The Routledge Handbook of Audio Description

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Opera and dance audio description

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Opera and dance audio description

Joel Snyder and Esther Geiger

1. Introduction

A great deal of guidance regarding audio description for opera is related to best practices for the development of audio description for theatre. The same best practices apply to audio description for dance, which the authors integrate with the use of the Laban/Bartenieff Movement System (LBMS) (Laban, 1950) as a framework for observing dance and crafting dance description (Chalmers, 2009). What follows is a collection of best practices as developed over several decades of practical experience with description for opera and dance as well as other performing arts description techniques used in the United States.

2. Opera

2.1 Critical issues

2.1.1 Directorial intent

For most performing arts events the describer should allow listeners to participate in the “willing suspension of disbelief” by describing in terms of the intent of the director rather than the theatrical experience (unless noticing the experience is a part of the intent). In other words, he/she should avoid stage directions – stage right, house right and downstage – as well as words like “enters” and “exits”. Also, theatrical references or jargon, especially names for technical equipment and devices, which would draw listeners’ attention away from their involvement in the presentation (“break the fourth wall”) and may introduce confusing, unknown terms, should be avoided. The exception to this “maintain the illusion” caution would be when the style of the production is presentational, calling attention to its theatricality. Because the production makes the audience aware that it is “watching a play”, it is appropriate for the describer to do so as well.

2.1.2 Preparation

As with any art form, an understanding of a particular genre can be helpful, particularly with respect to overall flow and styles or traditions. When preparing to audio describe an opera,
preparation and research are particularly critical. With opera, there are special reasons to spend time becoming familiar with the production’s score and libretto. Knowing the score will help the describer know in advance when there may be available passages for insertion of description or the reading of surtitles. Also, the insertion of description into short passages of instrumental music – sometimes only a couple of measures – could require that the describer “count beats” and prepare a description that does not overflow into the singing and the reader’s translation.

Most opera productions have relatively few technical or dress rehearsals and a limited number of performances. Thus, describers may have few opportunities to preview the work before the described performance. To augment the few rehearsals and performances available for previewing, the audio describer should look for every opportunity to become familiar with the opera and the timing critical to preparing description: read the libretto, listen/read the score, videoview, that is watch a video of another production of the same opera. Keep in mind, however, that the describer’s obligation is to convey the images involved in the particular production being presented; take care to focus on the production being described. As with other genres, it may be possible to work with a production company to increase familiarity of costumes, set pieces and even directorial elements. The company may have access or education staff who can assist. Indeed, it may be possible to attend a “sitzprobe” (a seated rehearsal which brings together singers with the orchestra); adjustments to the score for the particular production will be evident at this rehearsal and will inform the describer regarding time frames available for description.

2.1.3 Pre-show and intermission notes

As with spoken drama, pre-show notes provide an opportunity to provide description and information available to sighted patrons in a more relaxed time frame. For opera, the plot synopsis from the printed programme is important – almost without exception, this information is available to all patrons. The reading of a plot synopsis, however, can involve a substantial amount of time: if possible, it is advisable to communicate this information to consumers so that every effort is made to prepare the listener well before the start of the opera. Keep in mind – it is not the responsibility of the describer to provide information that is not available to the sighted audience. The purpose of pre-show notes is to prepare the patron by including descriptions that the describer will not have time to provide during a performance. In addition to the credits on the playbill, the pre-show notes cover descriptions of the sets, with the location of doorways or means of egress, levels, placement of furniture and so on; the physical characteristics of the characters, the roles they play, their costumes, any gestures or mannerisms they use repeatedly; dance movement; recurring staging techniques and any props that are significant. All these descriptions should be complete and detailed, tightly organised and not exceed 10–15 minutes. Most describers prepare scripted pre-show notes to be sure that they’re covering everything in a coherent, organised and timely manner. Productions with intermissions provide a second opportunity to provide additional information.

Pre-show notes should include the pronunciation of all character names or other possibly unfamiliar words and names that appear in the text or the programme (e.g., composer and conductor names). An excellent model for pre-show notes is the format developed for Metropolitan Opera radio broadcasts. Pioneered by Milton Cross in the 1940s, these introductions to each act of an opera are first-rate examples of an important element of opera description – before there was opera description. In this sense, it is clear that descriptive elements provided to opera lovers before or during a performance (e.g., scenic or costume description,
background information as provided in a printed programme, etc.) can enhance the experience for all. The pre-show notes provide an opportunity to define any terminology that might be used in the performance. In a period piece, terms of clothing or architecture might be explained. Unusual props can be defined (e.g., an ornate dagger, a decorative furnishing, etc.). The remaining time before the curtain can be filled with the director’s notes, articles about the composer, librettist/playwright, performers’ biographies, the appearance of the audience and the theatre and so on.

