

Hello, my name's Tom Walker. Welcome to the latest in a series of podcasts I'm recording for DaDaFest, which is a disability arts organisation very much based in Liverpool, but which also works across the North West and even further afield. This year, DaDaFest is celebrating its 40th anniversary with a number of events, including an exhibition of pictures on March 19th. But how will DaDaFest make those pictures accessible for visually impaired people? Well, I recently attended a workshop at the Everyman Theatre in Liverpool for young Everyman writers and producers, where the process of audio describing the pictures got underway.

Helen: Okay, everybody, listen up. Thank you. Look this way. Thank you. So, we're going to set you the writing task now. Because we've got 11 boards, so an intro board and 10 image boards, obviously there's seven of you writers. I have done the maths. I think what we'd love for you to focus on is we're going to give you a board each with one of the images on, and I want you to focus on...

Tom: The young people are now writing away and working with producers on the images, and standing outside are two very important people. They're producers. Helen Webster is a producer for the Everyman and Playhouse, and Jennifer Vaudrey for DaDaFest. Helen, just tell me what you've got the young people doing.

Helen: So, at the moment, we've got our YEP Producers group and our YEP Writers group, who've come together for the first time, actually, to work on a collaborative project, which is really, really lovely. And the writers are working on creating the audio descriptions for the image boards that YEP Producers have spent the last few weeks choosing and creating, along with Gill, who's the curator, and Mike, who's the designer of the exhibition. So, yeah, there's lots of hard work going on at the moment. I can see the writers scribbling down things on paper or writing on their phones, and I can hear the producers having a very in-depth conversation about which of the designs they like more of the boards that they've got.

Participant 1: You'd have to keep them coming to that. Just using the one at the end there.

Participant 2: OK.

Participant 1: Show these. Show them the... Oh, are those the only options for these? Yeah, because they're three.

Participant 2: Is that the same right?

Participant 1: No, they're two different. No, I mean, I'll save that.

Tom: Once the writing is complete, what will happen then?

Helen: So, in a couple of weeks' time, we will join up the producers again, but this time with the YEP technicians, and what they will do is they will record the audio descriptions that the YEP writers have created tonight, and they will record them so that we've got the files of them, and then we'll pass them over to DaDa, and then using the QR codes that are on the image boards for the exhibition, someone will be able to scan that and hear the audio description that the young people have recorded.

Tom: For people who don't know much about this kind of thing, Jennifer, why is it important to make images very accessible?

Jennifer: It's very important, basically, for the ethos of the organisation, just to reflect that with the exhibition. So, it's important that we're accessible for all, and that all of our audiences and our artists that we work with feel that they are involved in this project, and it's going back 40 years, so that's quite important as well, to reflect that, and just to make sure we've got audio description there, so anyone who's visually impaired or blind, they'll be able to understand and be able to visualise what's on the images themselves and get a good feel for it, so that's really important. And also, we're going to have a big launch for this exhibition. I'm going to just advertise that right now, on the 19th of March, at the Everyman itself in the theatre bar. So, it's been really nice having the YEP producers involved in planning that, and getting them thinking about our audience, and having BSL, use of that, captions audio description.

Zoe: So, just to say hello and welcome, and apologies I can't be there, but I hope this will help. My name is Zoe Partington, I'm the CEO of DaDa...

Tom: The young people heard or watched a film presented by Zoe Partington, who's the chief exec of DaDaFest, explaining about audio description. What was Zoe's main point?

Jennifer: Zoe's main point was to make it, give it context, and also to make it fun and passionate for themselves to write about that, in terms of writing about it, but also for the audience who are going to be listening to the audio description. Zoe had some really good points, and you don't want to make it really factual and quite academic, you want to make it feel like they're looking at the photo, like make it come to life. That's quite important as

well, so she had some really good tips and good points in there, and I think it'll be

helpful to the YEP team for when they're looking at theatre as well, to use that and have that in mind.

Tom: What are the young people getting out of this, Helen?

