

[Narelle] Hello, good morning.

Good afternoon, ciao. Whatever it is, wherever
you are in the world. Hi, and welcome

to another episode of the Digital Access Show. On the Digital Access
Show,

we look at communication. And really, when

we're looking at communication, we're

talking about usability, and we're talking

about accessibility. Now the two together give

good communication. One of the areas of

communication that is a real problem,

particularly for two groups, the people on the

autistic spectrum, and people like myself

who have severe vision impairments, is going

to a theatre, watching TV shows. Um, going to

festivals, concerts. Music concerts, not

too bad, we hear it. But we can't, we don't

know what's going on on stage. Or if you're a

person on the autistic spectrum, you have

trouble - anyone reading, having trouble reading

body language or facial expression. They

might not be able to read and understand what they're trying

to convey using body language and

facial expression. And of course,

movement, body language, facial expression are a

form of communication. However, there is a solution. And today, I want to
introduce you to Shari Irwin

from Vantage Point. And Shari Irwin is going to tell us about the

solution. So welcome, Shari, and thank you for being on here. [Shari] Thank you, Narelle, it's an absolute pleasure to be invited. [Narelle] Oh, I love having you around. Shari, tell us about yourself, tell us what you do. [Shari] Sure. So yes, I am what they call an audio describer. I will admit that when I first heard the term audio describer, I had never encountered it before. So, there's no shame in going, what is that? [both laugh] [Shari] 'Cause there was a point where that was me as well. Essentially an audio describer is a person who literally describes using audio. So using my voice and talking. Anything that a person with low vision or blindness isn't able to perceive with their vision. So, I am using audio to describe anything. It could be a play, it could be the costumes, it could be the scenery, it could be the choreography of a dance, it could be a painting, it could be a garden, it could be hiking up a mountain. It could be anything that you might need a little bit more information because your visual system doesn't give you the same picture, so to speak. My job is to fill in that picture for you so that the experience is as rich as possible for you. And of course people look for different things and watch different things out of the different experiences they have. Y'know, a bird

lover is going to be interested in the birds at the lake, but someone else will be interested in the trees. So of course it can be, you

know, unless you're working directly, you know, one-on-one

with a particular client. Um, you do have to

generalize a little bit, but essentially that's what

an audio describer does. And I guess my

particular specialty is live audio description. So people might be familiar

with an audio description track that they might find

on a DVD or on Netflix or in films that you can actually add an audio description track. Which is a little bit like the

director's commentary, that's the closest sort of analogy I can give, where there's a commentary

over the top of the movie or the show, where someone's describing a red car pulls up in front of

the house, a blonde woman climbs out of the car

and walks up the steps, you know,

those sorts of things. So it's like a director's

commentary, but it's describing the details of

the action in the moment. And so those audio description

tracks are available on lots of TV shows and so on. But

for live performance, that's kind of my specialty and I guess I came to

that because my background is as a theatre

maker and a theatre producer. So I have, you know, qualifications and

experience, um, in theatre making

and working for theatre companies in Brisbane. So I guess it was a

beautiful marriage of my love and my expertise

and knowledge about how you make a live

performance and the elements that are

important to convey and why. And with I guess, yeah, my interest in

wanting to kind of give back to a community that has been marginalized. And I, you know, I have to say when I first came to audio describing, it was actually through my role as a theatre producer, an email popped across my inbox that said, Vision Australia are looking for more audio description volunteers and I thought, 'what the heck is audio description?' I've never heard of it. This is back in 2012. So I did my research and I auditioned and I joined that volunteer team that still volunteer in Brisbane today across the nation actually. There's a small, very dedicated team of volunteer audio describers through Vision Australia. And that's sort of where I cut my teeth. And yeah, developed a style of audio description. So, yes, I was a volunteer for them for 10 years. And yeah, and I couldn't believe as someone who loves theatre, who studied it and made it. And it's one of a - a great passion for me. I was quite humbled and fairly ashamed of myself that I had never considered that if I were to lose my vision at some point, that suddenly a thing that was so central to my life and social life and wellbeing could become inaccessible to me, I'd never considered that. And as soon as I realised that, you know, absence in my thinking, I, yeah, I was really humbled and kind of ashamed of myself and thought, oh my gosh, if I can do this, then I want to be able to ... to help share a love of theatre

