and a barrier encountered in any element of those clusters can negatively impact on the AD experience.

While transport was a significant barrier to Charmaine's AD experience, Craig said that he is "*pretty mobile and independent, so there was no drama really*". He explained that he was guided by another b/vi person who had a guide dog, and he said that,

> *When you have a guide dog, we tend to walk a little bit quicker, just because you don't have to think about getting through the crowd, finding where the gaps are, or worrying about bumping into anything, because your dog's doing all that for you. So you're able to travel a little bit quicker and comfortably* (Interview with Craig).

The presence of a guide dog seemed to have addressed a number of the issues that Charmaine had identified in relation to navigating transport and crowds. This further highlights that end-users' experiences are impacted differently by a myriad of contexts, some of which may sit beyond AD practice.

Another barrier to participation that Rachael and Craig both mentioned was that AD performances of STCSA seasons in Adelaide are traditionally only offered on Tuesday evenings and Saturday matinees. Both Rachael and Craig mentioned that those days and times were not always convenient for b/vi audiences, or their sighted companions. Rachael said that "*you might not be available, or you might want to go on a different night*". However, if she wants to receive the AD service on a different day or time, this is not currently possible in Adelaide. This was a matter of programming and illustrated the need for BSOs and venue/theatre companies to work together to better understand b/vi audience preferences. However, even if BSOs and venue/theatre companies worked closely together to support AD for live theatre, this barrier may not be adequately resolved. The matter of programming is yet

another barrier to b/vi end-user engagement that cannot be resolved by simply improving the quality of AD practice, and highlights the fact that some barriers sit beyond AD practice.

Summary

Adelaide AD services have been available for b/vi end-users to access live theatre since 2002. The Adelaide service has been professionalised to a high degree, although there are no formal end-user feedback processes, which may contribute to the low awareness of AD services. This chapter explored interview data from end-users in Adelaide who articulated many of their experiences of AD for live theatre. While two of these end-user respondents had each experienced hundreds of live performances, another two had only experienced one live theatre experience with AD, and one had experienced less than 10 live theatre performances. While all of the respondents identified that AD for live theatre was a helpful and positive experience, the interview data identified a number of contingencies and contexts that enabled or constrained end-user engagement with AD for live theatre. In some instances the barriers related to elements of AD practice which may have been adequately addressed by improving AD practice.

The chapter also explored a number of barriers that the end-users identified which impacted their engagement with live theatre, which sit beyond AD practice. Some key issues identified by the end-users were: supports to attending; financial constraints; transport to/from the performance venue; and the AD show options in a performance season. None of these elements were directly related the AD practice, but reflected key aspects of experiencing live theatre that need to be understood in order to truly understand the end-user experience for AD. The end-user interview data from Adelaide further indicated that, for some respondents, those barriers were insurmountable. Mitigating or removing some barriers to participation may not have resulted in improving their engagement in AD for live performances. This chapter identified that for some of the Adelaide respondents, engagement with AD was not predicated

on the quality or professionalism of the AD practice, but on the level of external supports provided for making all arrangements for attending the theatre. This chapter thus concludes that the end-user experience of AD sits within a cluster of contexts and supports, including AD practice, and is also impacted by factors external to that practice. If an end-user encounters a barrier in relation to any one or combination of those elements, even if those elements are external to AD practice, their AD experience is disrupted. Furthermore, end-user AD experiences articulated by the respondents in Adelaide may not be adequately addressed by improving the quality of AD practice.

The following chapter draws together the various themes and hypotheses explored throughout this thesis, and presents a final argument in support of the premise that b/vi AD end-user experiences have not been fully explored or understood in AD research to date, and that the professionalisation of AD practice may not adequately address the barriers to engagement and participation identified by the b/vi respondents.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

Overview

End-user experience of AD for live theatre is complicated, and it is impacted by complexities beyond practice. Those complexities have not been well understood or accounted for in previous AD scholarship. Interviews with end-users and with service providers identified a number of barriers to participation that have not been adequately addressed by research which has largely focussed on improving AD practice. Braun (2008) identified that "other disciplines offer frameworks which can be adapted to suit the needs of AD research" (p. 6). This study is situated within a number of multi-disciplinary fields which all intersect in the practice and research of the development and delivery of AD for b/vi theatre audiences. To investigate end-user experiences of AD for live theatre, this research project used scholarship from critical disability studies, theatre studies, audience studies, and audio description.