Keep in mind that listeners are trying to absorb and remember a great deal of verbal information. Describe settings and costumes in the order they appear. As much as possible, describe each setting in the same order (left to right and top to bottom, for example). When many of the characters wear costumes that are variations of the same style, it is helpful to establish the basic style of the male and female costumes (“most of the men wear three-piece suits, white shirts and string ties while the women’s dresses are high-necked, long-sleeved and have straight skirts to the floor”) and then describe the specifics for each costume.

For most operas or presentations with a complex plot and/or a confusing set of characters, there may be a synopsis in the playbill. Just as this information is helpful to sighted audience members, sharing this information with listeners during pre-show notes may aid their appreciation of the performance and the description. If it is important to the plot or content, try to repeat some information during the description for those who did not hear the pre-show notes.

If there is a delay in the start of the performance or during a scene change or an emergency in the audience, describe what the sighted audience can see – a large group has just arrived and is being seated, the curtain is caught on a piece of scenery, and so on. If it is not apparent why there is a delay, it is fine to say so and that reassures listeners that the describer is still there. Indeed, often description consumers will arrive before pre-show notes begin; having recorded music playing through the system reassures consumers that the system is working.

As discussed with respect to pre-show notes, it is safe to assume that some of the listeners will not hear the full intermission notes; repeat the essential information during the second act whenever possible. If the new information for the second act is very brief, listeners may appreciate its inclusion at the end of the pre-show notes or while the house lights are dimming for the second act so they do not have to shorten their intermission activities to return for the second set of notes.

In productions with intermissions and a great deal of information to cover in pre-show notes, consider limiting the pre-show notes to overall production information (credits, etc.) and the first act’s details (settings, costumes, characters, etc.). Then, return during the final minutes of intermission with notes to describe the second act’s details, important reminders from the pre-show notes and, if time allows, share additional information from the playbill. At the end of the pre-show notes and at the end of the first act, it might be helpful to tell listeners what you will share with them during intermission. Listeners may decide whether they want to return in time to hear that information.

2.1.4 Respect the music

Generally, most opera attendees come to the opera to hear the music, especially the singing and, secondarily, experience the opera’s visual spectacle. It is critical then that the describer respect arias and strive to limit description to orchestral passages. The surtitle, of course, still
has to convey the text. Some organisations utilise a pair of describers to cover a performance. For instance, the first describer describes the performance while the second describer prepares and sometime delivers (recorded or live) the pre-show and intermission notes (as applicable) and serves as backup describer. For opera, it may be helpful to have a second describer/voicer voice any surtitles.

### 2.1.5 Localising opera ADs

Typically, audio description is offered at one to three performances throughout the run of an extended series of performances, often one evening performance and one matinee. This, of course, limits audio description consumers in their flexibility to attend performing arts events on their own schedule. Some organisations ask for advance notice of two weeks or more in order to provide description as a special request. In an effort to put the description consumer on a par with any other performing arts patron, certain producers will “cast” a describer who can attend selected rehearsals, develop a description script and be available at every performance (similar to an understudy). If no one desires the service, the describer is free to go.

For touring productions, experiments have been made with scripts that have been produced in one locale that can be shared with describers in another city. The American Council of the Blind’s Audio Description Project is in discussion with Opera America and The Broadway League regarding the establishment of an effort to develop AD scripts for touring opera and theatre. These scripts could be developed during the rehearsal process and would accompany the tour for voicing by local audio describers.

Increasingly, certain productions have recorded description tracks keyed to lighting cues and accessed via a PDA (Personal Digital Assistant) attached to the seatback. The descriptions (as well as captions and simultaneous translation) are available at any performance.

### 2.2 Practice

#### 2.2.1 To script or not to script

Some performing arts description producers will have a describer preview a performance (as production schedules allow) enough times to allow for the development of a description script. Others depend on one or two previews where notes are made and the describer provides description in a more extemporaneous manner. If time and schedules allow, the development of a script allows for the careful consideration of the various fundamentals of description outlined earlier. The describer using a script does not, of course, read the script without looking at the live performance; he/she must know the script well enough to use the script as a prompt and be free to describe extemporaneously when changes warrant departing from the scripted material.