and live performance with other people who want to either reclaim that, that pasttime that they feel they haven't been able to enjoy or to introduce it to people who've never had access to it in the first place. So that felt really, really great to be able to, kind of help, help open up that accessibility. [Narelle] Shari, one of the things - obviously I've attended the performances where you work. I've heard you do theatre. And I've heard you do concerts. And one of the things that really struck me was the difference between doing audio description in a play to audio description in a concert, because obviously in a play there are spaces. And is that where you actually are meant to fill in? [Shari] What do you mean by spaces, Narelle? [Narelle] Ah, spaces where there might be no sound? [Shari] Oh, where no one's speaking or? [Narelle] Yeah, no one's speaking. I should have said, you know, spaces and sound. And so when I've heard you do a play, I'll be sitting and I wear, for those that don't know, I actually wear headphones that are tuned into a channel, a bit like a CB channel, is it, or? [Shari] Yeah, that's right. Yeah. So if people were wanting to access an audio description, and you don't have to be blind or low vision to do this, anyone can do this. As long as you've turned

up to the right show at the right time,
it doesn't cost any extra generally. But yes,
you'd get given a headset a little bit like
a walkie talkie, but it's only one
way. So you can only hear my voice. You can't
talk back at me. [both laugh] [Shari] But yes,
it's a little walkie talkie, essentially,
and a set of earphones that you pop over your
head. And as the show is going, as the show starts, you would hear my
voice in
your ear, talking to you about what's happening on stage, who's
coming, who's going. So it's quite simple in that
regard, but it's happening in live time. So the show that you're watching
is the same show that I'm watching, so that if an actor trips over and
falls over a couch or something, that would be described. You know, if, I
don't
know, if they ad lib and they go off script or
they do something funny, that will be described
live. And I think that's the joy of having it
in a live description. Some... There is
often some talk in the industry, about 'why
can't just the audio track be recorded?'
And people just press play when the play starts. But everyone who's been
to live theater knows that some of the thrill is that it's
going to be a little bit different every time. And so, there's nothing
worse than, you know, having- let's say
you're at a concert or a comedy show, or
something, and someone cracks a joke at
a different time. And you're left behind. You're not laughing

when everyone else is. And that's particularly the case for visual comedy, right? There might be a side gag, as they call it, that if that happens out of sync, then suddenly you're the one laughing alone in the audience. Or not laughing and wondering, hang on, when did I, when did I miss that? So that's why I feel it's important for live performance to have live audio description, because... that's the truth of the experience. [Narelle] Well, that answers one of my questions, because I'm curious about why people didn't pre-record it. [Shari] Yeah look, some things can be pre-recorded. I know that Bangarra Dance, the Indigenous contemporary dance group who tour all across Australia, they do lots of touring, and they do have a recorded audio description track, but that makes a little bit more sense, because dance is time for the music. So, unless there's a real catastrophe, generally, the dancers don't ad lib, they do their choreography in time with the music and all those elements tie together. But getting back to your question, Narelle, about a play and filling that space, filling those moments of silence. Yes, actors certainly in text-based plays are given a lot more autonomy to kind of feel the moment between their fellow actor, and

they have to let that emotion rise

with authenticity. So that's where there are spaces and pauses and where an

audio subscriber has to be very sensitive to those things. I do find, I love audio