Helen: So, well, loads, in a word, loads. But we're here, which, what we do, Young Everyman Playhouse, YEP, is we're training the next generation of creative talent, and what's really important to us is that we're making sure we're keeping our finger on the pulse of all of the things that they need to go on and be amazing theatre makers in what, or just generally creatives, they don't actually have to work in theatre after this, but we have embedded accessibility into everything that we do, and we're always trying to make it better. There's always things that we can do better, but some of the things they'll have come across already, some of them, you know, there's a diverse range of experiences within that group as well. Some of them may identify themselves that way, some of them may know other people and have a broad knowledge of it, others may, this may be the first time that they're coming across accessibility. So this is offering them all of those tools that they can take forward into their future careers to make sure that whatever they make is accessible, and therefore, hopefully that means we're creating generations of people that embed it naturally without it being what it has been in the past of that add-on sort of, you know, and basically live in that Social Model of Disability for future years.

Tom: Jennifer, Helen's made a very interesting point there, hasn't she, that you integrate accessibility from the start. What happens if you don't do that?

Jennifer: Well, if you don't do that, then I think it's very obvious to the audience and it's very obvious to the artists that we work with. I think it's important to have that from the start, as I said, about making it accessible for all, and as Helen said, you know, looking at the Social Model of it. So it's just really important that it's... And also working with, you know, Deaf and disabled and neurodivergent artists and getting their opinion on that and making sure they're part of the process from the beginning. So it is hopefully from now on we're looking to step further of having it always integrated and not just an afterthought.

Tom: So your message to other organisations is don't try and retrofit accessibility?

Jennifer: Exactly, yes. And I think it's actually really important this project would be useful for other organisations to look at and to build upon their own festivals and events and how they go forward in planning that as well. It's an interesting model for them to use.

Tom: What's in it for the everyman, Helen?

Helen: A wealth of experience that may, you know, if you want something done, go to the experts, right? So having our young people working with DaDa, they'll probably get sick of the sound of my voice every week. So it's really nice to have other artists in that room, talking to them, working with them, also showing them something, you know, traditionally as part of YEP producers, we wouldn't necessarily do an exhibition. So actually this year's group have got this whole new knowledge of curation and, you know, choosing art and why we choose it. They've also then obviously got the experience of DaDa, of Deaf and disabled art. And so for us, also, I think more and more these days for very many, you know, very many reasons, we have to collaborate, we have to work in partnership with each other, especially in the cultural sector. You know, it's a difficult world out there. So actually the more that we can have these partnership projects and share our resources, the better we'll do, in my opinion.

Tom: Well, when we walked outside, everybody went a bit quiet, but they're starting to talk again now, which I think means you better get back in there to see what they're up to. So Helen and Jennifer, thank you very much indeed. Let's get back in there.

Helen & Jennifer: Thank you.

Dean: So we're just going to talk to Martha about the images she's working on at the moment. So what do you think at first glance, like what is your first initial thing when you look at the image?

Martha: It's really interesting. It conjures up a lot of thought in terms of the audio descriptions that I've written. I have written that Gabby is singing at an open mic night. She has an animated expression and there's a sense of catharsis and release in her expression. She wears a purple ribbed jumper and dangly black earrings. The pattern of the earrings appears as a shadow on her neck where the stage lighting hits her and the lighting is warm with pink undertones.

Dean: Well, that's really nice actually, because when we were picking the image ourselves, obviously when you see it, it's a striking image and it emotes a lot of emotion. And the colours in the image as well can either resemble rage or love because it's a red pure colour. What do you think as well about the image?

Rania: I thought it was quite important that we had a range of people. We need to make sure we've represented the people who are benefiting from the charity and taking part in what they're doing. And we did end up with loads of red...

Tom: Rania Sandhu and Dean Horrocks are two of the young producers working with the writers. Before we talk about what you're going to be doing and what you have been doing, just tell me how you got involved in the project.

Rania: Yeah, so I got an email from my university about the YEP producers programme and the different things that they offer because I'm an English lit student, so it's perfect for my degree. And I also spoke about it with my friend who did the writer's showcase last year with the YEP writers and weighed up which would suit me best and what would

be the most educational for me. So I applied, got through the interview process and got a space.

Tom: And what about you Dean?