#### 2.2.2 Equipment

With the exception of recorded description noted earlier, audio description is delivered wirelessly via microphones (headset or steno-mask style), transmitters and receivers with earpieces used by the audio description consumer. Generally, the transmissions are accomplished via infra-red (line-of-sight) or FM radio systems. FM systems can be portable and are often shared by multiple theatres.
2.2.3 Sound effects

The describer should be mindful of any sound effects in the timing of descriptions; for instance, “he turns away from her and she pulls out a revolver [BANG]”; “He falls over a desk [CLATTER]”. Description involves the weaving of its material within the structure of the event or images. This is an example of a practice that is critical to description for media as well and involves careful consideration on the part of the describer, the voicer and the audio editor. Usually a sound effect, or the event leading up to it, is described just before it happens: “the burglar drops his sack [THUD]”. At times, the description can be as effective after the action. “Waving their arms they run towards the platform. . . [Chuff chuff . . . the sound of a train pulling away]”; “the train is pulling out of the station”. In a live setting, it may be warranted to alert AD users to upcoming sound effects as they could affect service animals accompanying a patron (although service animals, generally, are well-trained and not easily distracted).

2.2.4 Identification of characters on stage

The describer should identify characters as they have been identified in the production. Introduce them only after they have been introduced in the dialogue. Consistently identify people/characters by name. Use a character’s name only when sighted audience members know the name. When an unknown character appears, refer to the person by a physical characteristic used in his/her initial description until his/her name is revealed. Once everyone knows the character’s proper name, tie the name to the physical description at the first opportunity (“John, the redheaded man”) and afterwards use only the character’s name. Be certain to describe entrances and departures – who and where – especially when there’s nothing audible to indicate someone has joined or left the scene. It may be helpful to create a list of the established names for each character for reference during the description. A list of commonly paired couples may also be useful in plays with difficult character names. Some AD consumers have suggested that once the material has identified a character, the describer could match the character’s name with the actor’s voice by mentioning the character’s name just before s/he speaks. Although the describer usually doesn’t need to repeat the identification, this might be necessary after a character has been silent or absent for a long time or if several voices are similar, particularly when it is important to know exactly who is saying what at a specific point.

2.2.5 Timing and surprise effects

Theatrical surprises should, ideally, come at the same time for all audience members. If characters’ appearances or actions, hidden identities, costumes, sight gags, sound effects and so on happen as a surprise to sighted audience members, do not spoil the surprise for listeners by describing (and revealing) them in advance. For example, if a character is in disguise, he becomes “the man” rather than “John wears a disguise”. Use a neutral term “the figure in red” when characters are disguising their gender. If the action that accompanies a sound effect will result in a reaction from the audience, treat this as if describing a sight gag. Time the description to allow listeners to react at the same time as sighted audience members. Or if the sighted audience is aware of something happening that might “warn them” of the possibility of, say, a loud noise, be sure to describe that action. For instance, “Pat” loads a rifle, so we know that there’s a possibility he or she will fire it.

When an effect is repeated, try to describe it the first time in a way that allows a “short-hand” reference later. For example, in a play where characters vigorously smoke cigarettes to
underscore their tension, describe the first instance as, “Mary and John light cigarettes, inhale and exhale deeply”. On later occurrences, as listeners understand the pattern of their behaviour, simply say, “Smoking again”.

With experience, describers learn to gauge when laughter and applause have peaked and begun to die down. If possible, hold description until the audience begins to quiet. If not, speak loudly when describing over loud laughter, music or applause.

2.2.6 *Audio surtitles*

Opera, even when sung in English or any other mother tongue, requires that someone read the surtitles projected above the stage. As noted earlier, often two describers, a male and a female, are employed – one to read the surtitles, the other to describe. A splitter on an FM or infra-red transmitter that can accommodate two microphones is often helpful. The surtitle voicer need not identify the soloist who is singing but he/she should use subtle shifts in vocal tone to convey the character changes. Since the text on the screen can change quickly, the surtitle reader, steering the libretto through the performance, generally has “right of way”.

