

"Teach him how to tell my story": Access at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival

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Abstract

The Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF), under the leadership of Artistic Director Bill Rauch, has become an industry leader in its commitment to access. This paper summarizes the Festival's access generally, then examines three areas that are unusual: audio description, open captioning, and sign language performances. The results are that OSF has been rewarded with a thriving and growing patronage from the disabled community and that community has been enriched by access to an art that often excludes them. Brief note is also made of the way Shakespeare language is altered or augmented by each of these means of presentation.

The Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF) is at the forefront of U.S. theater companies in its commitment to making all of its performances and programs accessible. Like most arts organizations, it offers accessible restrooms in all three theaters, Braille and large print playbills, accessible seating areas for patrons in wheelchairs, and complimentary Sennheiser assistive listening devices for the hard of hearing. OSF is unusual in presenting substantial numbers of audio described performances for the blind and visually impaired, sign interpreted performances for Deaf patrons, and captioned performances for patrons with impaired hearing. In the past six years, my position as Access Coordinator has increased from twenty to forty hours a week as the Festival's access programs grew and the number of patrons served by those programs exploded. There are quite a few reasons for this, but one of the most important was the hiring of Bill Rauch as the Festival's sixth artistic director in 2008. Bill's background in community based theater includes a career-long commitment to accessibility.¹ Almost immediately, there was a perceptible change in the way in which the Festival's management approached access issues. Instead of providing access because it was required by law, it became part of the way OSF did business, and we started looking actively for ways to expand our access programs.² This sent an important message

to the Deaf community, and very quickly the number of patrons coming to Ashland for sign-interpreted performances increased dramatically. In a time when many theater companies are actually eliminating or reducing greatly their commitment to sign interpreted performances, OSF increased the number from six to nine performances a year, with the ultimate goal of interpreting all eleven of the plays we produce in a season.

Instead of sign interpreted performances, many theaters now offer open captioned performances. This is a service for hearing impaired patrons whose hearing loss is profound enough that neither their personal hearing aids nor our assistive listening devices provides enough sound amplification or clarification to follow the dialogue. We started out slowly, hiring a company out of New York City to caption performances for us. However, we quickly realized that our budget would not allow us to fly someone to Ashland from New York every time we wanted to caption a performance, so OSF is now one of the very few theater companies in the country to provide in-house captioning. As a result, we offer far more captioned performances than we would otherwise be able to provide. Each play is captioned at least twice, and in 2013 OSF will caption thirty-five performances.

The Festival has been offering in-house audio description for our visually impaired patrons for over twenty years. Audio description is a live description of on-stage action delivered to the patron through the same type of assistive listening devices used by our hearing impaired patrons. All of our assistive listening devices have two channels, so the same devices can have multiple uses. We are even able to provide sound amplification and audio description on the same device when a patron is both blind and hearing impaired. In effect, the describer becomes the patron's eyes, sitting in the control booth and describing the play into a microphone, which is then broadcast to the patron sitting in the house. The describer uses the same rehearsal script as the actors, not to repeat the lines said on stage, but instead to know the best time to break in between the actors' lines with the description. In addition, the describer has prepared about a ten-minute introduction in which information about the set, costumes, and play's background is delivered to the patron before the play begins.

Most theater companies offer audio description for just one performance of a show. If the patron cannot attend that performance, they are out of luck. We have six audio describers on staff. They are paid a flat fee for each script they prepare and then an additional stipend each time they describe a performance. With six paid describers, we are able to offer live audio description for every performance of every play if it is requested. In 2012, OSF audio described 123 of its approximately 800 performances. Patrons needing audio description come from all over the country, and we add new patrons each season. Having summarized these services, let us look at

each with more depth and note some of the challenges of presenting Shakespeare's plays with these aids.

Audio Description

The Festival's six audio describers begin their preparations before the play officially opens. As stated above, they work from the same script used by the actors. As scripts change during the rehearsal process, the audio describers are informed of the changes. The on-site work begins during tech rehearsals. At that time, the describers take notes about the set and the costumes, which they will use as they write their show introductions. During dress rehearsals and preview performances, the describers actually sit in the booth and annotate their scripts with the on-stage activity. The true challenge of audio description is to provide as much description in as few words as possible. Ideally, the description does not speak over the actors' lines, though at times this is inevitable.

