1. Introduction

Canada has an expanding recorded audio description (AD) industry, mostly catering to broadcasters. Regulatory changes requiring primetime broadcasts to be available with description has bolstered growth. In this sense the recorded AD industry functions very much as it does in a number of other countries, as this volume testifies, while this chapter will focus more on the Canadian Live AD situation. It will also examine the concept of the “Canadian Dialect” and attitudes to race in AD. The author of this chapter is one of the first professionally trained live audio describers in Canada who started working in the field in 2011. Since then, there have been countless noteworthy developments in live on-location AD as cultural offerings began to become more inclusive and welcoming to blind and partially sighted (BPS) audiences. This chapter will serve to focus on the as-yet undocumented blossoming efforts of hundreds of live AD stakeholders: consultants, users, practitioners, researchers, producers, theatres and commissioners, and to give a clear idea of historical practice in the country at large. In terms of research, interesting work has been conducted within the Inclusive Media and Design Centre of Ryerson University in Toronto including contributions from Udo and Fels (2010), Whitfield and Fels (2013) and Naraine et al. (2018) concentrating on the impact of inclusive design and universal design on audio description, discussing alternative and non-conventional approaches for theatre AD, supporting the subjectivity and creativity of directors and actors. A focus on exploring non-conventional methodologies for description was again explored by Mala D. Naraine et al.(2018) examining theatre directors’ potential as describers, and while the results of these works have made little impact as yet on the actual provision of live AD, as elsewhere, it may well prove to be a future step forward, as predicted in several chapters in this volume.

The mantra “Nothing about us, without us” (Kuppers, 2016: 93–97) is often heard and in English Canada, conversations about Live AD are now informed by a supportive network of engaged Disability Arts consultants and activists. In the seminal Canadian Disability Arts book Stage Turns, AD user Linda Webber said: “the AD allows me the independence and choice to attend a live theatre production without having to rely on a sighted companion” (Johnson, 2012: 160). Conversations around AD have since become more nuanced. More recently, after attending an audio described performance of Saga Collectif’s Black Boys at Buddies in Bad...
Times Theatre, blind community leader and radio host Kelly Macdonald gave the following testimonial:

I have grown up without live AD and have found ways to cope – but most of that is just not realising what I am missing. Parts of a show I would not know what was going on, or interpret incorrectly – but didn’t know, so it was ok. While enjoying the experience of not only the play but the description, I realised how helpful the AD was and found myself keeping the headset on for the whole show, a first!

As more companies included described shows in their season, audience members who were watching theatre for the first time or after a long time, would express their joy in feedback after the show. Bubbling excitement for one show could transform into (now possible) full season attendance and passion for the live performing arts. Though not always a smooth experience, with technical problems being somewhat inevitable, there has always been a close connection to the audience, and this feedback loop has brought about a conversation about quality.

In the midst of this current Covid-19 pandemic (2020–2021), methods of delivering live AD are transforming, as is the relationship between theatres and their audiences with much new interest being shown in making work accessible. In this new reality, the pace and workloads have shifted so that care (and for some, caregiving) takes a much higher priority. Festivals like Luminato, FoldA and the Fringes are pioneering new design principles for their accessibility platforms and acknowledging that typical AD is not necessarily a “one size fits all” service. Service providers have out of necessity also been innovators to accommodate new venues and diverse forms of performance presentation. Their ongoing practical research and development is evidenced in the following section.

2. Canadian voices

In order to illustrate the progress made in AD in Canada, a number of colleagues were interviewed and their responses are detailed here.

Dr Jessica Watkin is a blind/disabled artist-scholar and educator who also identifies as a white settler, and works as a consultant and facilitator enabling other people to work or create in the way that suits them best. When asked about her work as a blind scholar, undertaking study in accessible arts and about the most influential experiences she had had with regard to consulting on and experiencing live arts, she began by explaining that through not having many accommodations that met her needs in theatre school, she was able to identify the gaps in both training pedagogy and in the ways assumptions are made about who is in the audience and who creates theatre in general. This perspective then led her to advocate for accessible theatre spaces on a larger scale and to her noticing that smaller companies and organisations listen more than big ones. She pointed out that the Canadian Stratford Festival would answer her research emails, but the Cahoots Theatre Company would sit down and have multiple meetings with her to engage in discussions about accessing theatre. Since moving to Toronto in 2015, Watkin has established herself in this sector (accessibility in theatre) as someone who knows what she is talking about. She pointed out that the Canadian Stratford Festival would answer her research emails, but the Cahoots Theatre Company would sit down and have multiple meetings with her to engage in discussions about accessing theatre. Since moving to Toronto in 2015, Watkin has established herself in this sector (accessibility in theatre) as someone who knows what she is talking about. She stressed that she had “seen” theatre from all sides: studied it, done it, designed accessibility for it and consulted in many capacities, and that knowledge was now informing how she consulted, trained and educated future theatre creators as well.

