

***Joe Snyder - Intersteno Ghent 2013***

**AUDIO DESCRIPTION WORKSHOP – Intersteno, 2013 – Ghent, Belgium**

**July 2013**

Opening SLIDE with narration embedded

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What better way to begin our work together than with description of a visual image:

“The Fan” by John McPherson

On a stage – at left, a woman in a flowing gown, her hands clasped in front of her, stands before a kneeling man in a doublet and feathered cap. He croons, “Why dost thy heart turn away from mine?” At right, a man at a microphone speaks: “Basically, the guy with the goofy hat is ticked because this babe has been runnin’ around with the dude in the black tights.” The caption reads: “Many opera companies now provide interpreters for the culturally impaired.”

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Audio Description or AD was first developed in the U.S. It was the subject of a Masters' Thesis in San Francisco, California in the 1970's by the late Gregory Frazier. Mr. Frazier was the first to work out the concepts behind the act and the art of AD. In 1980, a theater in Washington, DC, Arena Stage, assembled a group of people to provide advice on accessibility issues. Among the committee members was Dr. Margaret Pfanstiehl (then Dr. Margaret Rockwell). Dr. Pfanstiehl founded The Metropolitan Washington Ear, a closed-circuit radio reading service for people who are blind or for those who don't otherwise have access to print. From there the Washington Ear's AD program was developed. I was already a volunteer reader at The Ear, and a professional voice talent/actor and English teacher and I became one of the first audio describers in The Ear's program, the world's first ongoing audio description service.

So for over 30 years I have been working with Audio Description or AD—but what is this access technique? It is a kind of literary art form. It's a type of poetry--a haiku. It provides a verbal version of the visual--the visual is made verbal, and aural, and oral. Using words that are succinct, vivid, and imaginative, we convey the visual image that is not fully accessible to a segment of the population – the American Foundation for the Blind notes that over 21 million Americans are either blind or having trouble seeing even with correction. And describers help the rest of us--the rest of us, sighted folks who do not fully realize what we see. We see but we do not observe.

It's useful for anyone who wants to truly notice and appreciate a more full perspective on any visual event but it is especially helpful as an access tool for people who are blind or have low vision. You'll find AD these days at arts events—theater, opera, dance, museum exhibits, broadcast television, DVDs and first-run feature films—but also at conferences, in classrooms, weddings, parades, rodeos, circuses, sports events, on cruises, for karaoke performances – even at funerals!

But let me help you see what description is all about by asking you, figuratively, to close your eyes. What you'll experience next is the original soundtrack of an excerpt from a major motion picture, "The Color of Paradise." What can you glean about the film when you're limited to listening only. Let's try it.

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That was long! What was going on? Hard to tell, eh? So let's experience the same excerpt again—you're all still blind, there will be no picture, but this time let's add audio description. Will it make a difference? Let's see by listening.

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Ah, a bit more clear, yes? But just from having listened closely to the description of Mohammed and his interaction with the tree, what can you tell me about him?

(Remember, the character would have been described much earlier in the film.) I suspect that some of you will be surprised after watching the excerpt for only about 10 or 15 seconds. And as you do, please consider the words used and why, the images that were chosen for description—would you have singled out others? Description is often about what not to describe. Let's try it.

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RED BALL

Not too long ago I conducted a workshop in New Haven with day care workers and reading teachers on what I think represents a new application for audio description--literacy. We experimented with developing more descriptive language to use when working with kids and picture books. These books rely on pictures to tell the story. But the

teacher trained in audio description techniques would never simply hold up a picture of a red ball and read the text: "See the ball." He or she might add: "The ball is red--just like a fire engine. I think that ball is as large as one of you! It's as round as the sun--a bright red circle or sphere." The teacher has introduced new vocabulary, invited comparisons, and used metaphor or simile -- with toddlers! By using audio description, you make these books accessible to children who have low vision or are blind \*and\* help develop more sophisticated language skills for all kids. A picture is worth 1000 words? Maybe. But the audio describer might say that a few well-chosen words can conjure vivid and lasting images.