This study has identified two perspectives in approaching the end-user experience of AD for live theatre. One perspective is that of AD research where previous scholarship has prioritised improving the quality of AD in order to improve end-user experience of AD. Interviews with end-user respondents identified a number of end-user experiences that have been supported by high quality AD practice. However, this study has shown that considering AD practice in isolation does not fully account for barriers to end-users' AD experiences that respondents identified. Further, the study showed that improving the quality of the AD has not adequately addressed many of those barriers to participation. The second perspective locates AD in the field of critical disability studies, which presents an imperative to investigate how disability is understood and how it operates. This study has found that understandings of disability and how it operates creates different paradigms in each site, and that these different

paradigms shape the broader social, cultural, and political contexts of daily life for the b/vi end-user respondents.

This study found that "access to culture and full participation were prioritised in the social movements of persons with vision disability from the start" (Bestard-Bou & Arias-Badia 2022, p. 31). Campbell and Oliver (1998) identify that "the purpose of disabled people's [activism] is to promote change: to improve the quality of our lives and promote our full inclusion into society" (p. 22). The concept that "the personal is political" (Hanisch 2006), which became important to the civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s, emphasises that politics, in the broader sense of power relationships, shapes personal contexts and barriers to full social, cultural, and political participation. For disabled people to participate fully in social, cultural, and political aspects of daily life, political intervention is required in order to address systemic barriers and for change to be sustained. The slogan "nothing about us without us" (Charlton 2000) challenges the medical model of intervention and situates the individual as expert in their own lives, highlighting the importance of the personal experience in shaping access support and services. This study demonstrates that participation in the social, cultural, and political contexts extant in each research site, in various ways either constrained or enabled BSOs and venue/theatre companies in supporting for AD for live theatre.

Previous AD scholarship has not accounted for the complex layers of contexts which this study has shown to significantly impact on the end-user experience of AD for live theatre. In bringing these two perspectives of AD practice and elements of the broader disability context together, this study has challenged previous understandings of AD end-user experiences. It has identified that AD end-user experiences sit within a complex cluster of contexts and contingencies, and that many of the barriers to b/vi end-user participation have not been well understood or accounted for in prior AD scholarship, and that many barriers sit beyond AD practice, where improving AD quality will not adequately address those barriers.

This study has considered end-users' experiences in London, Singapore, and Adelaide. In the investigation of b/vi end-user experiences of AD for live theatre across the three sites, common themes emerged in relation to barriers to participation. Barriers were encountered in relation to the content or delivery of AD for live theatre and technical issues with equipment. Uniquely, end-users in Singapore identified that their involvement in formal end-user feedback processes, which are considered to be an important part of improving AD practice, resulted in their disengagement with the AD experience. However, all of these barriers may have been adequately addressed through improvements in AD practice.

Other barriers identified by end-users included a lack of supports to attending, financial constraints, challenges with accessing appropriate transport to/from the performance venue, social anxiety and neurodiversity, and the AD show options in a performance season. These barriers all existed beyond AD practice and have not been well understood or accounted for in previous AD scholarship. Neither have they been adequately addressed by improving the quality of AD practice. The findings of this study highlight the importance of considering the end-user experience holistically, and not simply to consider AD practice in isolation, as much of the current research has tended to do. Only by considering these other factors will the end-user experience of AD be more fully understood, and barriers to participation begin to be adequately addressed.

The study also explored various external contexts that impacted on the end-user respondents and their participation in social and cultural experiences. For example, the project assumed that BSOs, by their very nature, would promote AD services and provide support for b/vi clients to engage with that service. However, the results revealed that BSOs themselves were impacted by prevailing legislation and social policies, which in turn shaped the ways in which they engaged with their clients, and the services that were promoted and/or provided by the respective BSOs. Funding limitations were also a factor, given that the BSOs were usually

run by charities and/or not-for-profit organisations that rely on donations and grants. With limited funding, BSOs are required to prioritise their services to ensure supports for daily life above leisure and cultural experiences. This study concludes that despite some disability legislation being in place in each site, and anti-discrimination legislation being in place in the UK and Australia, basic human rights issues of access, equity, citizenship, and identity, continue to shape the socio-cultural contexts in which each of the professional organisations operate. Data from interviews with both AD end-user respondents and staff working with relevant professional organisations suggested that those issues, which are external to AD practice, can be more powerful in shaping their AD experiences than the quality of the AD practice itself. Data also suggests that these issues, which have impacted negatively on end-users' participation in AD for live theatre, cannot be fully captured in a model that primarily focusses on end-user 'reception' of AD content to measure end-user engagement and to improve AD practice, as the extant literature has tended to do.