describing plays, perhaps because of my

background in theatre, but I think where the craft

of audio description is needed is almost a

dramaturgical choice. If there is silence

on stage, because a character is grieving,

they're sitting in a pile, head in hands, you're

just seeing their shoulders go up and down as

they're sobbing quietly. That is something I

would have to describe, so people know what's

happening on stage. But I wouldn't use all

that space to fill all that silence with my

voice talking about it. I try to do it as

succinctly as possible, so that that silence,

that's a choice that the director

and the actors have made to go when

you're expressing grief. Sometimes it feels long

and empty and silent. So if that's an important

part of the storytelling or the emotional journey

for the audience to go on, then it's not going to be

helpful to have your audio describer going, they're doing

this, then they're doing this and then they're sobbing some more and then they're

grabbing a tissue and then they're

wiping their nose. Like that, you know, you don't want this sort of race track commentary

happening in your ear. With the moment on stage, incredibly still, incredibly tender and quiet. It means the audio describer has to respect that and try to be very sparing and respectful while still

capturing the essence of the quality of that moment. So, those are the things when

describing plays. I try to be very mindful of is

when I can talk and not talk over the top of

an actor's dialogue. [Narelle] Yeah. [Shari] But also if there

is a silence on stage to think artistically

why that silence is there and to respect the

artistic choice for that and not, you know, yabber

over the top of it. [Narelle] So the

difference between that and a concert -

because I remember I went and saw...

with the Little Red Shoe company,

theatre company? [Shari] Little Red Company, yep. [Narelle] Little Red

Company and they did this fantastic performance last year at South Bank. And you were doing

the audio description. [Shari] Oh yes, at

the Suncorp Piazza. [both] [overlapping]

[Narelle] And I just remember... [Narelle] How did you

get time to breathe? [Shani] [laughs] Yeah, they have very

vibrant busy shows. [Narelle] Yeah, yeah. [both] [overlapping] [Shari] It's a personal

choice. I know some people who,

you know, actually take - cause the headset's

often covering two ears. They sort of take one ear off so that - or they'll

put a headphone on and off. They'll take it

on and off as the show goes. Because again, some

people just want to sit back and relax

and listen to the music. [Narelle] Yeah. [Shari] Or want to know what costumes, what colors they are, you know, who's on stage now, where are they moving to?

[Narelle] Yeah. [Shari] So yeah, it's often

a personal choice. But yes, a concert

does allow more room to talk because you can still get

like, if the song is upbeat, you know,

it stays in your mind because music has that

way of carrying forward. So it's a little easier

to keep talking through it without ruining the

atmosphere of the song. Yeah. Or even for example, the chorus, fortunately songs have a chorus. So I try to put my audio

description inside the chorus - once the chorus has been heard once or twice. I throw in some

description in the third chorus because people

know the words by now. So they're not going

to be like, what's that? What are they singing about?

All you need is love. Oh yeah, I know

that. [untelligible] [Narelle] Yeah, yeah, exactly. And the thing with

that concept, and I've been to a couple

now, is they also have the Auslan conver-

interpreters as well, which, made for a fantastic experience. Because well, for me,

I couldn't see them. But I just know they

were there and the friend that was next to me

is going, 'holy smokes!' 'There's Auslan interpreters!' And she was just fascinated because, you know, just, you know, and then she took my headphones at one stage. Because she wanted to hear what you were saying, and she wanted to watch the Auslan. She wasn't worried about the show. She was just, 'oh my gosh, this is awesome.' [Shari] Yeah, yes, no, the Little Red Company are fantastic in terms of their accessibility inclusion. They have almost everything they do Auslan described. Sorry, Auslan interpreted, and audio described. And yeah, it is fanta- like it's beautiful to watch that language. It's a beautiful language to watch. Yeah, I enjoy it. And often if I'm audio describing an Auslan interpreted show, I'll tell people there's an Auslan interpreter on the right side of the stage and they're doing this sort of movement. Sometimes if there's time to kind of describe their movements. There was a fantastic, there is a fantastic festival that happens in Brisbane every second year called the Undercover Artist festival. [Narelle] Yeah. [Shari] And it's a weekend long festival that showcases the work of professional and community or emerging artists who have a disability of all kinds and all kinds of arts, so visual arts, singing, dancing, music, everything. And what I've loved about that festival beyond

