The Digital Access Show – Transcript

Live access (audio description) and

Auslan interpreting (transcript excerpt)

Introduction

[Music playing]

[Narelle] Good morning, and welcome to another episode of The Digital Access Show. This episode is different in the way we're going to run it. Now, everyone that watches regularly knows… I have a severe vision impairment. So, for me, I can't see what's actually happening on the screen.

[Narelle] I've brought along a number of experts to talk about something that I love. I go to a lot of shows and I love watching Bluey. I love watching some of those TV shows, and I know I've referenced that before. And for me, I have to have it audio described. In December last year, I took a friend of mine along and Belinda is here, Belinda Vesey-Brown from the Prio Group and MeetAandi. And we went and saw the live show of… Christmas Actually. And I always go to these shows because… Shari Irwin, from Vantage Point, Shari's here.

[Narelle] Hi, Shari.

[Shari] Hi.

[Narelle] Shari always does the audio description. Audio description supports people with vision impairment. People on the autistic spectrum may use it as well, because they can struggle at times with reading body language and facial language. People with cognitive impairments may use audio description.

[Narelle] And at these shows as well, they also have Auslan interpretation, which is why we have Megan Bytheway, and the lovely Shannon Kettleton. Shannon is deaf and lives with that particular disability, like I live with vision impairment. And we have an Auslan interpreter. So, Shannon can't hear what I'm saying. I can't see what Shannon and the interpreters are doing, so we're going to have fun. So, let's get into it.

Guest introductions

[Narelle] So Belinda, thank you. Can you quickly tell people a little bit about yourself and what you do?

[Belinda] Yeah, firstly, I am a middle-aged blonde woman, wearing my blue dress today, and I've got my beautiful background of my ideal house. But I have a few businesses. I have Prio Group, which is a design agency. And we have found a niche where we design for accessibility, because we found from my other business, which is MeetAandi, where we do a lot of digital document and video remediation, that we're at the end of the process where people say, now, can you make it accessible? And a lot of it hasn't been designed for accessibility. So, that's why I have those two sides of it. And really I think it's about education. People don't exclude people on purpose. They literally just aren't aware, and that's why these discussions are so good.

[Narelle] Yeah. Shannon Kettleton, can you please tell us a little bit about what you do, and about yourself?

[Auslan interpretation] [Shannon] Hi. I'm Shannon. This is my sign name. I'm profoundly deaf, and I can't hear anything, and I'm communicating through an Auslan interpreter. So, Auslan is my first language. I am bilingual. I can read and write in English, and I also have many different hats. I have lots of different roles. My main role is, I work for Queensland Department of Education, with the transition post school team. And then I also, on the side for fun, do a lot of creative projects. So I work a lot with interpreters to ensure that they provide the correct signs, and watching interpreters to make sure that the language is used correctly and it's fitting for the deaf audience, making sure there's complete access for the deaf community, so that they can attend events. I'm also doing, you know, I also like to enjoy a show once every once in a while. So, that's my few hats.

[Narelle] Oh, awesome. Megan Bytheway, I met you through Shari. Can you tell us a bit about yourself, please?

[Megan] Thanks, Narelle. So, my name's Megan. I'm a middle-aged woman. I've just recently cut my hair into a bob, so I'm looking rather grey, stark, and wearing a floral shirt. And I am an Auslan interpreter. I'm also an interpreter educator. And I do a lot

of theatre, a lot of theatre interpreting, and I've worked closely with Shannon as well, both as a side of stage interpreter and with Shannon Consulting. But also with Shannon on stage performing, and supporting Shannon to do so… from the audience.

[Narelle] Okay. Now, that's interesting. I've got to find out a bit more about that in a minute. And… Shari Indriani Irwin. Now, I've had Shari on the podcast before. Shari is our audio describer. Welcome, Shari. Can you please tell us a bit more about you, and what you do?