One specific example concerns one of her first times consulting, for the Buddies in Bad Times show Body Politic, where an actor says “I love you” to another actor, followed by a silence.
She remembered thinking “Okay, what am I missing here”? because the audio describer was not saying anything, so in the consultant feedback session with the audio describer after the show, she asked if the person was smiling when they said “I love you”, because that context would have changed that phrase dramatically. She knew that the silence was intentional, especially if it was not full of obvious movement to be described. These pieces of the describing puzzle allowed a blind audience member to be invited into the action but not spoon-fed the meaning, and that is what they are looking for. Watkin’s lived experience of blindness in the academy, as an audience member and as a theatre creator contributed to her consulting skills. She said she was able to pull from so many different experiences of advocacy. She had also been in advocacy training for a very long time, since she was diagnosed with degenerative eye disease, because she had needed to articulate to all kinds of different people both personally and professionally what her eyesight meant to them, how she could partake in activities and how to access performance. When asked what her feelings were about AD and whether they had changed over time, she said:

people should be able to make a choice, an informed choice, about how to be accommodated. I am a fan of audio description that is embedded into the creativity and aesthetic of any performance, that is driven by disabled people and that is provocative beyond descriptions.

J.J. Hunt, veteran audio describer and co-host of the podcast “Talk Description to Me” was asked about his connection to the audience over the past 20 years. He talked about how, when he started his extensive work in Canadian film and television no one knew what he did and that he had to explain the basic concept every time he mentioned his work. He explained that historically with film and television there has been very little built-in opportunity to interact with AD users. Referring to his substantial experience in the museum sector, leading described city tours and other live events, of the current climate, he said the following:

now, with an increased focus on live events and tours, conferences, Facebook groups, Twitter exchanges and the like, describers and description users have far more opportunity to get to know one another. That not only means that we’re all in a better position to ask questions and share feedback, but there’s far more opportunity for coordinated innovation moving forward.

Hunt went on to talk about having described Pride parades, city tours and other live events and how important it is to offer description as it pulled people out of their homes and into group activities and social occasions. He explained that participants regularly told him exploring an area on foot put that area “on the map” and expanded the city by leaps and bounds. According to J.J. Hunt, a described Pride was both an equaliser and great fun.

Steph Kirkland is founder of Vancouver’s VocalEye which provides descriptive services in western Canada, primarily for Vancouver and Victoria, British Columbia. She spoke about how described performances have helped people to have confidence to return to the venue for other shows and how this familiarity had allowed them to be more adventurous. After years of having been the AD equipment table manager during live performances, Kirkland had realised that each described offering should be a social event. She explained that her organisation had been working with the community to create regular opportunities to gather, whether they had been connected to a performance season or civic event. Kirkland gave an example of a large, free and inclusive event that VocalEye had described regularly: “one way of breaking
down isolation within the community is through described fireworks, which are a big draw in Vancouver”.

Kat Germain has worked as a professional audio describer and researcher and has been a member of the Ontario College of Teachers. When asked what kinds of experimental AD she had engaged with in the past, she spoke of her work developing new live description techniques. She gave examples of developing WeeScription audio description techniques for babies and toddlers and said that parents and caregivers had responded very positively. They had said their children were responding positively and listening. The earpieces were a challenge, but this was expected. She also spoke about Relaxed Audio Description for Relaxed Performance which is designed to assist with following the story: “Relaxed Audio Description (RAD!) for Relaxed Performances – (got a) fantastic reception from neurodiverse people and parents/caregivers as well as at least one little girl who is blind. Though the techniques are different, she still found it helpful”. Germain also referred to having created recorded AD for live, touring performances and how this is not widely practiced, so there was not really a handbook to go by. She said in that way they were experimenting as to what would/could work. She shared that she has been a research fellow of the Blackwood Gallery at the University of Toronto Mississauga and prepared research on techniques of describing Sign Language which she had presented as a talk entitled “Visual Translation and the Amazing Broken Telescope Kaleidescope”.

3. On the “Canadian dialect”

In March 2019, this author was the first Canadian to give a talk at the Advanced Seminar on Audio Description (ARSAD) in Barcelona. The talk was entitled: “Describing the Great White North: confronting race, gender and class”. The subject of this talk reflects the general situation in multicultural Canada and live AD, where describers regularly meet users as a course of practice. This proximity impacts discussions between describers about employing appropriate and correct racial descriptions and what those might be. The fact that at this moment Canadian cultural institutions are reckoning with racism also plays a role. At ARSAD, this was addressed as follows:

intersectionality is deeply important to me as I am a person of colour of multiple ethnicities and, to my knowledge, the only describer of colour in the field of professional live audio description in Canada. In Toronto where I live, my colleagues and I have regarded person descriptions and the rules and standards around them as an area for refinement. I think of our ways of describing as a Canadian Dialect of audio description.