No claim is made that the end-users' experiences articulated in the interviews and reported in this study are reflective of experiences of all b/vi people in each of the three research sites. While end-user experiences are individualised and contextualised, the common themes and experiences identified within each site, and even across sites, provide invaluable insights for further exploration of the broader contexts which contribute to those experiences. The reported end-user experiences may also provide compelling points for further research into the embodied AD end-user experience of live performance in other locations with different social, cultural, and political histories and disability contexts.

Finally, there are three main findings of this study: 1) end-user experiences of AD for live theatre are about more than simply the comprehension of the AD and/or source text; 2) end-user experiences of AD for live theatre are far more complex than previously understood; and 3) end-user experiences of AD for live theatre are impacted by broader contexts beyond AD

practice. This study has thus demonstrated that end-user experiences are more complicated than previously thought. AD experience sits within a cluster of contexts, and if any element of those contexts becomes a barrier to participation, the AD end-user experience is disrupted. This study concludes that many of the barriers that end-users identify are not issues of AD practice, and thus improving the quality of AD practice will not adequately address those barriers and improve end-user experience.

Directions for Future Research

The small number of end-user respondents in Singapore recruited for this study reflects the early stages of the development of AD in that site. Proactive AD advocacy in Singapore over the next three to five years and beyond, as indicated by data from the interview with Paul from SRT, may increase awareness and uptake of the AD services. In turn this may result in more b/vi end-users engaging with the service. An increase in the number of b/vi end-users and in number of end-user AD experiences of live performances, may warrant further investigation of end-user experiences in the next three to five years. The number of end-user respondents in Adelaide was considerably less than expected, given that AD for live theatre has been available in that site for more than 20 years, and the history of previous BSO support for the service in that city. However, further research into end-user experiences in Adelaide, again in the next three to five years may also be worthwhile, particularly given the recent shift in understandings of disability and how it operates. This shift is reflected by the recent implementation of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) which has implications across social, cultural, and political contexts in Adelaide and across Australia.

Further research undertaken in more sites across the UK, and beyond London may provide insights into the barriers to b/vi participation that are unique to regional areas. Similarly,

research in other Australian cities may provide new understandings of the challenges that end-users face in locations where they only have access to volunteer-run services (such as in Brisbane) or where they have access to a far broader range and greater number of live performances than those available in Adelaide (such as in Sydney or Melbourne). For example, the large touring shows, such as *Harry Potter* or *The Lion King*, usually only perform in Melbourne and Sydney and do not include Adelaide in their Australian touring schedule. Research that engages end-users in other Australian cities may capture b/vi AD experiences across a broader range of live performances, and may also identify different or similar barriers to participation.

Similarly, further research could investigate end-users' experiences of AD for live theatre in entirely different sites altogether, including other sites where English is the main language, such as various locations across North America, including the US and parts of Canada. This new research would expand understandings of end-users' experiences, and could also broaden understandings of the various complex contexts identified in this study, such as the social, cultural, and political environments. Such new research may also provide new understandings of the ways in which disability is understood and how it operates in each new site. Further understandings could be explored in relation to the ways in which the local and national legal frameworks constrain or enable disability access in general, and b/vi access to social and cultural experiences in particular. It may also be warranted to explore the ways in which BSOs and venue/theatre companies engage with AD and support b/vi patrons to participate in live performances. Such further research could add to broader understandings of the systemic barriers that b/vi people face globally in seeking what the UNCRPD has identified as a human right: participation in social and cultural experiences.

There may also be value in undertaking similar research in locations where English is not the official language, to explore whether barriers to b/vi social and cultural participation through

access to AD for live performances differs in other locations, and whether any such differences are reflective of different political or cultural contexts. For example, AD practices in Spain are impacted by a unionised voice artist workforce (Orero 2005) which does not exist in any of the three sites investigated in this current research project. Research similar to this project but conducted in Spain, for example, may capture different barriers to b/vi end-users' participation, or different constraints identified by the BSOs or venue/theatre companies that support or provide AD for live theatre. Such research may need to include voice artists who are in the dubbing union and who are involved in delivering AD services. The inclusion of this further cohort may identify other barriers or enablers unique to the Spanish environment that have heretofore been unexplored.