[Shari] Thanks. It's a real pleasure to be back, and in such wonderful company today as well. So, yes, my name is Shari Indriani Irwin. Well done on the middle name. Not everyone gets that right. And I work for Vantage Point Audio Description. So, I guess our speciality is audio description for blind and low vision people to attend live events. And that, I guess, is my particular personal passion, because before I moved into this field of accessibility work (and I still have this practice), I worked in the theatre industry. I still do as a producer, playwright and creative artist. So, it's a really beautiful meld of the two things I care about. So, I do audio description for live performance, as you really helpfully described at the start of the program. But there are occasions where I'll also audio describe static events, like art exhibitions. I'm preparing something for the Queensland Museum as well. So, it doesn't always have to be a show. It can be an experience. If you can move through it or walk through it or feel it, whether it's a wedding or an art gallery or a live show, that tends to be where our work is done. I'm looking forward to the conversation about recorded access versus live access. I should describe that: middle-aged woman with black hair, I'm wearing glasses today, and in theme with The Digital Access Show, I'm wearing a necklace that's made out of scrap pieces of circuitry from a computer. That's me on theme today.

Main discussion

Preparing live audio description (Shari)

[Narelle] Shari, can you describe what's involved, from an audio description point of view, in setting up for a show? So, if we take the next one that's coming up, the Little

Red Company is Your Song. What do you actually have to do, from an audio description point of view?

[Shari] Sure. So from my point of view, I try to make myself as familiar with the show as possible, because obviously the end result that I want for people using audio description is to be experiencing that show in the moment as present as the rest of the audience. So if there is a joke, if there is an exciting costume change or scenery change, I want the people using audio description to feel that experience as close as possible to the same instance that everyone else in the audience is experiencing as well.

[Shari] I think that's the beauty of live performance. You're not just experiencing a human connection on stage individually, but you're experiencing it collectively with the people that you've brought to the show, and the rest of the audience that could be hundreds of people. So in terms of my preparation, I have to be as familiar with that show as possible, and all the visual elements of it, so that as I'm doing the live description, I can keep up with the action.

[Shari] And as people would know, the speed of light travels pretty much instantaneously. So my job is to try and make sure that I have crafted my description in words in a way that is as succinct, as clear, and as expressive as possible, but also arrives with that listener as soon as possible, so that they are experiencing the same thing as their neighbours in the audience. Which means I have to be quite familiar with the show, so that I can almost anticipate things that are going to happen on stage, sometimes even before they happen, so that the flow can be made in a logical way and people can follow the story and share those moments of reveal.

[Shari] So, I typically watch a performance up to three times if it's a very complicated visual performance. Obviously there are some relatively simple shows, like Your Song coming up by the Little Red Company, or even Christmas Actually that you saw last year. In terms of visual elements, that's a fairly straightforward show: you have your band and your singers. There might be costume changes in between some songs, but really there's not a lot of moving parts to the set. There's no scenery coming and going. There's a little bit of a light show and so on. But with larger shows (say, in the

Lyric Theatre or the Playhouse), where you've got scenery changes and costume changes, and casts of 20 people or so coming and going, that's where it might take me time to prepare and make my notes so that I can stay on track with the performance. On the day of the live description, I'm wearing a headset that transmits to earphones that the people using the service are wearing in the auditorium. And along with what they can hear from the stage, they can usually hear me in their ear and keep up with the events of the play that way. Does that help explain the process?

Preparing Auslan interpreting for theatre (Megan)

[Narelle] Megan, from your point of view, what do you have to do to prepare for a show from the signing, the interpreter's point of view?

[Megan] Thanks for that. And it's very similar to what Shari was talking about. I spend a lot of time learning songs, going through scripts, and as soon as I get a booking for a show, I'll ask for the script. If there is a pre-recorded or recorded version of the show (an archival), I'll often watch the archival while using the script and highlighting areas that might be tricky to transfer into Auslan—jokes that are very particular to the hearing world, and especially things that have rhyme. Complex concepts can also take significantly more time than the spoken English, so working with a deaf consultant like Shannon is really helpful: I can bring tricky parts and ask, "What do I do with that?" so it lands effectively for deaf audiences, with as close as possible to the same impact and timing as other patrons.

Preparation is considerable so the interpretation quality matches what's happening on stage. Often you work with another interpreter for theatre shows. Sometimes there will be two of us on stage at the same time (particularly for dialogue-heavy scenes), and other times we'll switch partway through the show. We also change out to manage fatigue—usually every 10 to 20 minutes, depending on the show and the energy levels of what's happening on stage.