(Singh, 2019)

I spoke of the idea that our culture and arts are affected by movements such as #mmiwg, #Blacklivesmatter and #metoo, as well as truth and reconciliation with our Indigenous populations. As such, audio describers researched, reflected and have ultimately determined that “existing practices don’t cut it in Toronto” (Singh, 2019). I finished my talk with the following thought about the language used by confronting my own bias in describing race, gender and class in description: “the rule of thumb is promoting and employing descriptive (rather than prescriptive) language that allows the diverse audience to feel reflected on stage” (Singh, 2019).

Since then we have come to understand that what actually defines the Canadian Dialect is the centering of the user. We have actively been exploring intersectionality and
anti-racist action in my practice and seeking out conversations with Black, Indigenous and Persons of Colour (BIPOC) and AD users, and we were thrilled to meet another black describer. We have been convinced to let go of the “only if ‘relevant’” qualifications for race. After anti-Black racism surged to unprecedented prominence after the police killing of George Floyd and, in Canada, the death of Regis Korchinski-Paquet, it is finally becoming clear to all Canadians that race is always relevant. Like everywhere else, racism is a problem in AD (see Hutchinson et al., 2020). Individual anti-racist actions are worthwhile and can create sea change. Some of the current practices encouraged in Canadian AD are listed here:

- always describe everyone’s race;
- prioritise the attempt to do this;
- for AD users, understanding racism, which is everywhere, requires describers to name race;
- present the information coherently.

In the Introductory Notes, the actor/dancer/singer’s race can be described as follows:

ACTOR’S NAME, who is (choose from this list as they appear to you) Black, Indigenous, a Person of Colour or white, (optionally, you can follow with ethnicity, background and or self-description as described next) cast as CHARACTER NAME . . . then describe the character. For example: “Keanu Reeves who is a person of colour of Hawaiian, Chinese, English, Irish and Portuguese descent is cast as Hamlet. Hamlet has long brown hair and a full beard. He wears . . .”

- never describe the races of only people who are BIPOC. Describe all races including white;
- use the most specific term possible for the person or people being referred to. At the time of writing, the best umbrella term for racialised people is BIPOC. Possible additions are “with African descent” or “mixed race” or “biracial” or “multiracial” or “of multiple ethnicities”;
- avoid demeaning terms such as “non-white” or “minorities”;
- avoid using any animal husbandry terms such as “half-breed”, “mixed breed”, or “mulatto”;
- avoid the use of food similes like mocha, chocolate, and cinnamon. This practice is fetishising and not anti-racist;
- recruit BIPOC blind and partially sighted stakeholders and engage them as paid consultants. The mantra “Nothing about us, without us” applies;
- stay informed and up to date with language. Be actively anti-racist;
- seek self-descriptions when possible. An AD self-description is one created by the subject (actor, performer, etc.) and can include race, physical description, gender, disability and other information such as sexual identity, e.g., gay;
- incorporate self-descriptions. Actively engage in discussion about describing in non-harmful ways. For example, saying “a person with cerebral palsy (CP)” versus describing contracture versus indicating CP through a description like “a curled hand”;
- incorporate self-descriptions by saying “Daniel Radcliffe is a white man who describes himself as having dyspraxia, a condition that makes it hard to plan and coordinate physical movement. Daniel is cast as Harry Potter. Harry has short brown hair and wears glasses. He has a lightning bolt shaped scar on his left temple. He wears . . .”
Locally, Canadian actress and writer Nicole Stamp\(^8\) has influenced my views on describing race through her prolific writing on social media as well as her advocacy for BIPOC representation in children’s media and literature.

4. Practice

The following types of programming use descriptive services: theatre, opera, dance, performance art, circus, conferences, installation art, visual art, social sculpture, children’s programming, feature film, episodic television, video, short film, animation, web series, book images and illustrations, LGBTQ2SIAA+\(^9\) Pride parades, neighborhood walks, city tours, sports, ceremonies and websites. Concentrating here on theatre production, effectively offering live on-location audio described performances and creating an inclusive culture is a multi-step cross-platform process for any theatre team. Often, companies delegate a team member to act as an Audio Description Coordinator.