One solution to the overall problem of reading the copious amount of language represented by the surtitles is to abridge the text, leaving out all but the most essential dialogue. An advance copy of the surtitles is extremely helpful in this regard.

3. Dance

3.1 *Critical issues: basic information*

Many of the principles discussed in relation to opera (e.g., preparation, timing, respecting the music, etc.) apply to description for dance as well. Research on the choreographic pieces (and the oeuvre of the choreographers) will give the describer a fuller understanding of how to watch and “translate” the pieces. Video viewing and/or attending live rehearsals is essential in crafting a script. Respecting the music still applies, even though movement may be the “main” focus.

3.1.1 *Pre-show and intermission notes*

Live or recorded, these notes are helpful to orient audience members in terms of sets, costumes, titles, themes – especially if the programme includes several different choreographic works. Unlike with full-length operas – or plays – dance concerts are often comprised of multiple shorter works, sometimes by multiple choreographers. Programme notes read pre-show can offer some background on the works and their creators, prepare the audience for group versus solo performances and describe sets and costumes. Intermission notes likewise “set the stage” in the audience’s mind’s eye for a different set of works presented in the second half. Pre-show touch tours are extremely helpful. Sometimes, dance companies – or the group providing description – will offer movement workshops, giving patrons a chance to actually embody some of what they will “see” and perhaps experience some of the musical selections as well.

3.1.2 *To script or not to script*

In the opinion of the authors, a carefully crafted script is especially important for describing an event as complex and multi-layered as a dance performance, where there most often is no
narrative plot that carries through the show. In classical ballet, there is sometimes a story – and that can be summarised in pre-show notes, similar to providing a synopsis for an opera. But Modern, Contemporary and many other forms of dance have no narrative and must be described – and appreciated – for whatever other elements the particular work highlights, such as choreographic structure, theme and mood; spatial patterns; group and individual relationships; physical virtuosity and so on. Pre-performance descriptions of dancers, as well as individuals’ names or labels used during the performance, may depend on these other essential elements. For example, for a piece that’s “about” group spatial patterns and clusters of dancers gathering and scattering and where all are costumed identically, it may not be necessary to label individuals; the describer can focus on the unifying patterns in space. But for a piece where individual dancers are costumed uniquely, even playing “characters”, the particulars for each performer should be included. Note that, while the dance describer (and his or her audience) benefits from having a well-crafted script in hand, no two dance performances of the same work are ever the same. The describer must be prepared to “keep one eye on the script and two eyes on the performance” and adapt quickly as needed.

3.2 Practice

3.2.1 Describing dance

The authors’ techniques for creating dance description are rooted in the observation/analysis and language skills developed through the Laban/Bartenieff Movement System (LBMS) (Laban, 1950; Studd & Cox, 2019). Using LBMS fundamentals, trained describers observe, select and then succinctly and vividly use language to convey a sense of the movement, its meaning and the overall choreographic structure of a dance.

The Laban/Bartenieff Movement System (LBMS) provides an important method for enhancing audio description for movement performance. The seeds for this system were sown by Rudolph Laban (1879–1958) in 1950 and further developed, particularly in the US, by Irmgard Bartenieff (1900–1981) (Wahl, 2019; Bartenieff & Lewis, 2002). LBMS is a comprehensive system used in understanding multiple aspects of the patterns of human movement. LBMS offers description writers and live describers a valuable tool for observation, selection and description of important movement elements in live performance, video and film. It provides a systematic framework for analysing any kind of movement, by looking for major movement patterns (e.g., developmental sequence, thematic ideas, overall movement phrasing) and by organising observations around component categories including:

- body actions (what part moves where);
- body shape (changes in form and “body attitudes”);
- spatial patterns (how the mover relates to the environment);
- dynamics (expressive qualities).

The authors’ exploration of LBMS and dance was sparked when considering a broadcast of the audio described version of the 1977 film *Saturday Night Fever* (description created by the National Captioning Institute). A turning point in the story occurs during a dance contest, when the protagonist (played by John Travolta) discovers something about his own limitations – and unearned advantages – by watching the performances of the Black and Hispanic
couples that take place behind him and his partner. To a Movement Analyst, it is clear that
the stylistic differences between the performances served as an important device to convey
character and further the plot. But what was focused on in the description, admittedly (and
unfortunately), was a labelling of the moves the dancers were making; there was not as much
difference in the descriptions of the couples as could be discerned by watching them move.
These described passages and transcripts of the audio description are listed here: the repeated
language between the two segments is in bold. Links to the videos of these passages are
available on YouTube (www.youtube.com/watch?v=C25pxVNmy8E and www.youtube.com/
watch?v=fCo3KesPM_w). The performance of the Travolta couple’s routine is described as
follows:

Stephanie touches the wide lapel of Tony’s white suit as they gaze at each other. He dips
her back slowly, pauses, then pulls her up. They extend arms and circle around each
other. Stepping to the beat, they glide around the dance floor.