Following characters and voices in Auslan (Shannon)

[Narelle] That's interesting, because I was going to ask: obviously I can hear the different voices. Shannon, with the Auslan interpreters, how do you manage as a viewer knowing who's doing what—who's speaking?

[Auslan interpretation] [Shannon] That's a really great question. In Auslan, we have something called role shifting. If an interpreter is working by themself, they will shift from one side to the other to show who's talking, and use things like looking up or down to show status or seniority. If there are two interpreters side by side, they can go into character—one might take the main character and the other takes other characters, and they jump around as needed. We're watching what's happening on stage, and the interpreters align with that. The main focus is the performance—there's dancing and people moving—so you're looking at that and then looking back at the interpreter. It's important to keep your eyes in two spots, which is interesting.

Audience experience: sound, visuals, and attention

[Narelle] When I'm listening to a show, I can't follow where the action is, so I'm really focused on the sound. I'm also really reliant on audio description—Shari will say, "They're coming in from the left," and because I did have sight for quite a long time, I'll automatically move my head to the left and think, "Oh, where are they coming in from?" People who lose sight later in life often do that. The directions help me build a picture in my mind and keep my interest. I was at a lecture a couple of weeks ago and felt quite lost—I don't know whether there were visuals because I just don't know. The voices felt monotonous and blended in, and I nearly nodded off. Audio description keeps me engaged because I can picture what's happening. Do you find that, Shannon, having that type of experience?

[Shannon] I think it's probably a little bit different for me, because visuals are so important. If there are costumes and dancing, it's fabulous—like the Lord Mayor Christmas carols with the sparkly dresses; no one looked at the interpreter because everyone was watching the whole thing. But if it was very plain—like a poetry reading with no real action—I'd just watch the interpreter. It depends on what's happening on stage. In Othello, for example, they had a pool in the background with a man swimming, so I wasn't watching the interpreter—I was looking in the background wondering what was going on. For a deaf person, visuals are number one. If there's a lot of talking, I'll watch the interpreter and go back and forth between the interpreter and the action.

Recorded content: audio description and captions for static video (Belinda)

[Narelle] One of the biggest problems I had for a long time is that I'm very light sensitive. For a long time, if I went to any show I had to wear really thick blindfolds because I ended up with really bad migraines. Even though I had audio description, I could still feel the light changing. But I have actually slept through a couple of shows because I had to block all the light and the audio description wasn't as good—two very expensive sleeps. Belinda, what have you got to do when you're going to do the audio description and the captioning for a static video? What's involved for you?

[Belinda] We have the benefit of it being pre-done, so we're not having to do things on the fly. I was thinking when you guys were talking that from show to show, because it is live, things would change subtly that you're not really prepared for. Whereas when we're doing something pre-recorded, it is what it is. Our biggest problem is people presenting to camera who don't have experience presenting for accessibility—they say things like "as you can see on screen," and then we don't have enough gap to add anything meaningful. Where we can, and where it's not time sensitive, we will pause and then put in a meaningful description. It would be so much better if the lecturer themselves were educated on how to present to camera and would describe what they're showing on screen, because then everybody benefits—it's in the notes or transcript, and if someone listens while travelling they can still understand without watching the video. I've also heard that for movies, audio description is being considered more now—gaps are being set into scenes so it can be described at critical points. But less than one percent of everyday online videos have audio description, so we've got a lot of work to do educating people. Live production is way ahead and is setting the tone for where the rest are heading.

Consulting and planning for access (Shannon)

[Narelle] Shannon, in the work that you're doing as a consultant, how much are you able to talk to people about digital accessibility, captioning, interpretation and consideration of that as they do their work—when they set up a lecture or a class, or whatever?