Dean: So I come across the YEP application online, on social media actually. And I've had friends that have done it in the past, so it was really inspiring to see them do it. I was really intrigued to get involved. I've also applied for the other things they've had on and unfortunately not got on, but I applied for the producers and they accepted me, so brilliant.

Tom: What are your ultimate ambitions? Firstly you then Dean.

Dean: Well I would love to be an actor, that's first and foremost what I want to do. But working in the creative industry is something that I always like to be involved in. So no matter what I'm doing, whether it's acting, performing, producing or directing, I'm pleased to be involved in it.

Tom: And what about you Rania?

Rania: I am not entirely sure. I came into this programme to see if, I thought it was a useful way to see if producing suits me and suits what I like. I'm the same as Dean, I want to work in the creative industry in some capacity. I want to focus mainly on accessibility and things like that because it's an important thing to me and being able to make the arts something that everyone can enjoy and everyone can experience.

Tom: Did you know about audio description before you heard about this project this evening?

Rania: I knew about audio description but I didn't know so many of the details. I think I looked at it as a much more simple thing than it is. I looked at it as more just describing the image rather than explaining context of things.

Tom: What about you Dean?

Dean: I completely agree. I was totally unaware of the amount of work that goes into making it accessible. Do you know what I mean? The sort of things we went through I was completely unaware of so it was insightful to understand that and become more aware for someone who wants to work in the creative industry and make it more accessible. It's important to know these things.

Tom: What have you learnt so far?

Dean: The description side of it. Obviously for me, I'm not blind or Deaf so it won't affect me but being able to describe an image that is going to effectively be able to be described to someone who obviously can't see it. So something that's effective in that respect.

Tom: What about you Rania? What have you learnt? How would you go about audio describing a picture now?

Rania: I think it's definitely shown me that it needs to be a wider focus as well as the specific details and when we spoke about the idea of someone maybe not being interested in one photo but being more interested in the other, the idea of starting with the big context and telling them what it is so that they can then decide do I take more interest and listen to the rest of this or do I go and move on to something that interests me more.

Tom: You mentioned accessibility earlier Rania. Why is that so important?

Rania: I think it's really important because everyone deserves to have a way to express themselves and also take in the art that other people have made because it's a different form of allowing people to take other people's experiences and see how they've been living and I think I've had periods of time in my life where I've faced accessibility issues. I used to be in a wheelchair, I used to be a wheelchair user and I lived in London and a lot of the time it would say it was accessible but I couldn't even get through the front step

and it was very dehumanising to feel like I wasn't welcomed in a space where I knew I should be welcomed.

Tom: And from your point of view Dean, I imagine that inclusion is something that is very much at the forefront of your mind.

Dean: Yeah, totally. I think it's important in all aspects in theatre to be inclusive and to include people who might be of a minority who need to have that support. It's important to make sure that there's a place for them to come and that everybody's involved.

Tom: From a social justice point of view, is inclusion something that you think is just absolutely an integral part of creating a just society?

Dean: Of course, yeah. Everybody deserves to feel involved and everybody deserves to feel included. Myself, as a gay man, I know what it feels like to be discriminated and to be put on the sideline and not seen, do you know what I mean? So it's important that people have voices and people are heard and people are shown.

Tom: Tell me what that discrimination from your point of view feels like.

Dean: I mean, personally, obviously it's not a good feeling. You want to feel normal, you want to feel accepted in a world. So that's kind of why I think it's important, because I know what it's like to feel like that. So acceptance and normality, making it normal. We're all people and we all deserve to be heard and we all deserve to have a voice.

Tom: And you've experienced discrimination, you were saying, haven't you?

Rania: Yeah. So I've had different experiences with disability, like different extremities of it. So I've had periods where I was very visibly disabled and it was something that people could catch on to without me giving them any information. And I used to feel very vulnerable at those points. And I didn't feel like that being expressed outwardly was something I was in control of. It was just something that I had to do to get by day to day. And also, I think relates a lot. I'm a person of colour, I'm a brown woman, and I don't

really get to see that many people like me in theatre, which when I was younger was quite upsetting because I loved the idea of singing and dancing and acting and making things and expressing myself, and not being able to see that all the time can put you off. But I think I'm lucky that it motivated me to make myself the next person for someone else to see.