[PAUSE FOR MUSIC – 00:19]

They join hands and twirl, hands overhead, several times and then pull apart and swivel their hips.

The performance of the Hispanic couple is described as follows:

Smiling broadly, they join hands and swing apart several times. The man twirls the
woman then dips her back.

The couple spins apart; they throw their heads back, shake their shoulders then jump
forward. Facing opposite directions, they stand side-by-side and swivel their hips.

(Tony takes a sip of his drink, then pauses)

The dancers join hands and circle the floor, separate, the woman twirling, then move
together. The man holds the woman as she leans back and kicks her leg high.

You can see and hear how different the two sequences are, but you’ll hear very similar words
and phrases. This was a missed opportunity – how could the description convey a more com-
plete and a more vivid understanding of the movement sequences? Applying an LBMS frame-
work and concepts to the development of audio description techniques specifically focused on
movement and dance can provide that missing clarity and detail.

3.2.2 The LBMS framework

In this paragraph, we will focus on two aspects of our LBMS-based approach to movement/
dance description:

1. choosing language;
2. conveying thematic essence.

CHOOSING LANGUAGE: FINDING THE RIGHT WORDS (MOVEMENT HAS MEANING)

LBMS prompts the use of a more specific vocabulary for describing movement: again, the
emphasis is on the difference between just saying what someone is doing (body actions) and
describing how they do it. We train describers to use “walk” verbs which incorporate adver-
bial ideas; describers must become “walking” thesauri in order to conjure near-synonyms
like HOP, SKIP, LEAP, GALLOP, DASH, TROT, DART, HUSTLE, RUSH, ZIP, SCURRY, STROLL, LINGER, LOPE, DALLY, MOSEY, DAWdle, TRUDge, PLOD, LOMP, LUMBER, FLUTTER, TIPTOE, FLIT, TRACK, WANDER, or WEAVE.

In description workshops we screen video clips of people walking, sequences where just hearing “walk” doesn’t give nearly as much information as seeing the image. For example, watching Charlie Chaplin in City Lights, we agreed that his body organisation and dynamics are essential elements of his signature character. In My Fair Lady, Audrey Hepburn’s body attitude and expressive qualities, as much as her costume and speech, are what demonstrate how “Eliza Doolittle” has changed after being groomed by “Professor Higgins”. In other examples, we focus on gait patterns, spatial interactions and other movement ideas that inform characters’ walks.

Here are examples of the “same” movement sequence, described from four different perspectives, based on the component categories of movement mentioned earlier:

- body actions (which body part does what): “she extends her arm up, opens her hand and rotates at the wrist, right-left-right-left”;
- shape qualities (changes in the body’s form): “she rises and spreads her fingers, enfolding the doll, then wraps it into her embrace”;
- spatial patterns (how the mover relates to the environment): “she reaches high to touch the apple, pulls it very near to look at it, then places it down in the basket by her side”;
- dynamics (expressive qualities): “she cautiously searches the top shelf. Ouch! it nipped! She firmly scruffs the kitten then cuddles him gently”.

The sequence of body actions may be the same, but describing with words chosen from the other categories gives much more specific meaning to the sequence. Two examples of dance pieces where we might choose descriptive words from one or more of these categories are Fantasy in C Major, choreographed by Bill T. Jones, performed by Axis Dance Company and Full of Words, choreographed by Marc Brew, performed by Axis Dance Company. In the former piece, description might include an emphasis of spatial patterns, groups gathering and scattering in space (see performance on https://youtu.be/-hGgio-u9ng). In the latter piece, the describer might note bodies’ shape in relation to one another and use touching and shaping words such as nuzzle, embrace and entwine (see performance on https://youtu.be/K1Ukw7jWuIM).

