WAF ACCESS: WHAT IS IT?

Audio Description and Verbal Description are means of making the arts accessible through words to blind and partially sighted people, who use a lightweight headset to listen to the description during a performance or an exhibition.

In live performing arts, Audio Description consists of three essential elements.

1. Description of the set, characters and costumes, giving the blind and partially sighted audience information about the visual style and design of the production. This may be recorded and sent out to those who have booked, and also delivered live just prior to the performance.
2. A Touch Tour, during which the blind and partially sighted audience explore the set, perhaps meet the cast and also handle some crucial props or costumes, completing their understanding of the style of the production.Tickets for Touch Tours are free but should be booked in advance.
3. Description of the visual elements of the performance. This will include characters’ actions and reactions, shifts in location and lighting effects.

The description is delivered live, accommodating the changes in pace that are typical in live performance. It is timed so that it doesn’t overlap dialogue or lyrics, taking care to describe only essential elements, and allowing the piece to ‘breathe’.

Audio Description can sometimes be replaced by a Verbal Description.

Verbal description uses nonvisual language to convey the visual world. It can navigate a visitor through a museum, orient a listener to a work of art, or provide access to the visual aspects of a performance.

For more information on how to make a DIY verbal description, go to http://www.artbeyondsight.org/handbook/acs-verbal.shtml

Captioning is similar to subtitling and gives Deaf, deafened and hard of hearing people access to your performance. Captioning is also helpful for theatregoers whose first language is not English and students who are studying the text of a play.

At a captioned performance, the words are displayed on a screen (or screens), placed near the stage or in the set and can be seen at the same time as they are spoken or sung. Speakers’ names, sound effects and offstage noises are also shown. A trained captioner prepares the script in advance to mirror the rhythm and flow of the performance and the captions are delivered live as the action happens on stage.

Sign Language Interpreted Performances allow deaf members of the audience to understand your show and follow the story.

During a BSL interpreted performance, every word that is spoken or sung is interpreted into British Sign Language (BSL) by an interpreter standing on stage. Doing this well depends on an in-depth knowledge of the script, and the two languages. BSL is a visual-gestural language that is distinct from English, with its own grammar, structure and syntax.

In conveying the meaning of every line uttered on stage, they effectively ‘perform’ the play for the Deaf audience and can be thought of as an additional performer on stage.

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Relaxed Performances are designed to provide an opportunity for people with autism spectrum conditions, learning disabilities or other sensory and communication disorder to access theatre in a relaxed environment.

The performances are adapted in number of ways to reduce anxiety and create a supportive atmosphere, including adjusting light and sound levels, providing ‘chill-out’ areas and demonstrating an embracing attitude towards audience noise and movement.

Touch Tours can be a great tool to allow blind and visually impaired audiences to experience your work, whether live art or visual arts.

Museums in many countries provide architectural and sculptural models that make masterpieces accessible to people who are blind or visually impaired. Exact plaster copies of original sculptures can be touched, and architectural structures reproduced as small-scale tactile models offer opportunities to explore the exterior and interior of a building.

Verbal description as part of a touch tour enhances the visitor’s tactile experience. It can also provide access to a museum’s collection when the works of art are not available to touch.

For theatre and opera, Touch tours can be organized even when audio-description is not possible. They allow the blind and partially sighted audience to explore the set, perhaps meet the cast and also handle some crucial props or costumes, completing their understanding of the style of the production. It is best if as many members of the production can be present as possible. Tickets for Touch Tours are free but should be booked in advance.

For more information on how to organise and promote your accessible performance, please visit: <http://www.accessibletheatre.org.uk>

For more information on how to organise and promote your accessible visual arts project, please visit <http://www.artbeyondsight.org/handbook/acs-whattools.shtml>

For more information on how to make your music performance more accessible on a tight budget, please download Attitude is Everything’s wonderful DIY Access Guide there : <http://www.attitudeiseverything.org.uk/diyaccessguide>