In terms of process, audio describers create a script detailing the performance’s visual components and physical action through thorough and careful study of an archival video, as well as seeing the show/set/costume/props in person at least two times. A set of Introductory Notes (see for example Snyder and Geiger in this volume) comprise the first part of this script. In the case of a new work, the script is written during the rehearsal period based on whatever information is available (i.e., photos of the maquette, design drawings, etc). The script is then continuously revised as the elements come together. Each production and process is unique, and so the describers work with theatres and producers well in advance for best results. Introductory Notes are a seven-to-ten minute pre-show script that relays vital information about the production to the seated audience via their headset. It includes, but is not limited to, the following: contextual information, the organisation of the play, list of scenes, description of the cast of characters’ costumes and relevant parts of the programme which may include credits and/or brief background information. Often theatre performances with an intermission are serviced by two audio describers who each describe half the show but work to create the script together. The timeline of a live AD service is illustrated in Table 34.1.

It is important to always plan to include team members such as the theatre’s Production Manager and Technical Director and the production’s Production Manager and Stage Manager to coordinate testing equipment in the theatre and sound level set with describer(s) in the (AD) booth.

The technical requirements for the production of live ADs are summarised in Table 34.2.

As far as the outreach and welcome stages of the AD are concerned, audio description coordinators take time to consider how they will reach and welcome the blind and partially sighted community to the show. Where appropriate, they will make sure to loop-in their outreach, group sales and box office team as well as Front of House Managers and ushers so that everyone has up to date information and training.

The following suggestions should be made available to producers:

- make it an event;
- invite patrons to meet up before and/or after for a more social experience;
- offer a touch tour to enhance the patron’s experience of the production;
- offer a buddy service or curbside ushering service that allows patrons to call or text from a nearby drop off point or transit stop and be escorted in to get their tickets and device;
- offer the lowest ticket rate and a no-charge additional ticket for support persons or companions of patrons requesting the AD service;
submit show information to listings of specialised performances and advertise with accessible media broadcasters;
• do long-lead outreach to Blind and Low Vision clubs and groups. Schedule one or more described performance per run;
• consider offering AD for additional performances to accommodate group bookings;
• gather contact information from patrons for future AD-specific outreach.

Moving now to logistics, as ticketing systems vary, often patrons are asked to use a code when buying their tickets which indicates their booking of the AD service. A second option is a separate ticket or voucher specifically for devices. Patrons often appreciate receiving an accessible PDF version of the programme in advance of the performance. When possible, provide a link

Table 34.1 Timeline of a live AD service

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What</th>
<th>When</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Testing of AD equipment and booth</td>
<td>Comfortably in advance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Descriptor receives archival video*</td>
<td>Minimum two-three weeks in advance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Descriptor begins scripting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Descriptor attends the show</td>
<td>Ideally one week before live description service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Descriptor looks at costumes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Descriptor tours the set</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD script gets final touches.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>AD Tech Run</strong></td>
<td><strong>AD Dry Run</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A technical rehearsal runthrough to set sound level for describer’s speech</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A runthrough with Blind/Low Vision consultant(s) in attendance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First audio described performance</td>
<td>Within a week of AD tech run</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional AD performances</td>
<td>Within six months of 1st AD performance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The Archival video must be good quality and accurate/up to date for description.

Table 34.2 Technical requirements for the production of live ADs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A specialised app, device or audio transmitter (with antenna) and wireless receivers with single earpieces for patrons. Batteries inserted should be brand new. Equipment should be diligently tested and fully charged. Disposable foam earpiece covers may be required for hygiene reasons. Patrons may wish to use their own earpiece/headset.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A microphone, either a headset mic or a directional mic on a stand with muting capabilities. Depending on the set up, programme sound via headphones or speakers may also be required.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An AD Booth typically with a stool, a music stand (with light) for the script and space for one describer. Sightlines must be good or as good as possible. The describer will be speaking out loud throughout the show. Generally the quieter the environment the better as to avoid sound-bleed from show calls, machine hum or fan noise (sometimes impossible). Work with the describer(s) to determine the optimal set-up.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
to an online recording of the AD *Introductory Notes* which could include clips of the actors’ voices in character for easier association (especially for musicals and large cast plays). Also, consider providing programmes in accessible formats such as Braille or large print.

Producers ensure patrons are asked to arrive well in advance as they will need to pick up the devices, do a quick tech check and be seated early to listen to the *Introductory Notes* and allow enough time to negotiate stairs, elevators, settle guide dogs, and so on. This may require extra Front of House (FOH) staff or volunteers. When the show has General Admission seating, choose and reserve at least two accessible seating areas including one to accommodate guide dogs who will require space to lie down. Some people will be fine with stairs, others will require the use of elevators and some may require wheelchair accessible seating. Patrons and their companions are often grouped in the same area, typically close to the stage for the benefit of low vision patrons and in an area suitable for patrons with service animals. Table 34.3 illustrates the typical timing for a performance with AD service.