CONVEYING THEMATIC ESSENCE (THE WHOLE IS GREATER THAN THE PARTS)

Considered in a broader LBMS context, the process of observing objectively, editing critically and selecting words that are vivid provides a vantage from which to find the “story” of each piece of choreography. Whether or not there is a narrative plot, it offers describers an expanded range of seeing. In developing description for movement or dance, we look for the “story” it tells: what main idea does the dancing communicate to the viewer? What is the essence of the dance? What information would be most important to allow a blind audience member to “view” the performance as fully as possible, to help her follow the meaning of the choreography? The LBMS framework provides a lens for seeing essence and perceiving meaning.

Describing each movement, however vividly, does not convey the essence of a choreographic piece. It is like just listing the ingredients in a recipe; the ingredients are not the finished dish! In describing a dance piece, we first look for its main idea before deciding what

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words to use. We observe from a “macro” vantage first. For example, in the Saturday Night Fever clips referenced previously, we might note that the overall essence of the Travolta couple’s routine is “cool”, while the Hispanic couple’s is “hot”. Then we look again to find what movement elements create that whole impression:

- Travolta/cool: held torsos, even phrasing, smooth spatial shifts, level dynamics, “going with the flow” – gliding along the surface;
- Hispanic/hot: mobile torsos, accented phrasing, sharp spatial changes, dynamic shifts, push-pull with gravity.

Sometimes, conveying the whole requires leaving out some parts, in order to focus on ideas, not just movements; to create space in the description for non-movement elements like lighting and to leave room for the AD user to hear the sound score and the stillnesses. Dust, choreographed by Victoria Marks and performed by Axis Dance Company, is an example. Our personal guideline notes for the description said:

this dance is structured to employ many types of contrasts:

- visual contrasts: light/dark, warm tones/cool tones, patterns/full light, one or two dancers/large group;
- sound contrasts: nature sounds/music, quietness (serene sounds)/active (agitated) sounds;
- choreographic idea contrasts: stillness/mobility, passive/active, initiator/follower, intensity (seriousness)/lighthearted busyness, isolation/interaction.

The activeness/passivity, stillness/mobility of each dancer at any given choreographic moment is not based on who is in a wheelchair/“disabled” or not. Sometimes the choreographer purposely turns that around.

The audio description transcript is the following (the link to the piece is www.youtube.com/watch?v=8rWpyqyfQLU):

1

A small pool of light reveals a woman lying still, face down. From left, a second woman drives her motorised wheelchair into the light.

2

She pauses next to the prone woman, then reaches down to lift the woman’s shoulder and change her pose.

3

The woman in the wheelchair continues to pose the other, moving one body part at a time. The woman on the floor moves only as she is moulded, holding each new shape. [SLIGHT PAUSE]

The mov-er steers her wheelchair to gently nudge the mov-ee onto her back.
The passive dancer on the floor is softly pulled and pushed, her head lifted, her back lightly touched, to bring her to sitting. The wheelchair presses into her from behind; she slides to a crouch, then a squat. In stages, her partner stands her up. The standing woman now turns her head – on her own – toward the wheelchair dancer. Light fades to black.

Light comes up. The standing woman faces a new dancer. She who was passive is now the initiator. One press of her forefinger against the other’s breastbone sets off a cascade of movements. The first backs away and watches as the new dancer flails and dangles, drops to her knees, her elbow, then splies onto her back. Lights fade out.

The circle of light comes up. A new dancer stands beside the splayed woman, slicing the air with sharp arcing arm movements. The splayed woman lifts her head, as the other gazes upward. Light fades to black.

[PAUSE, MUSIC CHANGES]

Full stage lights up. From left, a man and woman, in time to the music, prance and dip forward. They are met, from right, by a dancer motoring her wheelchair on, dragging another who hangs on to its back. Now dancers converge and scatter busily all over the stage – two drive wheelchairs, five are on foot. Greetings, hugs, taps, re-groupings. Dancers wave, bump, tease, chase, shove, lean, flop onto and roll or climb over each other, scurrying and whizzing playfully from place to place.

Now, as lights begin to dim, the dancers spread across the stage and slow to stillness, pausing in tableau. Lighting creates an uneven geometry of shadows slashing across the floor.

In unison, the dancers begin to turn slowly in place. Now all are seen in right profile.

Now their backs all face us.