Dean: Definitely. Well, that's it. If you can't see representation out there, then you've got to be that representation. So little people like who are growing up in this world can see that too.

Tom: And there's the old saying, if you can't see it, you can't be it.

Dean: That's it. If you make it believable and put it out into the world, it's going to become the norm. And that's what we want.

Rania: Yeah. And I think if you can't see people like you, you don't realise that that is something attainable and something you can do. It's not this huge fairy tale dream of yours to be in that space. You are welcomed in that space.

Tom: Final question. How well is the session going so far?

Dean: I think the session's going really well. I think there's a lot of passion, there's a lot of energy, and there's a lot of ideas. So what we need to do moving forward will be to narrow down our ideas and hone in on what it is we are trying to get across and make sure it's clear.

Tom: And what are the next steps?

Dean: So it will be looking over our designs that we've curated, checking that they work, checking that they look presentable, and editing any changes that we need to do for the next step so that they can be finalised.

Tom: And will you be doing the recording?

Rania: So the writers will be writing down their scripts for the audio description, and then they will be given to us. We'll be editing them and seeing how well they fit. And we'll delegate between the group who is going to record what.

Tom: Have you decided who's got the best voice to do the recording yet?

Rania: Not yet.

Dean: We haven't decided yet, but we have said there's a few of us that want to do the recordings ourselves. So that's something that we'd like to be involved in as well.

Tom: Well, from what I've seen and heard so far, you two will both be good at the recording. You both have great voices. So thank you very much.

Rania: Thank you so much.

Tom: Thank you. Better get back in there.

Denise: I'm just going to do a quick overview of my job, which is coordinating access for...

Tom: We've just stepped outside the room where the young people are busy writing away. And with me is Denise Kennedy, who's the access and support coordinator for DaDaFest. Denise, just very briefly, tell me what that actually involves.

Denise: Well, I suppose I have responsibility for making sure that every event and every person, participant, artist, staff member have the access support that is required. And that can go from making sure they've got the right chair in the office to making sure that

any Deaf or blind or neurodivergent audience have the ability to access any production or exhibition or theatre piece.

Tom: And what the young people are doing this evening falls very much within your remit to a certain extent, because it's about accessibility.

Denise: It is indeed. Obviously, we've got a few exhibitions happening as part of the festival. And in order for visually impaired people to access those, there is a requirement for some cleverly crafted descriptions to give a sense of images and context and people involved within the exhibitions. And so we're really happy and excited that the Young Everyman Producers and Writers are working on that at the moment for the Dive Into the Archive exhibition.

Tom: There will be people listening to this who might not have that much experience of blind and partially sighted people. So how do you go about, in particular, making pictures accessible?

Denise: Right. Well, it's making sure that the context, the content is... I think as a seeing person, we walk through life and we either miss a lot of things and we filter out a lot of things visually. So, of course, when you're considering people who don't see and aren't making those decisions subconsciously, we need to focus in on what's in front of us far more precisely and to be able to describe the world of that image. And that can be metaphorical. That can be quite standard, bog standard, so to speak, like this person doing that. But maybe creating a world, a picture, an image, a feeling, an emotion, all those different things that can come across. Someone's laughing and is it... are they just laughing cruelly or joyfully or... It's the context. It's the difference. It's what's coming across. What's the story within that image?

Tom: When I was asked about this, I'm visually impaired myself, I was talking about granular detail. Is that important or do I need too much information generally?

Denise: Well, it all depends on the person. I think it's a very bespoke thing, access and access requirements. You may need granular. Someone else might just might need a feeling or an emotion and all in between. It's a spectrum, as we know, life in general. So,

yes, I think granular is important. You want to know that there's a man in a suit walking a dog, you know, but then it's around the edges. What's around the edges of that?

Tom: Are my requirements maybe more a bloke thing, possibly?

Denise: Well, I wouldn't like to comment on that, obviously, but it's just your personality. It's what you want to hear.