An example is now presented to explain in broad outline how a performance should be arranged for live AD. The example exemplifies the running order for an 8:00 PM performance:

- 7:15 PM – patrons should be directed to pick up their headset from a staff member (AD Coordinator). At this time, FOH should ensure that patrons are advised of the theatre’s amenities (restrooms and food and beverage options) and emergency exits of the facility and told that they will be able to ask questions and give feedback about the AD after the show;
- 7:30 PM – patrons are seated in advance of the house for their comfort and to give time to resolve any equipment-related questions or issues (e.g., adjusting volume, what device controls are available, volume etiquette). An equipment test is led by a staff member (AD Coordinator) to make sure they know how to use equipment (turn on, adjust volume, reset channel) and ensure everything is in working order. Once everyone is ready, the staff member (AD Coordinator) will signal the describer in the booth. The describer will ask patrons to raise their hands if they can hear. The staff member (AD Coordinator) resolves any issues;
- 7:35 PM – patrons listen to seven to ten minutes of *Introductory Notes* (ideally before pre-show music is played and the house is let in);
- 8:00 PM – performance begins, patrons hear AD *in between* dialogue;

### Table 34.3 Typical timing for a performance with AD service

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Frame</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One hour pre-show</td>
<td>Audio description equipment ready for distribution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45 minutes pre-show</td>
<td>Patrons begin picking up their receiver and earphone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 minutes pre-show (or ten minutes earlier than the rest of the house)</td>
<td>Audio description patrons are seated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25–20 minutes pre-show (or once seated)</td>
<td>Introductory Notes begin*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shortly before the end of intermission</td>
<td>Intermission Notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion of the show</td>
<td>The Coordinator and Audio describers will collect the equipment, hear comments and answer questions from patrons.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*If patrons are able to purchase assigned seats often a start time for the *Introductory Notes* is announced, but if not, they begin shortly after the general opening of the house.
late starts – patrons may be given updates via headset if there are delays (as required);
• curtain call, Q & A – the curtain call is also described, including the audience in the house (standing ovation). Q and A will be described;
• after final applause subsides – patrons are typically reminded to return their equipment and encouraged to give feedback. Audio describer signs off and goes to the equipment drop-off area to answer questions and hear feedback.

Finally, we should point out that variations (e.g., alternate running order, intermissions, etc.) may occur. When technology and the ticketing process allows, patrons can be seated separately around the house. In this case Introductory Notes begin promptly at 7:45pm and patrons are told to seek assistance if they experience technical issues at that time. Introductory Notes may also be pre-recorded on MP3 and posted online. Patrons may receive a link via email so that they can listen at home prior to the show and many may listen live again on the day. Productions with intermissions often have Introductory Notes continue at intermission. Information pertaining only to characters, set and costumes is read in a three-to-five-minute period at the end of the intermission before the show resumes. At the end of the first half, patrons are told exactly what time these additional notes begin.

5. A History of professional live audio description in Canada

What follows is a history of professional live AD in Canada. This author started to put together packages about AD for local theatres in 2015. At the time she was describing as a team with audio describer and theatre researcher Kat Germain and they began to document AD in Canada. They carefully worked together wondering how to help theatres introduce AD and in 2016 began using the name “Live Describe”, acting as an informal coalition producing high quality work. The first part of this section records the initial steps made in the development of AD across the Canadian nation. Germain did much of the work in putting the following account together, and it contains contributions from Steph Kirkland.

Researchers note: please note that the account is not exhaustive. Many “firsts” in visual arts, partnerships, dance, training, outdoor performance and French language productions have not been included, nor have all the people and organisations that have played crucially important roles been listed. Because of the newness of AD in Canada, media coverage has been scarce. Several excellent organisations and independent contractors have shared their stories, but sometimes they were the only sources of this information.

This history of AD in Canada is presented initially as a series of “firsts” thereby providing a “stepping-stone” account of how the practice has developed over the nation.