[CHIMES]

The dancers continue their slow-motion rotation.
11
Now all are in left profile

12
At left, suddenly a wheelchair dancer sweeps her arm up and circles her chair to the right. At this cue, a man at right spins, then reaches out to draw her to him. While some continue their slow, in-place rotation, others break rank and repeat some of the earlier greeting, reaching, running and pushing. Each always returns to a still patch of light and rejoins the ongoing group rotation.

13
Small groups step forward, then back into place. Now all pause, in tableau again, their backs to us.

14
In unison, all look over their right shoulder then turn toward us.

15
They are still.

16
The two at right turn away.

17
The two at center turn away.

18
The remaining three turn away.

19
Steadily, evenly, all rotate to their left, to face the far left corner.

20
Abruptly breaking the spell, a woman dashes from right to left, slicing through the group. She flings herself to the ground, then scrambles up and races back as the others pull away from her and stride off left. She repeats the run and slide, left alone on stage. The lights have brightened and the floor pattern disappears. The lone dancer runs off as others return along her same diagonal path (from far left to close right). They are tugging, shoving,
catching and lifting each other. Some push, roll and dart past others to advance along the
diagonal and scatter offstage right.

21

Now all but two have exited. They pause, stare at each other and one runs off right, leaving
the other standing alone.

22

Body erect, she gradually turns her back to us. . .

23

. . . then pivots slowly on one foot then the other to complete her rotation.

24

Now she looks at us, then walks forward, gazing across the audience.

25

The light brightens on her as she bends forward, hands to her right knee and unfastens
her prosthetic lower leg. She sets it upright in front of her. It stands alone as she kneels
behind.

26

Crouching, she slides left on her knees.

27

She glances at us, leans forward to peer at the leg, reaching out slowly with her index
finger to poke the leg and tip it over. As she sits up, another dancer, in a separate pool of
light to the left, reaches upward, arching her back, then crumples to the floor, face down.

We mentioned our choreographer friend who felt audio description for dance would be
lacking because the ingredients are not the dish . . . At the end of our conversation, he finally
brightened and said: “well maybe . . . the language would have to dance”!
We agree!

3.2.3 LBMS and its use in AD for dance

AD, enhanced by LBMS fundamentals, provides unique access to dance and movement, espe-
cially useful for people who are blind or have low vision. Describers observe, select and then
succinctly and vividly use language to convey the performance experience. The imaginative
use of language and a focus on essence and meaning will result in communication of higher
quality, relaying not merely the “what” of a visual sequence but also the “how”.

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LBMS could be used equally fruitfully in describing opera.

4. Conclusion: aesthetics and access

We believe that the process of accommodating people with low or no vision at an opera or dance performance is in itself a kind of aesthetic innovation. It is another way of seeing. Words – the vivid use of language – become a conduit for the visual elements of movement and staging. Combined with haptic and experiential elements, the audience member may more closely experience the “what” and the “how” of the opera or dance piece. It can be a new, as-yet-not-fully explored, dimension for the choreographer or theatre maker. As such, the art is accessible – the access is a part of the art. But at its core, audio description, enhanced by the Laban/Bartenieff Movement System, is about making cultural life accessible for people who are blind or have low vision. All citizens have the right to be full participants in their nation’s cultural life and that includes live performance; there is no reason why a person with a visual disability must also be culturally disadvantaged. Gian Maria Greco (2018: p. 208) emphasises that “access does not merely mean for an individual to have a good at her disposal or to have the possibility to reach it. Having access also means being able to use, interact with and enjoy that good”. In the United States, where the principal constituency for audio description has an unemployment rate of 70%, audio description can have a significant impact. We are certain that with more complete access to culture and its resources, people become more informed, more engaged with society and more engaging individuals – thus, more employable. With a focus on people’s abilities, we will come much closer to greater inclusion and total access.

Notes

1 Much of the material in this Opera section was developed in correspondence and conversation with veteran describer of opera Elizabeth Kahn of Raleigh, North Carolina.

2 Launched in 1931, the Met’s Saturday Matinee Broadcasts are the longest-running classical radio series in American broadcast history. That rich tradition continues unbroken in the 2020–21 season with an expanded schedule of encore broadcasts selected from the company’s audio archives and aired over the Toll Brothers – Metropolitan Opera International Radio Network. – www.metopera.org/season/radio/saturday-matinee-broadcasts/

5. Further reading


6. References


7. Filmography

Chaplin, C. (Director). (1931). *City lights* [Motion picture]. Charlie Chaplin Productions, USA.