Indeed, I was quite pleased to provide description – for the first time – for Sesame Street. We were quite heartened by a particular letter we received from a blind parent of sighted children who for the first time could follow along with her kids the antics of Elmo, Bert, Ernie, and all the other denizens of Sesame Street. We also provide description for the Spanish version of Sesame Street—Plaza Sesamo—and we also add description to Sesame Street's commercial DVDs.

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ELMO'S WORLD

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In the time we have this morning, I thought it would be most helpful to review the skills that a describer must develop in order to make the visual verbal, according to the Fundamentals of Audio Description that I developed some years ago.

I recall being simply amazed when I first encountered Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's brilliant detective, Sherlock Holmes. Brilliant ... and incredibly observant. In developing AD for television, a video, for theater, for a museum – in any context – I keep in mind / emphasize four elements – the first of which is all about the skill that Sherlock Holmes honed:

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1) OBSERVATION The great philosopher Yogi Berra said it best: "You can see a lot just by looking." An effective describer must increase his level of awareness and become an active "see-er," develop his "visual literacy," notice the visual world with a heightened sense of acuity, and share those images.

Miss Helen Keller saw clearly that "Those who have never suffered impairment of sight or hearing seldom make the fullest use of these blessed faculties. Their eyes and ears take in all sights and sounds hazily, without concentration and with little appreciation."

Test your visual acuity by observing the following video excerpt:

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AWARENESS TEST

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Next, describers must edit or cull from what they see, selecting what is most valid, what is most important, what is most critical to an understanding and appreciation of an event.

Oliver Wendell Holmes expressed it succinctly: “The great struggle of art is to leave all but the essential.”

Thirdly, LANGUAGE. We transfer it all to words--objective, vivid, specific, imaginatively drawn words, phrases, and metaphors. In Ghent, is the KBC Arteveldeoren 390 feet tall or is it as high as 40 elephants stacked one on top of the other or taller than a football field set up vertically or 30 stories tall

How many different words can you use to describe someone moving along a sidewalk?

Why say "walk" when you can more vividly describe the action with "sashay," "stroll," "skip," "stumble," or "saunter"?

Thus, imagination is critical. There are no elephants there, there's no football field but, in the words of Jonathan Swift: "Vision is the art of seeing things invisible." And Mark Twain said it even better: "You cannot depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus."

But good describers also strive for simplicity, succinctness - "less is more." In writing to a friend, Blaise Pascal once noted: "I have only made this letter longer because I have not had the time to make it shorter."

While a describer must use language which helps folks see vividly--and even see beyond what's readily apparent--it's important to maintain a degree of objectivity--describers sum it up with the acronym –

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SLIDES -- "WYSIWYS": "What You See Is What You Say."

The best audio describer is sometimes referred to as a "verbal camera lens," objectively recounting the visual aspects of an exhibition. Qualitative judgments get in the way -- they constitute a subjective interpretation on the part of the describer and are

unnecessary and unwanted. Let listeners conjure their own interpretations based on a commentary that is as objective as possible.

So you don't say "He is furious" or "She is upset." Rather, "He's clenching his fist" or "She is crying." The idea is to let the audience make their own judgments - perhaps their eyes don't work so well, but their brains and their interpretative skills are intact.

And because the image is created in the minds of our constituents, we try to avoid labeling with overly subjective interpretations and let our visitors conjure their own images and interpretations, as free as possible from the influence of coloring. There is no specific, objective thing – indeed, Anais Nin reminds us that: “We don’t see things as they are, we see them as we are.”

And finally, vocal skills. In addition to building a verbal capability, the describer develops the vocal instrument through work with speech and oral interpretation fundamentals.

Our voices must always be consonant with the event or image we're describing. And, of course, we make meaning with our voices. Try this exercise: say the following sentence aloud:

Woman without her man is a savage.

Now say it aloud so that it means just the opposite:

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Woman: Without her, man is a savage.

Let's try one more. Say the following aloud simply so that it makes sense:

That that is is that that is not is not

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How about:

That that is, is; that that is not, is not.

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Thank you all—if you'd to be in touch with questions or observations, feel free to contact

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