Tom: How will people access the audio description when they come to the exhibition?

Denise: OK, so obviously there will be staff and support around the exhibition, but we'll have QR codes in which people can key in to hear those audio descriptions as they travel around the exhibition.

Tom: So they'll need to bring their smartphones with them?

Denise: Yes, that's true. Now you're delving into nearly delving into an area that that's not my expertise, but yes, they will need to bring their smartphone. They may find it helpful to either ask for someone to support them around or bring someone that... I mean, a lot of people usually come along with somebody. So it's about making sure that whether they turn up on their own or with somebody, the exhibition is accessible.

Tom: I guess one of the challenges might be knowing where the QR code is. So I suppose if you've got people there...

Denise: Absolutely. And of course, we will be making sure that nobody's abandoned or have to feel their way for themselves. But also there will be information on the website, giving that information of where they can find...

Tom: That's great. Well, Denise, thank you very much indeed. It's been a very lively, energetic evening so far, hasn't it?

Denise: Yes, absolutely. So really looking forward to seeing what the young people come up with.

Tom: The producers and writers seem quite engaged, don't they, from what we're seeing?

Denise: Yeah, they do. I've been asked some tricky questions, which is always a good sign.

Tom: I think everybody should ask you tricky questions, Denise.

Denise: Yeah, I look forward to it.

Gill: Well, what we've been doing is looking at images from the DaDa Archive and selecting from many, many images, selecting those down to a manageable number to make...

Elsie: It's been an interesting experience because there's definitely been more decisions than we realised when it actually comes down to it. Because you're not just looking at an image and being like, oh, does that look pretty? Is it conveying what you wanted it to convey? But also, is it distracting? Is it clear? Is it visible? I don't know. Lots of different factors that you wouldn't think of originally, I don't think.

Tom: What about you, Lottie?

Lottie: Yeah, we wanted to make sure as well that it was very inclusive, that we had broad representation, obviously because DaDa works with so many people with lots of different disabilities, neurodiversities. So we wanted to make sure anyone who is Deaf, disabled or neurodiverse could come to the exhibition and feel represented in some way.

Tom: Normally, when I introduce people, I kind of let them speak for about 10 seconds, then I introduce them. But it was such a lovely conversation that I just wanted you to carry on. Because this is Gill Crawshaw, who is a curator and going to be working with DaDaFest. You've been with Lottie and Elsie as well, haven't you? Just tell me a little bit about yourself, if you would, Gill, for people who don't know you.

Gill: Yeah, sure. Yes. So I'm a curator. That's something I've been doing for about the last 10 years. I'm a disabled person. I've got an interest and a history in disability activism way in the past. That's quite a long time ago, I have to say. And so in the projects that I do and the exhibitions that I curate, I try and bring a bit of that experience of being an activist in the disabled people's movement into those projects and try and organise exhibitions and projects that have something to say about disabled people's lives.

Tom: Before we talk about those, could you tell me just a little bit, and probably fairly briefly about your activism? I imagine Lottie and Elsie don't know about your history.

Gill: Do you really want all this?

Tom: Maybe not all of it. Just some of it, maybe.

Gill: I guess, you know, mostly in the 80s and the 90s I was involved in a network of disabled people called the Disabled People's Direct Action Network. And we were a group who took direct action, who went out on the streets and protested around lack of access for better rights, for equal access for disabled people. We had a particular focus around accessible public transport back in the 90s. This was before there was legislation, before the Disability Discrimination Act, that became the Equality Act, had come in. So, you know, transport's difficult now, as we were talking about earlier, but then back in the 90s it was nigh on impossible for disabled people to get on public transport. So that was one of the focuses of DAN, the Disabled People's Direct Action Network's campaigns. And we used to go out into the streets and blockade roads and handcuff ourselves to buses to show and to bring that issue to public attention and try and put a bit of pressure on the government and on transport companies.

Tom: Now Lottie and Elsie are quite young, but I remember the Direct Action Network very well and had a lot of admiration for the things that you did because you didn't just campaign for things, you actually put your own liberty at stake as well.