just the art in it is great, is that
because it's really embracing disabled communities, or communities
with disability, rather, there's almost
like a hub of service providers that come together. So, it's beautiful to
have
a little room where I'll be sitting next to some
Closed caption typists. I'll also have an Auslan
interpreter on one of their breaks sitting in
the same green room. So all these people come
together whose sole job it is to help people with
disabilities access art. And often we're quite separated. So even though
we'll be working
on the one show, you know, the Auslan people
are down on the stage and I'm up at the back
in a bio box somewhere. So we don't often get to work or really chat to
one another. But this festival means that we're all there together and we
actually get to learn
about each other's work. It's a really lovely opportunity to come
together around one, one specific project.

But yeah, it's terrific. [Narelle] Why do you think
theatre started bringing audio description in? I don't know
how long it's been going. Obviously I only found
you two or three years ago and obviously I'm a fan because I love going
to plays. I love concerts.

Why do you think a decision was made to
bring audio description in? [Shari] I really think it's got
to do with the rise of advocacy inside the
disability community. I think really there
is this wonderful wave in Australia that probably feels frustrated
that the waves arrive to, you know, is

not fast enough. But certainly, like you
Narelle, I've felt that the tide rise in the
last three years. It may be a bit longer
though, it's been building over
the last four years where artists who
have a disability are much more
vocal and proactive now or seem to be about, you know,
demanding their human right to access art and, you know, literature and
all those things. So, there's I think been a generation that are now
equipped with understanding what they can ask for, what they deserve. I
think we also have more platforms too. Just technology has allowed
different people
with different disabilities to jump on their phone,
film their life and go, 'hey, this is a problem for me,' or
'hey, this isn't good enough.' And they have a platform to
be able to kind of disseminate that information and
praise people, businesses, experiences that have allowed
them to have a great time and then to kind of critique
the ones that haven't. So there's more
accountability I think in all sectors, but I
think in the arts too. Yeah, there's just been
an overall, I feel like recognition that there's
no excuse anymore. You can't pretend that that
community doesn't exist, that community is now getting more vocal, that
is more present. And that accessibility
isn't, I think there used to be
an assumption that if your venue was accessible for a wheelchair, then
you
were doing your best. You tick the box
of being accessible. And they've come to realize that there are so many

more services that are needed to be

truly accessible. I was commenting to someone today actually, that I actually suspect - this is a

personal theory, I don't know if this is true. But I suspect that because of

the COVID pandemic, and the fact that the community were getting so many frequent updates from, you know,

the health department and politicians about these stats and figures

about our safety. And all of that, all of those news reports, most always had an Auslan interpreter beside that person, which

was fantastic. And I think, um.. people - seeing that

made people go, oh yeah that's right,

lots of people with different barriers

to information have a right, like a requirement,

to know this stuff. And so I think

there was gradually this collective awakening about oh yeah, there are deaf people

who need to know this. There are blind people

who need to know this. And so I feel like in some

ways, certainly Auslan has become more recognized as another service

of accessibility. And I guess audio description is not as well known because again we're sort of

something you have to hear about, you

can't just see us. [Narelle] That's it. [Shari] Yeah, so,

but I think because of that recognition,

that again, that tide has risen and it

has lifted all boats and I think there's

been more of an understanding

and interest in audio description because

people are now thinking about

specific communities of people with

different disabilities. It's not just about wheelchair access anymore. It's like oh

yes, there's folks who are deaf or hard of hearing, there are folks who have low vision, there

are folks with neurodivergence that need, you know, a

different set of circumstances to be able to enjoy a

live performance. So I just think the awareness is

building and there's now a commitment to it where

there's actually some budget lines put to production

budgets to go 'great!' We'll actually keep

some money aside and pay for these

services which is great but it does sometimes

boil down to money. I know there's

a lot of goodwill, but it's, y'know, an expensive

thing making theatre and adding one more cost

to it can blow the budget. [Narelle] I know

for me last year, I was really, really

excited - I love Carols By Candlelight, and the Little Red Company putting on the Brisbane Carols by

Candlelight and doing the audio described version the night before for people

with disability. It was the dress rehearsal and

they audio described the dress rehearsal and I was so excited because it made it accessible. Whereas now, I sit

and I listen to it and I think 'oh, you know,

just not quite the same.' [Shari] Yeah.