This study identified several cohorts of people who are not part of the b/vi community yet may benefit from access to AD services which may help to provide them with greater access and engagement with social and cultural experiences. One of these groups could be the younger audiences who may attend a live theatre performance but not understand the on-stage action. Some AD research is already being performed in relation to younger people with/without cognitive challenges to better understand the extent to which AD supports comprehension and learning (Moreno Montano 2023). Further research with younger audiences who do not have cognitive challenges would provide new data for exploring the application of AD for this cohort.

One of the other groups that this study identified as potentially benefitting from AD for live theatre includes people whose sight is impacted by the natural process of ageing. For many people in that category, prescription glasses may provide them with enough access to the visual elements, and so they may not experience any of the challenges to access that the b/vi community experience. However, as people age it is expected that their ocular capacity will be reduced. AD may provide them with information of visual details of the on-stage action that

they may start to miss as they age. Both the UK and Australia have ageing populations, and research may identify ways in which AD can support that ageing population, even if they are not legally blind.

The third cohort of people whom this study identified as not necessarily part of the b/vi community but who may benefit from access to AD for live performance, includes people who are neurodiverse, such as people who have a diagnosis of ADD, ADHD, ASD, or autism. Some research exploring whether AD enhances information processing for young people with ASD is already underway (Zabrocka & Kata 2023). However, further research could be undertaken with adults with ASD and other presentations of neurodiversity. Research in relation to AD experiences of neurodiverse people may also need to consider the complex clusters of contexts and supports that interact and impact on respondents, as identified in this current research project. Further research into the AD experiences of cohorts outside of the b/vi community may provide new pathways for the application of AD practice. Such further research may also indicate that AD services support a much larger portion of the wider population, which may then warrant further support for the development of legislation around the provision of AD services.

There has been some research into the use of AD to support learning a foreign language (Walczak 2016), and further investigation into the benefits of AD as a pedagogical tool (Kleege & Wallin 2015) in educational settings such as schools and tertiary education institutions, may identify new ways in which AD can support (sighted) students in their learning outcomes. Such research may also develop new pathways for b/vi students to better integrate into 'mainstream' educational opportunities, which was an issue identified by Amanda from iC2 PrepHouse in Singapore.

Further research in locations that are not part of the developed world may also provide new insights into the peculiar experiences of b/vi people in developing countries. New research in developing countries may help to account for particular social, cultural, and political contexts that shape b/vi opportunities for access and participation, and identify specific barriers to b/vi engagement in social and cultural experiences. Such research may highlight ways in which AD may address some of those barriers.

The barriers to participation which end-user respondents in each of the three sites identified in thus study, and the barriers that sit beyond AD practice, may also warrant further investigation. Further research into these barriers may provide additional insights, and the barriers may be better understood and be further located as part of the broader complex contexts. New research that investigates the implications of end-users encountering those barriers, may identify further solutions to mitigating or removing those barriers, and may provide new understandings of the supports required in seeking true equity and access.

Recommendations

I am a professional describer with more than nine years' experience in delivering AD for live theatre. Therefore, my motivations for conducting this research project were to contribute to the scholarship of AD, and also to its practice and to the pursuit of b/vi access to social and cultural experiences. In considering how the findings of this study might be effectively applied to current AD practice, I propose the following recommendations be considered:

1) That professional organisations that support AD for live theatre, work in partnership with BSOs to lobby for legislation that mirrors the requirements in place for the provision of sign language interpretation for D/deaf community access to leisure, social, and cultural participation. The UNCRPD identifies disability supports as a

human right. The fact that each of the research sites is a signatory to this international convention provides a platform from which to activate government support for equitable access for the b/vi community. Such legislation would provide the legal impetus for service providers to ensure that AD is made available, and that it is provided to minimum standards of both quality and quantity for both live theatre and for broadcast and other digital content.

2) A number of researchers and practitioners have called for consistent standards of AD practice to be developed, (Bittner 2012; Kleege 2016; Matamala & Orero 2013; Vercauteren 2007) alongside formal describer accreditation (Snyder 2023), to ensure consistently high quality AD services. Therefore, such standards of practice and describer accreditations should be developed, in tandem with the development of appropriate legislative requirements for the provision of minimum standards of quality and quantity of AD for live theatre as well as for broadcast and other digital content.