Because the Festival offers audio description on request, the six audio describers on staff must be available all season. The Access Coordinator uses availability and individual preference to assign a primary describer, as well as an understudy, to each of the eleven plays. The Festival's Access Coordinator also accumulates a list of performances for which description has been requested and distributes the list to the describers as early as possible in the pre-season. As an indication of just how much this service continues to grow, the 2013 season is only three months old as this is written, and there are already requests for audio description for ninety-seven performances. Officially, the Festival requests two weeks advance notice in order to describe a performance. However, the Box Office and House Management both know that we will do anything we can to accommodate a request, even if we receive the request on the day of the performance. Several times every season, visually impaired patrons come to the Box Office to purchase a ticket for that day or arrive at the theater with a ticket in hand and either do not know what audio description is or that OSF offers the service. Invariably, we have been able to provide description either by the main describer, the understudy, or sometimes by the Access Coordinator if no one else is available. There have even been times when the patron arrives just before the performance is scheduled to begin, the house manager explains the service to the patron, calls the describer, and the describer gets to the theater as soon as he or she can and describes the rest of the show. We know how much audio description enhances the experience for the patron, and our Box Office records show time and time again that once they experience OSF's commitment to provide this service, they will come back again and again to enjoy it. One patron has returned to the Festival for multiple audio described performances every year since we began offering the service, and another has been coming for fifteen years, now accompanied by her second guide dog.

All plays present challenges to audio describers, especially when there is a lot of choreography or there is little opportunity to speak between the lines. In the case of the 2012 productions of *Troilus and Cressida*, there were a relatively small number of actors playing a large number of parts. Normally when this happens, the actors make a concerted effort to change their voices for each character they play. This production of *Troilus and Cressida* was set in modern Iraq, and the Festival brought in several actors of Middle Eastern descent to perform in the play; when they changed their voices, however, their accents still sounded Middle Eastern. Even some of our sighted patrons had difficulty distinguishing the characters, and it was especially challenging for patrons with visual impairment. As the audio describer, I literally had to identify each of the many characters throughout the entire play, rather than just a few times, as I usually do. In our 2012 production of the Marx Brothers' musical comedy, *Animal Crackers*, there was a lot of choreography; the describer, Honey Marchetti, familiarized herself with the various dance styles used in the production and was actually able to use specific terms to describe the movement on stage. *Animal Crackers* was unique in that the actors playing the Marx Brothers characters in the play were actually encouraged by the director to ad lib whenever the mood hit them. As the run of the play progressed, the ad-libbing seemed to get crazier and crazier, to the point of occasionally bringing audience members on stage to participate in the insanity. The describer really had to be on her toes because no two performances were ever the same. By the end of the run, Marchetti had virtually abandoned her prepared script and was just doing her best to convey what was going on to her patrons. (Attached is a PDF file of two pages with audio described notes from OSF's 2013 production of *The Taming of the Shrew*, directed by David Ivers. These notes indicate where in the script the describer breaks in and what is said. See /media/899/amberg_note.pdf.)

ASL Interpreted Performances

American Sign Language interpreted performances of live theater in the United States have been declining as theaters must make difficult decisions about where to allocate their limited financial resources. Many theaters now offer open captioning, a text display of the exact words spoken in a performance, on a display board positioned so that everyone in a particular seating area can see it. As an alternative, however, and because of increased interest from the Deaf community, OSF has in the last few years expanded the number of sign interpreted performances. In 2013, the Festival will sign interpret ten performances. The plays to be interpreted are selected by the Access Coordinator, with input from the Deaf community and the sign interpreters. Deaf patrons attending interpreted performances and interpreters working for the Festival are given questionnaires that list the plays for the next season and ask which plays they would most like to see interpreted. The

results of those questionnaires are tabulated and strongly influence the choice of plays that are interpreted. Eventually, once the funds become available and the Deaf community indicates that it will support four interpreted weekends rather than the three we currently offer, the Festival will interpret all eleven of its plays.

Because theatrical sign interpretation is a specialized skill that most ASL interpreters are not trained to do, OSF cannot offer interpreted performances by request. There are virtually no interpreters in the immediate area who have the training that OSF's Deaf patrons have come to expect, so we hire interpreters from all over the country, bring them to Ashland for a week of rehearsal, and house them while they are here. Making Shakespeare's plays accessible can present special challenges. This is especially true for sign interpreted performances. Normally the sign interpreters translate any script they are interpreting from standard English into American Sign Language and then devise the signs that will best convey the meaning of the original script. With Shakespearean English, however, they must translate the text twice: from early modern English to modern English, and then into ASL.