[Auslan interpretation] [Shannon] Yeah. For a show it's a little bit different to a lecture. In a class, the interpreter needs access to what's being talked about—videos should have captions so they know the context and terminology. For a deaf person, we've only got one pair of eyes, so if people are talking while the interpreter is signing, or a video is playing at the same time, it helps to pause and create a gap: watch the video, then discuss, and allow time to read content that isn't spoken. For performances, there are also practical planning considerations. For the Lord Mayor Christmas carols, we had an interpreter on stage, but we also needed to consider where deaf people would sit—an Auslan area was taped off so you could see the stage and interpreter, and there was picture-in-picture of the interpreter on the big screen so people sitting further back (or arriving late) could still access it. With broadcast setups, you also need the right lighting and framing so you can actually see the interpreter clearly. Those considerations are best put in place before you start planning.

Timing and "gaps": fitting description into live performance (Shari)

[Narelle] Shari, from the audio description side, have you been able to have much influence on gaps and spacing in live shows?

[Shari] No, is the short answer. A director and creative team put the work together, and it's up to me to make sure my description is sensitive to the nuances of that performance and the breaks available. Different genres allow different flexibility: in contemporary dance or classic ballet (where there's music but not talking) I have more freedom about when to add description, but I'm still mindful not to talk over important musical moments and to match the tone—if a moment is tender or sombre, I'll use my voice sparingly and gently so I'm not trampling the moment. With scripted theatre, where dialogue is crucial, I do my best to avoid talking over it. That's why I do a lot of preparation and practice, including a rehearsal run to see if I can fit descriptions in without speaking over actors. Sometimes it's unavoidable in very dialogue-heavy plays, so I try to choose moments that are less crucial—like speaking over a simple "see you later" while I describe an exit—rather than over an important heartfelt exchange. It does get tricky, but that's part of the fun and challenge of it.

Challenges

Interpreter preparation and time commitment (Megan)

[Narelle] Megan, what do you see is the biggest challenge facing interpreters today?

[Megan] Oh goodness—great question, one I hadn't really considered. I think the biggest challenge is the time commitment. The size of the stage is often an indicator of how critical my preparation will be. For a show like Chicago, Book of Mormon, or some Shakespeare, the hours of practice and consultation (including filming yourself, sending it to a consultant, getting feedback, and refining the interpretation) are enormous. I ask for about three months of preparation. It's not my day job, so it has to be a love job because you'll never recoup the hours in your fee. If I can't have the time and space to sit with the script and become really familiar, I'll have the soundtrack running in my headphones for weeks so I know it inside out and can predict and time moments perfectly. It's a lot of weekends and a lot of hours after my day job. Another challenge is the education piece—helping people understand what we need to make it effective for the audience. For example, in a recent exhibition translation job, questions like where the interpretation will sit (beside the piece, or via a QR code on a phone; picture-in-picture versus standalone) change how I approach the work and how easily audiences can follow along.

Static video: ethics and cultural context (Belinda)

[Narelle] Belinda, what do you see as the biggest challenge you face with captions and audio description in the static world?

[Belinda] I think some of it is ethics, and also cultural differences. We're trying to work out the balance: how much do we describe, and how much meaning are we adding that we might be unconscious to? We're trying to make that conscious—how much a brand is trying to communicate, what the brand message is, whether they're trying to show they're inclusive, and whether audiences from different nationalities will need some things described because it's not a given. That balance between the emotive message, the brand message, and what's important to communicate about what's being seen is the hardest.

Deaf access: information in Auslan, promotion, and timing (Shannon)

[Auslan interpretation] [Shannon] Biggest challenge is probably information in Auslan. A large number of deaf people in the community don't have strong literacy skills, so they can't access written information easily. We like things organised a few months in advance, and promo information needs to be in Auslan—what it's about, the time, where it is, how to get there, and what to expect. It's not worth having interpreters there if no deaf people attend, but interpreters aren't allowed to advertise because of confidentiality, so that falls to consultants and organisers to create promos and connect with the community. Time is also critical: if I'm paying \$100–\$150 for a seat, I expect a high-quality interpreter. If an interpreter is only notified a week prior, the quality can suffer. And finally, scheduling matters—sometimes interpreted shows are put in quieter sessions, but many deaf people work demanding jobs and have fatigue; weekends and big nights are often when we have the energy to attend and enjoy the show. So for me it's information, time, and quality.