3) BSOs should be required to provide consistent information for b/vi people to be aware of AD for live performance. This would be one aspect of delivering against social policies consequent to the legislation requiring the provision of AD in line with the requirements of the provision of sign language interpretation, recommended above.

4) AD advocates and champions should engage with venue/theatre companies to garner their support to provide a pre-show announcement that the live performance is audio described to provide access for people with impaired sight. This thesis has shown that AD can be helpful in providing access support to people outside of the b/vi community, such as those who are young for whom AD provides information to understand what they are looking at, those who are ageing for whom AD provides information that may not be clearly visible to them, those who are neurodiverse for

whom AD provides information that may not otherwise be easily accessible. An announcement like this at every live AD performance will raise awareness of AD with broader audiences. The announcement may also invite people outside of the traditional AD audience to consider using AD.

5) Those involved in the development and delivery of AD services should recognise the variety of factors that impact on b/vi people's experience of AD, and proactively try to address those various factors. This may include providing support for b/vi people to access touch tours. It may include providing venue/theatre Company staff induction training to ensure an inclusive welcome when b/vi patrons enter the venue, as well as to ensure that all of the technical requirements for the delivery of an AD service for a live performance are checked and confirmed to be in working order before each AD performance. While this process of checking technical elements may be part of the steps in providing a high quality AD service, end-users identified interruptions to their AD experiences because these steps had not been undertaken prior to the commencement of the show. Attending to these issues as a part of the standard preparation process would mitigate this barrier in the future.

6) The UK model for providing AD for large touring productions which present in London and then tour nationally, should be adopted in Australia. This model ensures the audio describers are 'embedded' in the production and then tour with the show. This ensures consistency of quality and delivery of the description regardless of the performance location. It also means that AD is not re-created before every stop on the tour schedule. This approach could be adopted for the large touring productions that visit Australia, which would mean that AD could be offered at more performances in each location, and across all tour locations. It would also reduce the overall cost to the touring production of investment in AD because they would only have to pay for

the preparation of the AD script once, rather than for each new Australian city. Ongoing costs would be around delivery of the AD for each show, but not for the preparation process, which is the most time-consuming aspect of the AD service. Depending on the show and the touring schedule, it may also be appropriate for an Australian describer to travel on with the large touring production throughout the Asia-Pacific region, where English is the official language, and this would capitalise on the proximity of Australia for mitigating travel costs in the region.

7) Formal end-user feedback processes should be established in Adelaide as soon as possible. While this study has identified the unintended consequences of instigating formal end-user feedback processes from the outset in Singapore, there are a number of reasons that I would not expect to encounter the same issues in Adelaide. Firstly, AD services have been available in Adelaide for more than 20 years, and far more people in Adelaide have had many more AD experiences for live theatre than end-users in Singapore. Further, as there are many more b/vi end-users in Adelaide, the burden of the formal responsibilities for providing feedback would be shared across a larger number of participants than just the handful involved in the Singapore feedback process. The Adelaide end-user cohort includes b/vi people who have had hundreds of live performance experiences. By virtue of the sheer number of live performance experiences, the Adelaide cohort would have more experiences on which to draw when discussing and providing feedback on specific AD experiences. Several of the Adelaide end-user respondents identified their interest in being involved in a formal feedback process. They are keen for more b/vi people to be involved in order to ensure a robust feedback process that did not rely on only one or two experiences and opinions.

Final Summary

This study has explored the personal and individualised end-user experience of AD for live theatre and considered contexts which are external to AD practice which impact on that end-user experience. With that in mind, I return to my interview with Grant Lock in 2018, immediately after his first experience of AD for live theatre.

Grant said that he was surprised at how much AD helped him to understand the show. He realised after the show that there had been times when he had forgotten about the AD entirely and had simply engaged with the on-stage action, that is, the embodied experience of the live performance. His overall response to his first AD experience for live theatre was deeply emotional. During the post-show interview he recited a poem about his experiences of losing his sight and of 'discovering' AD.