[Narelle] As when I could see.. And y'know that's something,

I mean I'm hoping that they do it again this year because I'm going

to be front row seats [laughs]. [Shari] Wonderful,

wonderful, yes, I think they'll announce something pretty soon. But yeah, again, that's produced by Little Red so they have a really great commitment to accessibility services. They had a great ... not just at Auslan and audio description but they had sort of chill out zones for folks who get a little bit overstimulated by all the crowds and the noise and you can still watch the [cut off] [Narelle] And that's it, they had seating areas specifically for people with wheelchairs close to the stage, where they could see, where they could participate and yeah, it's such a wonderful thing. [Shari] They have a great disability access consultant named Madeline Little and she sort of heads up a kind of consultation committee with them to make sure that yeah, as many people as possible can access something that everyone loves like Christmas carols. [Narelle] Yeah, yeah. [Shari] It's great. [Narelle] It's a simple thing but I think one of the things that people forget as well is that a play gives a message. And if you're not able to take in the message visually, you're going to miss out. You really do and having someone provide the audio description means we get the same accesses. [Shari] Exactly. [Narelle] Shari, what are a couple of takeaways that we can - that you can give people about audio description? What, what... What would you like people to know? [Shari] I'd like people to know that it is for anyone to enjoy. People - and understandably different communities can be quite guarded about who

they let in and out of kind of their safe spaces which is completely understandable. But certainly I've never encountered in this community of blind and low vision people a sort of gatekeeping of, you know, services I feel everyone's very wanting to share information and you know, make the community... to advocate for the community as much as possible. So I guess the first thing I'd want to say is audio description is - anyone can access it. It doesn't cost any extra so if you're curious and you're at a show and its being audio described for that time, just ask for a headset and you can have a listen and find out what it's like. There's, yeah, there's never a cost to the person like you might have to pay for your ticket to the show but you wouldn't have to pay extra to do the audio description. No one is going to, you know, look you up and down or, you know, expect some sort of ID card or proof - they just want you to experience, it's just another another service. [Narelle] Mhm. [Shari] And so, yeah, I really encourage people to listen to that because if they want to be an ally to the blind and low vision community then it gives you a real sense of the kinds of extra detail that folks

in that community need, rely on,
to get literally the full picture of
any experience. And so, if you understand
that then you can be a great ally in how to
help those friends or family, community members,
be safe or get a little bit something extra
out of a walk in the park. You know we take - the
sighted community take so much for granted,
the pleasure or interest that you know, a vest
or a little detail that you notice on a walk,
you know, at the shops can give you and it's
that sort of, you know, beautiful - those little
details that can really, can really brighten
someone's day, or you know, add that
texture to the world. [Narelle] And I think you've got
it right, it is texture. You reminded me I took
my mum to see Nine to Five. [Shari] Oh, the Dolly Parton-
[Narelle] Yeah, yeah. [Narelle] And because it was so
bright, I couldn't - I had to have blindfolds
on, cause I'm very light sensitive. I
slept through it. [Shari] Ah. [laughs] [Narelle] There was no -
[Shari] Seats are comfy [laughs]. [Narelle] Yeah, it was a very expensive
sleep,
is what I'll often say. [Shari] [laughs] [Narelle] And you know
I sort of - listened to the start and thought, 'oh,
this is really good,' and then I got a bit tired
and then I went to sleep. Because I didn't have