It was Théâtre Nuits D’Encre in Montreal in 2008 which provided the first live audio described performance in Canada. Diane St-Jean audio described two performances of the play La Vieille est morte ou Un Feydeau. In the same year in Toronto, Clay and Paper Theatre launched “Puppets Without Barriers”, an initiative to provide accessible theatre. A 2008 presentation of Horse Feathers also included a touch tour. In 2009, they offered touch tours with verbal descriptions for the play Between Sea and Sky by David Anderson and Krista Dalby which had Integrated Descriptive Dialogue supported by a collaboration with Ryerson University’s Inclusive Media and Design Centre (IMDC). Also on offer were large print and Braille flyers and programmes created by blind intern Roisin Hartnett. The initiative continued in 2010 with the presentation of Circus of Dark and Light by David Anderson and Krista Dalby. Wanda Fitzgerald and Rose Jacobson consulted (Klein, 2014: 3).
In 2009 Vancouver’s Kickstart Disability Arts and Culture founded by Geoff McMurtry provided the first Canadian AD training for eight describers. The training was led by preeminent AD Trainer and Advocate Deborah Lewis of Arts Access Alliance (“Kickstart”, 2010). The Kickstart team also audio described The Miracle Worker for the Vancouver Playhouse Theatre Company, the first English Language audio described play in Canada (Johnson, 2012: 160). At Kickstart, Executive Director Rina Fraticelli restructured. Four core audio describers (Khaira Ledeyo, Teri Snelgrove, Rick Waines and Steph Kirkland) would eventually join a programme called EarSighted which was renamed VocalEye in 2011, and in 2012 was turned into a non-profit organisation. Descriptor Steph Kirkland became its founder and director. They continued their work independently, describing theatre and events in Vancouver, Surrey, Richmond, Victoria and Nanaimo. In Vancouver in 2014, Steph Kirkland and VocalEye received an Outstanding Achievement Award from the American Council of the Blind AD Project (“American Council of the Blind”, 2014). In 2012, the group also created a programme where blind and low vision patrons met up with “Theatre Buddies” who are volunteers trained in sighted guiding. They assist with the lobby, seating and equipment. Blind community consultants Tamara Tedesco and Tamara Grenon assisted the training of describers and “Buddies” (Kickstart, 2020).

In 2010 EarSighted described the plays The Blue Dragon/Le Dragon Bleu and Spine and select performances of Hive 3 for the Cultural Olympiad at the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Games in Vancouver, marking the first Canadian Olympics with live on-location AD for any event associated with the Olympics (Towrl, 2010). In the same year VocalEye presented the first full season of Described Performance in Canada, with 15 shows in five venues coordinated by Meg Towrl. The Arts Club Theatre would continue to offer AD on over 100 shows (and counting) making an unwavering commitment to its blind and partially sighted audiences.

In 2010 the Picasso PRO project led by Rose Jacobson and dedicated to bridging disability and the arts created an initiative to train audio describers in Toronto with Deborah Lewis and provide professional AD to local theatres in a partnership programme thereby planting the seeds that would enable a push for inclusivity in the theatres of Canada’s largest live performance scene (“Embracing inclusivity”, 2011). In 2011, amidst floundering Toronto theatre community support for AD, trained Descriptor Rebecca Singh (then Theatre Local) pushed for and succeeded in providing, with Picasso PRO, a pilot AD programme at the Luminato Festival. This laid the groundwork which eventually led to Luminato’s now deeply consultative and successful accessibility initiatives. Consultants Wanda Fitzgerald and Durelle Harford-McAllistair contributed greatly to the success of the exploratory programme of art installations produced by Rob Vanderberg (“Pilot Audio Description”, 2011). Also in 2011 at the Stratford Theatre Festival, Shelly Stevenson ran a pilot programme and focus group. They hired Deborah Lewis to provide AD. The following year she returned and trained six describers. Stratford became the first regional theatre to purchase equipment and provide consistent AD services, offering four audio described plays in 2012 (O’Connor, 2012).

In 2012 in Vancouver VocalEye presented The Wizard of Oz, the first Live Description for young audiences at Carousel Theatre, with Touch Tours post-show (Amarshi, 2013: 6).

In 2013 Toronto Pride offered live on-location AD of the parade. Descriptor J.J. Hunt provided the service with Jason Vermes producing and Em Williams assisting. This was a Canadian Pride first and J.J. Hunt would go on to describe several subsequent Pride marches. Also in 2013 VocalEye Descriptor Rick Waines provided AD for Alice Cooper’s performance in Nanaimo, marking the first live concert AD in Canada as well as Nanaimo’s first described performance (“Alice Cooper in Concert”, n.d.).
In 2014 L’Académie Théâtrale l’Envol de Laval was the winner of the prix Reconnaissance au Gala Reconnaissance for their development and provision of AD which they call “Théâtrodescription” (“Prix Reconnaissance”, 2015). In 2014, they become the first theatre in Quebec to provide live AD on a regular basis (“Origin of Théâtrodescription”, n.d.). Still in 2014 VocalEye began a pilot programme for describing fireworks, a Canadian first. In subsequent years, they employed tactile techniques and publicly shared their approach to the work as free annual workshops called Fingerworks for Fireworks, co-created by former board member, blind community member Collin van Uchelen.