A deaf actor acts as the sign master who coaches the ASL interpreters for each show. We generally use three interpreters per show because of the large number of characters that typically appear in our plays. The interpreters divide up the characters in the play so that they each have about the same number of characters to interpret. In most circumstances, each time the actor speaking on stage changes, so does the interpreter. So, if we are interpreting three plays with three interpreters per play plus a sign coach, we often have ten interpreters at the Festival at the same time. We group the interpreted performances over three weekends during the season, one each in the spring, summer, and fall, so that our out of town patrons have the opportunity to see more than one interpreted show while they are in Ashland. An example of how this works is our recently interpreted performance of *King Lear* (2013), directed by Bill Rauch in the Thomas Theatre. Three interpreters worked this show, dividing the characters as follows:

Interpreter 1: Lear, Edgar, Messenger, and Oswald (sometimes).

Interpreter 2: Edmund, Goneril, Kent, Burgundy, King of France, Regan (sometimes), Oswald (sometimes), and soldiers.

Interpreter 3: Fool, Cordelia, Cornwall, Albany, Regan (sometimes), Gloucester, soldiers.

As long as there were three or fewer characters in a scene (act I, scene 2 for example), the interpreters' job was relatively straightforward. As the character on stage is speaking the lines, the interpreter interprets what the character is saying. In a scene such as act 5, scene 3, the final

scene in the play, there are nine named characters, and the interpreters' job becomes not only interpreting the lines but also making sure the Deaf patrons know which character is speaking. They use several techniques to minimize the possibility for confusion. The most obvious is to change their facial expressions to match the emotions of the character speaking. Facial expression is a major component of American Sign Language, and speakers of ASL know when to watch for changes in facial expression to indicate a change of speakers. A second technique is the use of sign names. Before the show, the interpreters assign a sign name to each character that they can then use either to identify the character as he or she is speaking or when another character refers to him or her by name. We have added additional sign interpreted performances if the demand is great and, more important, if we have enough seats available in the area of the theater where the interpreters stand, and if the interpreters who are assigned to the show are available to return for an additional interpreted performance. This happens very rarely.

The average number of tickets in the special section set aside for these performances is about forty. This is a huge increase from five or six years ago, when we were lucky to sell ten tickets in the section. Reasons for this increase include a more concentrated use of e-mailing and social media by our marketing department to reach the Deaf community, both locally and across the country, and the lure of Howie Seago's presence in our acting company. Howie has been a tremendous ambassador, using his many connections in the national Deaf community to attract new Deaf patrons to our shows. We also offer a reduce ticket price for all seats in our sign interpreted sections, as well as a reduced price for our backstage tour if we have requests for a tour to be interpreted. One of our hearing actors, John Tufts, has now learned so much sign language that he conducts the backstage tour in ASL himself, although we still provide interpreters just in case he needs assistance. Tufts's initial interest in learning ASL came from working with Seago on stage, but he now enjoys the beauty of the language itself.

Contrary to what many people assume, American Sign Language is not a translation of American English into representational signs. Instead it is a separate language, with its own structure and syntax. Howie Seago "speaks" his lines using sign language, and, like Tufts, many of our hearing actors have also learned some ASL. The interpreters direct the attention of the Deaf patrons to Seago when he signs on stage, instead of interpreting his lines. They do, however, interpret all the other actors' lines, even if the actors are signing, not only because the interpreters are usually more proficient in ASL than the actors on stage, but also because the sight lines from the patrons to the actors are not always ideal. With both the actors and the interpreters signing, the patrons can decide who they primarily want to watch.

Open Captioning

The most recent addition to services provided by OSF Access Department has been open captioning. First introduced at OSF in 2007, the Festival is now recognized as a national leader in providing captioned performances to our hearing impaired patrons. Opera companies often provide supertitles that give brief summaries of dialogue. Instead, the Festival captions a word-by-word transcription of the entire script on a Light-Emitting Diode (LED) screen as the actors speak the lines. Special seating sections are created so that patrons requesting captioning can read the display board and watch the stage simultaneously. OSF currently has on its staff multiple experienced captioners. Like the audio describers, the captioners are assigned to specific shows and run the program when a captioned performance of that show is scheduled.

Preparing an open captioned script at OSF is a multi-step, time consuming process. Several years ago our IT Department wrote a program that the captioner uses to upload the actors' rehearsal script from the Final Draft software program used in the rehearsal hall to the computer used by the captioner. The program removes all stage directions and breaks the script into lines of twenty-six characters because the LED board that we use displays that maximum number of characters per line. That includes punctuation and spaces between words, as well as the actual dialogue. Once the script has been uploaded and broken into lines of twenty-six or fewer characters, the real work begins. The captioner is provided the same DVD of the production as the understudies are given and studies this, along with the script, to match the captioning on the display board as closely as possible with the cadence of the actors delivering their lines on stage. There are times during any stage production when no words are spoken, and the captioner must be sure there is nothing on the display board during those moments so that the patrons' attention will be directed to the stage and not the display board.