that, I don't have that visual. [Shari] The richness was lost. [Narelle]
Yeah, the

richness was gone. So, you know, Shari,

for me I'm always - I love hearing your, when you're working - Shari,

where are you on next? When can people go and

listen to your work? [Shari] Gosh, that's a good

point. I'm definitely next at... Well,

probably a Brisbane Festival thing. Well, at

Vantagepoint it is two people at the moment -

myself and Todd McDonald. Who some of your listeners

may have already encountered. But yeah, we are doing

a lot in Brisbane Festival. So there's Volcano,

contemporary theatre and dance. The Jean Paul Gautier

Fashion Freak show. We're doing the No

Bang Theory which is a great comedy

cabaret by an artist who used to be featured

at the Undercover Artist Festival. He's a gentleman

that identifies as autistic. What else? Gosh, I'm

looking at my - I'm doing Dear Brother at

Queensland Theatre. There's a Torres

Strait Island dance work called Gurr Era Op

featuring Ghenoa Gela they're a beautiful

artist from the Torres Strait, very fun and very

engaging, amazing performer. There's so much to - If you've got grandkids

or kids and you want to do something

with the family, The Little Red

Company who we were talking about before

often do music concerts. They are co-producing with

Love White Theatre Company. To do a show called Fancy Long
Legs which is for all ages. Kids, grown ups, grandmas,
granddads, whatever. And that's another
fully accessible show so there's gonna be
Auslan, audio description. [Narelle] Fantastic. [Shari] Sort of
breakout spaces and that's based off the kids' book. [Narelle] Fantastic.
[Shari] Lots going on in September. [both] Yeah. [Narelle] So if you want
to find
out [about] any of those, obviously you hit Ticketek,
or you get on to the Little Red Theatre, Little Red
Company's website. [Shari] Yeah. The Brisbane Festival
website as well. [Narelle] That's
another one. And Shari - [Shari] Or my
website which is all the stuff that I'm audio describing. But of course,
Vision Australia... [unintelligible] [Narelle] What is your website?
How can people contact you? [Shari] Sure, you just
jump on to vantagepointad.com and that will take you to
Vantagepoint audio description. And you can learn about
me and learn about what shows I'm
audio describing next. And drop me a line.
You're welcome to kind of write in,
or give me a call. And I'm always, always
fascinated with feedback. Obviously as a sighted person, you know, I work
with
folks who are blind and low vision and I've
worked in show business. But I'm always really
hungry for feedback. And the positive flattering
feedback is lovely [laughs]. But I'm also really, also really hungry for
some

critical feedback. If you've listened to my audio descriptions or if there's anything on the website that you're like, 'oh, this website's not quite easy to read,' or all those sorts of things. I'd really rather hear it and fix it or address it than kind of not know. So yeah, really encourage everyone to reach out. I'd love to get to know you. [Narelle] Yeah. And to be honest, one of the things, one of the shows I always tell people about for a good, or to my mind, it's only me - for a good example of audio description is go and have a look at ABC Iview. Muster Dogs. Turn on your audio description setting on your smart TVs. Have a listen. Because that's the work Shari does, except she does it in a little bit more difficult way. She does it live. [Shari] I don't get to stop my take [unintelligible]. [Narelle] Exactly. [Shari] I get it wrong [laughs]. [Narelle] That's it. And it's awesome listening to Shari in action. And that's another episode, thank you Shari. Thanks for coming on. [Shari] My pleasure. [Narelle] And this is, I think it's episode 33. We're really wrapped. We've had about 460 listens since January. So we're hoping that that's a good number. We can only keep pushing ahead. And if you know of anyone that you think, would love to come on our show and talk about communication, accessibility and usability, which Shari's got all three wrapped up in one. Please let us know. And you can contact us at reception@dasat.com.au Please like, subscribe, share. We're found on Amazon, Spotify, Apple podcasts, and all the good podcast channels. And we'll see you next time. Thanks very much.