At the ParaPan Am Games, the Toronto 2015 team became the first host in the history of the games to offer live, on-location description to blind and low vision spectators (“Pan/ParaPan American Games”, 2016).

In 2016 audio describers Rebecca Singh and Kat Germain marketed their live on-location services to local theatres as Live Describe. They often worked as a team and together helped many companies present their first audio described performances. Live Audio Described offerings in Toronto began to increase and diversify. In Kelowna in 2016, VocalEye described To See or Not to See, a play by Ruth Bieber, a playwright with vision loss (“Nelson District Arts Council”). It was also in 2016 that Jessica Watkin began writing about her experiences as an AD consultant on Body Politic produced by Buddies in Bad Times Theatre and Indrit Kasapi/LemonTree Creations.

In 2017 Vocal Eye became a registered charity. Also in 2017 leading accessibility consultant Christine Karcza began working with the Luminato Festival, under the guidance and leadership of Naomi Campbell, Anthony Sargent, Josefine Ridge and later Cathy Gordon. They created multi-year strategies to improve the festival’s accessibility, laying the groundwork for deeply consultative programming (“Accessibility”, 2017: 27–28).

In Vancouver All Bodies Dance offered AD for Do Make Show (“Vocal Eye, Do Make Show”, n.d.). They would go on to collaborate with VocalEye on Translations, a research project that explored new approaches to making dance accessible to blind/low vision audiences and culminated in a 2018 public performance (Brand et al., 2019).

In 2018 the Toronto Fringe Festival/Next Stage Festival began working with consultant Christine Karcza and describers Kat Germain and Rebecca Singh to offer AD and increased accessibility of programming. In 2018 in Toronto Femmes du Feu offered the first audio described performance specifically geared to include babies and toddlers with their show, TWEET TWEET! (“Femmes du Feu”, n.d.). And under the leadership of Lynda Hill, the Wee Festival & Theatre Direct offered “Relaxed Audio Description” for “Relaxed Performances” – a first in Canada and possibly beyond (“Flying Hearts”, 2018). Relaxed performances are a popular accessibility service offered by many theatres initially designed to make the theatre experience welcoming to audience members on the autism spectrum, but now benefitting many other individuals as well (“Access Activators”, n.d.). In Kingston, the Festival of Live Digital Arts Festival (FoldA) offered three performances with live AD presented virtually by an off-site describer – another first in Canada and possibly beyond (“FoldA Access Guide”, n.d.).

In 2019 VocalEye launched Notable Social events which gave audiences a chance to meet at a pub or cafe before or after an event and get to know the neighborhood. The events were coordinated by Amy Amantea (“Public Art”, n.d.). VocalEye also presented its first described operetta, Countess Maritza for Pacific Opera Victoria (“Countess Maritza”, n.d.). And in response to Covid-19, VocalEye launched “Almost Live” presenting described virtual art tours, performances, festival highlights and special guests via Zoom, hosted by Amy Amatea (“VocalEye, Virtual VocalEye”, 2020).
With the demand for Live Description picking up pace, in 2019 Rebecca Singh launched Superior Description Services and pledged to work with blind and partially sighted consultants on 100% of projects (“Superior Description Services”, n.d.). When Opera Atelier presented an audio described *Don Quixote*, Superior Description Services used two describers to deliver the service live (“Opera Atelier”, 2019). Finally, in 2020 the Luminato Festival offered live AD of Alex Bulmer’s *May I Take Your Arm?* and *The Cave* during the first Covid-19 quarantine via Zoom, which attracted listeners as far away as Australia. This was hosted by Christine Malec (“Blind Abilities”, n.d.).

6. AD across the country

Following on from the previous chronological account of developments in the spread of Live AD in Canada, particularly in the main centres of Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver, other venues in less densely populated areas have benefitted from such developments. This section therefore consists of a brief excursion over the length and breadth of Canada to show how live AD in particular has developed and spread over the last ten years. Mention will be made of initiatives that have had a national impact. For example, in 2017 in the nation’s capital of Ottawa, Ontario, the National Arts Centre presented Propeller Dance’s *Living the unDesirable Life* with AD (Robb, 2017).

On the west coast, in Surrey, British Columbia, in 2012 VocalEye described *Don Quixote*, the first audio described event in Surrey (“Helping the visually impaired enjoy the theatre”, 2011). Elsewhere in the province, in Victoria, BC in 2013, VocalEye presented Live Description with Touch Tours for *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* at the Belfry, a first in Victoria (“Goodnight Desdemona”, 2013). In 2015, VocalEye described the Vancouver Pride Parade with two describers (“AEBC” 2015).