Gill: Well sure, I guess that was, you know, that was part often of direct action is doing something where, you know, it can sometimes call non-violent civil disobedience, so yeah, you're sort of breaking the law and that means that you might get arrested for that. It didn't happen that often with us, I have to say. It did happen sometimes, didn't happen that often, but yeah, that was part of it. But I guess a lot of people there thought, you know, yeah, go ahead, arrest me, I've nothing to lose, you know. I'm discriminated against in everything, I live in a residential home, I can't get a job, yeah, arrest me, why not, I've nothing to lose.

Tom: Well I hope you don't mind me saying I've got a lot of admiration for what you and your companions did back in the 80s and the 90s, I mean you changed things enormously.

Gill: I think it was part of the picture, yeah, part of the picture around change, yeah. But honestly Tom, don't make this all about me.

Tom: Well I just thought it was good to get some context, you know, especially for the young people to understand who you are and what your history is. But moving forward then, if we can, sort of 30 years and looking at what the young people are doing tonight, how's this session gone?

Gil: Oh, this session's gone amazingly. I've just said, you know, that the people have just worked so hard, have come with really great ideas about what this should look like and today, I mean today's session's bringing in a group of writers as well from this Young Everyman programme and people are just cracking on and getting on with it and really, I think, you know, thinking about access in a very practical way but as well people are bringing their own knowledge around that to the table and to the writing that they're doing and to the selecting of the images.

Tom: Why is it important that pictures are made accessible? Because for me as a visually impaired person, I tend to kind of just accept my exclusion from that element of art, if you like, but should I?

Gill: No, you shouldn't. You just said it yourself. That's why it's important, isn't it? So that people aren't excluded, so that you can have an experience of those images that otherwise, you know, you would just be excluded from them. It's really important that everybody should be able to access those images.

Tom: And do you think that can be done practically then? So that, you know, do you think you might be able to persuade me, somebody who's never been in an art gallery or very rarely at least, can you get me in there?

Gill: Yeah, art galleries are for everybody, art's for everybody, yeah, you should definitely come along, yeah.

Tom: You've seen the writing and seen the production that's going on tonight. Are you confident then that these pictures are going to be very well audio described?

Gill: Honestly, I am. Are you? How do you feel about it, Tom?

Tom: Well, I've heard the... Well, I've been spending a lot of time talking to you and some of the young people and I'm sure from what they've been saying, I've got every confidence that this exhibition is going to be absolutely brilliant from an audio description point of view.

Gill: I think it is, though. I just heard somebody reading out as a sort of test to one of the other people, read out a bit that he drafted so far. I've seen little bits of the writing and yeah, it's really great, yeah, yeah. I think people are really not just thinking about, okay, what is this image of, they're covering that, of course, but they're thinking about the mood and the emotions behind it as well.

Tom: Well, I spoke to Rania and Dean and they were working with Martha and I heard some of her writing and it was extraordinarily good.

Gill: Exactly, exactly. You said it. Tom, I do think we might have to wrap up.

Tom: Are we being told to wrap up?

Staff: It's seven o'clock, I've got to stop you.

Tom: Can I just ask one final question? We always put one final question, if that's all right. We've got one minute.

Gill: Is it for me?

Tom: It's for you, yeah.

Gill: For somebody else? Yeah.

Tom: How optimistic are you for the future of accessibility in the arts?

Gill: Oh, yeah, really, really optimistic. I think our understanding of what access is has broadened so much in recent years and I think as younger people get involved then that understanding gets wider and wider and I think that's really, really good. We're not just thinking as maybe we were in the past a few decades ago about access to buildings and access to information. It's about much more than that now, as it should be.

Tom: This building closes at seven o'clock. Down to me, we're late. But thank you everybody who's taken part in this evening's recordings. You've all been great. There's been loads of energy from my point of view. So when this gets published, make sure you listen and share. Thank you.

All: Thank you.

Tom: Thanks to everyone at the Everyman who took part in the workshop and who got involved with the recording of this podcast. To find out more about DaDaFest's anniversary celebrations, all you need to do is go to their website at dadafest.co.uk. That's d-a-d-a-f-e-s-t.co.uk.