The poem expressed some of the social and emotional impacts that Grant experienced as a result of his sudden, catastrophic and degenerative sight loss. Several of the experiences articulated in the poem reflected experiences of other b/vi end-user respondents in this project. Grant spoke of the "*gut-level grief and pain*" that he had experienced as a result of his sight loss, which reflected the experience of Steve (from London), who spoke of experiencing grief "*because of [his] sight loss*". Grant wrote about being excluded, of being "*out of community*". This was also echoed by Steve when he explained that part of his grief was because of the loss of being part of a shared experience. Grant spoke of his social disconnection with others, his isolation, and being excluded, even while being surrounded by people. He said, "*[he] used to be the guy who looked out for the loner*". He realised the shift in his social position from having been the one who welcomed, to being the one in need of being welcomed. This is reflected in Glen's experience of the profound sense of otherness that people living with disability often identified, and the importance of being welcomed. This was also identified by other end-users

such as John and Sarah. Steve said that being made "*to feel part of it and to feel safe and supported and engaged with*" was "*the most wonderful experience*" and this is contrasted starkly with Grant's experiences, which he has articulated in his poem (see Box 8.1 below), which describes how he felt "*unneeded*" and consigned to his "*lonely corner*".

Grant uses the image of a 'leper' as a metaphor for his own lived experience of his sight loss: "*Unclean! Unclean! Can't you hear my bell?*" This vivid picture identifies the intensity of the isolation and exclusion that Grant experiences because of his disability, his 'leprosy', along with his inward 'scream' of desperation to 'make the connection'. To some degree this reflects Charmaine's experience of what she perceived as the judgement of sighted people around her when she ventured into the city to attend a live performance, and her consequent preference for attending a local cinema with family or friends. She still sought social connections, but chose to do that in settings that did not remind her of her disability and her disconnection.

Grant navigated his darkened world by relying on auditory input, which had become a 'forest' of noise, although he explains that a voice welcomes him and invites him to 'join' in with others, to participate in the social and cultural experience. This reflects the experiences of many of the b/vi end-user respondents in this project, who identify the importance of social and cultural participation. Grant said that this welcoming voice was "*beautiful*". That last word reflects the use of visual vocabulary by other end-user respondents to express an auditory experience. In this instance, beauty is usually associated with seeing something which evokes an emotional response. It is also juxtaposed with the image of the outcast 'leper' whose appearance is often portrayed as grotesque because of their disease/disability. As Grant articulates in his poem, the voice appears "out of the audio forest" and a deep connection is made, one of welcome and inclusion, which is indeed beautiful. Grant's articulation of his deeply moving first experience of AD for live theatre reflects the impetus of this project: to

better understand end-users' experiences of AD for live theatre, as shaped by contexts which are external to the AD practice, such as social and cultural contexts, which may be impacted by disconnection and isolation caused by the lived experience of disability. Grant's poem is shared here with his permission:

Box 8.1 Marginalisation, a Poem by Grant Lock

Marginalisation

Grant Lock

I used to be the guy who looked out for the loner,
But now, after the meetings, "Time for tea."
Laugh and chat. But me, I'm out of community.

Dysfunction at the junction
Of where my disability and personality meet
Produces gut-level grief and pain.

I peer at you, my faceless friends, in vain
There's a fuzzy wall between me and you
Lonely corner. Bitter pie. No Jack. No Horner. Alone am I.

These fractured molecules in a seemingly functional cell
But I feel unneeded. Useless. Redundant.
Macular slice of separation – the face of Hell.

"Unclean! Unclean!" Can't you hear my bell?
Ringing out the warning, yet pleading for your touch,
Your voice, your association. Surely that's not too much to ask,

But here I float,
Beneath the bastions of your castles.
Melting iceberg. Lonely moat.

And in this opaque corner, marginalised
By the unseeing focus of these muddy eyes,
Inwardly, I scream! "Where are you Jack? Where are you Horner?"

Mrs Glibly passes by. "Who are you?" I ask.
Glibly she replies, "But Grant, you know me. You know my voice."
And glibly, she swans into the night.

But I have no choice. If I cannot make the connection right,
I'm lost. Alone. Out in the corner.
Old Jack Frost.

And then, out of the audio forest you come.
A welcome, blurry tree. I feel your touch, I hear my name
You say, "Grant, come and join us. Come with me."

Thank you.
You
Are beautiful.

This poem articulates a very personal experience of blindness, isolation, and reconnecting with community, through social and access supports. However, this individualised experience also reflects the experiences of many of the b/vi respondents in this study. The poem highlights several aspects of the complex cluster of contexts in which b/vi people experience their disability and the ways in which that impacts their interface with the world. The poem also articulates the important social and cultural connections that AD can provide for b/vi end-users to ensure their access, inclusion and participation in social and cultural experiences, as part of the broader community.

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