Following are a few lines from the recently captioned performance of *King Lear*. First is the script, as presented by the actors on the Thomspson stage, starting in February 2013.

Act 4, scene 5, original text:

LEAR: No, they cannot touch me for coining, I am the King himself.

EDGAR (aside): O thou side-piercing sight!

LEAR: Nature's above art in that respect. There's your press-money. That fellow handles his bow like a crow-keeper; draw me a clothier's year. Look, look, a mouse! Peace, peace, this piece of toasted cheese will do 't. O, well flown, bird! In the air — hewgh! Give the word.

EDGAR: Sweet marjoram.

LEAR: Pass.

GLOUCESTER: I know that voice.

LEAR: Ha! Goneril with a white beard? They flattered me like a dog, and told me I had white hairs in my beard ere the black ones were there. To say "ay" and "no" to every thing that I said "ay" and "no" to was no good divinity. When the rain came to wet me once, and the wind to make me chatter, when the thunder would not peace at my bidding, there I found 'em, there I smelt 'em out. They are not men o' their words: they told me I was every thing. 'Tis a lie. I am not ague-proof.

Here is the captioned script, broken into twenty-six character lines and "messed" by the captioner to parallel the way in which the actor speaks the lines. The blank lines in the middle of Lear's speech indicate times when the actor pauses. During pauses, the reader board goes blank to allow the patron's attention to move from the board onto the stage to watch what the actor is doing during the silence.

Captioned script:

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EDGAR: O thou
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That fellow handles his bow
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To say "ay" and "no" to every thing

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Once the script is ready, the captioner rehearses during live performances. The laptop is plugged into the Festival's network, and the captioner sits in the control booth and manually advances the prepared script as the actors are delivering their lines. Timing is very important here; the captioning should be in synch with the dialogue without giving away the lines before the actors actually speak them. This is particularly important in comedy. One of the first shows I captioned was *The Music Man*, and I inadvertently advanced the script a little too quickly and revealed a laugh line before

the actor delivered it. I heard about that from the stage manager after the show, and so now really try to avoid going too fast. As one can imagine, the slightest lapse of focus can throw off the script, so the captioner has to concentrate fully every second of the show.

Conclusion

As with any new service, it takes time to develop a group of patrons who come to the Festival specifically because we offer captioning. People with significant hearing loss have been advocating for captioning for many years, and more and more movie theaters and sports venues now offer it. This is not nearly as true with live theater, but OSF has been very fortunate to partner with the Oregon and Washington Captioning Advocacy Projects (ORCAP and WACAP), two groups in the Northwest that promote the use of captioning. Interestingly enough, this partnership developed from what could have been an adversarial relationship. When OSF first started captioning and was offering very few captioned performances, we were contacted by these groups, expressing their concern that our efforts to provide this accommodation were woefully inadequate. We knew how committed we were to captioning, but because we were doing it ourselves, we had a timeline that we thought was reasonable for an organization starting from scratch. We tried over and over via letters and emails to convince the lawyers representing ORCAP and WACAP that our intentions were legitimate and that in time we would provide a truly significant number of captioned performances. Only after members of their Boards came down to Ashland and met with us personally did they believe that everything we claimed in our letters was true. Now they actively distribute our lists of captioned performances to all their members, and each season we have more and more patrons from the Portland and Seattle areas come to the Festival for live captioned performances, when they would not have thought of coming before. I have every reason to believe that OSF will continue to offer not just open captioning, but ASL interpreted and audio described performances well into the future, and that it will adopt new assistance technologies as they become available.

Notes

1. Community based theater should be distinguished from community theater. The latter usually puts on amateur productions of well-loved plays. As co-founder and former Artistic Director of the Cornerstone Theater Company, Rauch and his team went to rural and urban communities not served by theater and created site specific works to speak to that community. This was sometimes done via adapted versions of Shakespeare, as well as new works created for that community. Details about their work may be found at the Cornerstone website, <http://cornerstonetheater.org/> [accessed 28 May 2013].

2. In Bill's second season he hired Howie Seago, a nationally known Deaf actor, to join the acting company. The first part of a five-part YouTube interview with Seago may be found at the link below. He discusses the beginning of his career and his skills as a Shakespearean actor. The link is currently available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BDEfNDRZsU0> [accessed on 20 May 2013].

Online Resources

Cornerstone Theater website. <http://cornerstonetheater.org/>.

Audio described notes from OSF's 2013 production of *The Taming of the Shrew*, directed by David Ivers. [/media/899/amberg_note.pdf](#).

References

Text and open captioning script for *King Lear*. 2013. Oregon Shakespeare Festival.