[Narelle] It's interesting, Shannon—it's exactly the same for people with vision impairment. Only a small percentage of websites are accessible, so if I find an accessible show, the first challenge is: is the website accessible so I can even buy the ticket? Often it's not, so I'm hunting for a phone number and hoping I've got the right one. Then once I'm there, I'm wearing headphones for audio description and sometimes I'm also managing my guide dog and people wanting to touch him. And like you said, if you're paying a lot for a ticket, you want a good service. Because most audio described shows are in the afternoon when I'm tired, it can be sound overload by lunchtime. It's interesting how our two worlds are very different, but we have similar problems. Shari, for you, what are the challenges?

AI tools, independence, and ethics in live audio description (Shari)

[Shari] One challenge is the fast-moving world of AI technologies for description. On one hand, it's been wonderful for the blind and low vision community—tools like smart glasses can read signs, menus, and give real-time information, which supports independence. Where it gets interesting for my work in live performance is whether AI will become sophisticated enough to describe the nuance of theatre in real time,

instead of a human describer in a headset. I hope there remains a meaningful difference between pattern recognition and human experience—art is inherently human, and context matters (a smile doesn't always mean friendliness, for example). With theatre, that contradiction between what someone does and says is often the point, and I don't yet feel AI can capture that nuance. There are also ethics questions—how AI is used as a tool versus replacing human creative work. It's an evolving space to watch.

Key takeaways

Belinda: Build awareness and design for the audience

[Narelle] Thanks, Shari. Belinda, what's one takeaway—what's a piece of advice you can give to anyone that's listening?

[Belinda] I think we all need to bring awareness to others about the importance of audio description—whether at theatre, in movies, or in recordings we upload to YouTube. Think about your audience, and think about what you're trying to communicate with that piece of content.

Shannon: Book early and share information accessibly

[Narelle] Shannon, what's a piece of advice that people need to be aware of?

[Auslan interpretation] [Shannon] Book interpreters when you can, and be aware of time—booking things three months in advance if possible. Think about how you put out information to the deaf community before you start selling tickets. And for people who are hard of hearing, adding captions on screen (for example, captions for lyrics) can also support a different cohort of people.

Megan: Include a deaf consultant and respect confidentiality

[Narelle] Thank you. Megan—what piece of advice can you give people in regard to interpretation that they should always think about when they're doing pre-recorded content or events like lectures?

[Megan] From my perspective, having a deaf perspective on what we do as interpreters is absolutely crucial—engaging a deaf consultant is key to engaging deaf audiences. Interpreters also can't share client information because we are bound by

confidentiality, so we can't promote shows we're working on. Having a deaf person involved in the process helps make sure deaf audiences actually hear about it and attend.

Shari: Ask for access and give feedback to improve services

[Narelle] Yeah, exactly. Shari?

[Shari] I have two takeaways. First, for people using audio description: ask for it. I know the onus can feel burdensome, but if there's a show you love and accessibility isn't advertised, contact the venue or producer and ask—"Why can't you have it Auslan interpreted? Why can't you have it audio described?" You'd be surprised how willing places are to accommodate, but they often need to be asked and don't know the need is there. A good example was Richard Wagner's Ring Cycle: one low vision patron contacted me, I contacted Opera Australia, and they agreed to have audio description at no cost to her beyond her ticket. Second, feedback matters. I invite honest feedback from people using the service because I'm sighted and I'm dependent on blind and low vision audiences to tell me what works and what doesn't. Similarly, venues can't improve if they don't know what's hard—sometimes it's as simple as telling staff you can't find the bathrooms or can't hear bells for entry. Human-to-human conversations are often what create change over time.

Closing

[Narelle] Thank you everyone for your time today—Belinda Vesey-Brown from Prio and MeetAandi, Shannon Kettleton from the deaf community, Megan Bytheway (Auslan interpreter), and Shari Indriani Irwin from Vantage Point AD. I'll add your contact details (if you're happy) at the end so people can keep finding out about what you do. Please give us feedback—we love feedback at The Digital Access Show. Was this interesting? Did it help? Let us know. If you like what we do, like, subscribe, review, and share. And thank you again. I have learned so much.

[Music playing]