In 2017, in the city of Calgary in Alberta, Inside Out Theatre brought in Steph Kirkland from VocalEye to provide AD training. Inside Out Theatre’s inaugural performance marked the first described performance in Alberta. The theatre quickly developed the Good Host programme, which facilitated audio described performances, Relaxed Performances and ASL interpreted performances throughout Calgary and occasionally Edmonton. The programme is subsidised and theatres pay what they can. Part of the agreement with theatres includes free or low ticket prices for disability-identified patrons (“Inside Out Theatre” n.d.).


On the prairies in Regina, Saskatchewan, in 2017, Globe Theatre presented *The Little Mermaid*, the first audio described performance in Saskatchewan (“Community Initiative Fund”, n.d.). In 2018, elsewhere in the province, in Saskatoon, SUM Theatre offered AD for the Theatre in the Park experience *Queen Seraphina in the Land of Vertebraat*. This was a provincial first (“Theatre in the Park”, 2018). In addition that year, Persephone Theatre offered Saskatoon’s first AD in an indoor venue at *Mom’s the Word 3* (“Persephone”, 2018).

West of Ontario and in the centre of the country, in Winnipeg, Manitoba, in 2019 FemFest 2019 invited the show *Raising Stanley/Life with Tulia* to the festival. The show incorporated integrated, open AD. The Ottawa team introduced Manitoba to live, on-location description (“FemFest”, 2019). In the same year, Sick + Twisted Theatre presented *Sex & SexAbility*, Manitoba’s first locally-produced live audio described production (“Creative Manitoba”, n.d.).
In the predominantly French-speaking city of Laval, Quebec, Connect-T, services d’audiodescription was launched under the direction of Sylvain Noël in 2016. They provided AD services for cultural and sporting events throughout Quebec. Continuing to work at L’Académie Théâtrale l’Envol de Laval, they were the first in Quebec to provide AD for a theatre’s entire season (“Origin of Theatrodescription”, n.d.).

In 2018 on the east coast of Canada, in Halifax, Nova Scotia, the Halifax Pride Festival offered the first AD in Nova Scotia at their 2018 parade (Pace, 2018).

Lastly, in St. John’s, Newfoundland, in 2018, Power Productions offered AD for Crippled, the first audio described performance in Atlantic Canada (“Support”, n.d.).

7. Future directions

The compilation of history, methods, best practices and investigations presented in this chapter will assist academics in doing more research on AD in Canada. A deeper centering of the blind and partially sighted community should occur in the process of creating and servicing cultural experiences with AD. The questions of if and how to standardise audio approaches are moving to the forefront of the conversation, and any decisions should be end-user based. Toronto, the fourth largest city in North America with a population of 2.8 million people, half of whom were born outside the country, is often referred to as “the most multicultural city in the world”. This report underlines the unique opportunity for innovations in culture and technologies due to the racial and ethnic diversity of the populace and the correlating panoply of cultural offerings. The Canadian Dialect of audio description should become part of a larger discussion among many nations.

Notes
1 The Luminato Festival is an international festival dedicated to performance, visual and media arts, and based in Toronto.
2 FoldA, or the Festival of Live Digital Art, was established in Kingston, Ontario in 2018. It supports artists creating theatre in a digital age.
3 Fringe Theatre Festivals are produced outside of mainstream theatre institutions. The pieces are often non-traditional in style or subject matter. The first Fringe Festival took place in Edinburgh, though now they take place all over the world. Canada has the largest circuit of Fringe Festivals in the world.
4 Talk Description to Me is a description-rich podcast hosted by Audio describer J.J. Hunt and Christine Malec.
5 ‘WeeScription’ is Audio Description for babies and toddlers.
6 On May 27, 2020, Regis Korchinski-Paquet, a 29 year old Indigenous-Ukrainian-Black-Canadian woman, died in Toronto after Toronto Police arrived to answer a domestic disturbance call. Her family accused the police of playing a role in her death, and this sparked a number of protests in Canada regarding police brutality and systemic racism.
7 IBPOC or BIPOC both mean Indigenous and/or Black and/or People of Colour. An Asian or Latinx person would be called a BIPOC – the term does not only refer to people who are “part” Black or Indigenous.
8 Nicole Stamp is an actor, writer, director and TV host. Her excellent writings on race and other subjects can be found on her twitter @nicolestamp.
9 LGBTQ2SIAA+ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Two-Spirit, Intersex, Androgyous and Asexual and other identities that fall outside of cisgender and heterosexual paradigms.

8. Further reading

Blind Abilities. (n.d.). *This Friday and Saturday, the Luminato Festival Listen Party! May I take your arm? And the cave. Meet the actor in the pre and post events and live audio description! And interview with Christine Malec.* [Blog post]. Retrieved from https://blindabilities.com/?p=5949


9. References


