

ACCESS TO ARTS FOR PEOPLE WITH HEARING LOSS

Arlene Romoff

ARLENE ROMOFF: The subject of this workshop is access to the arts. Although my Background in college was mathematics, my love of the arts goes back even further. I graduated from the High School of Music and Art in New York City, and I'm a musician just by avocation.

Challenges began to set in when I started losing my hearing at age 20. At age 20 I had normal hearing, and for the next 30 years, little by little, my hearing decreased until it was virtually gone. At that point, I got a cochlear implant. So with my history, I am very familiar with all the assistive devices that people with hearing loss require to stay connected.

These things are particularly important when we consider the arts—consisting as they do of theater, whether it's live theater, movies, museums and so forth. Some things are easier to handle with a hearing loss than others. In the arts there are often an ample number of opportunities to attend programming with sign language interpreters, so I will leave skip over that subject. If you can sign all you have to do is sign up for opportunities that provide sign interpreters. But being a late-deafened adult, I don't know sign language, and having gone through 30 years of a degenerative hearing loss made me a big advocate for people who do not use sign language as their primary means of communication.

Depending on your degree of hearing loss, you can use amplification devices and/or captioning. So that's what I want to talk about today. The thirty years I spent going deaf created an identity for me that I certainly wouldn't have had without it. What it created was a very persistent advocate for people who are deaf and hard of hearing, particularly late-deafened adults. In New Jersey, I'm active on the state level at the Division of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Advisory Council, and I am a trustee of our state association of SHHH. I am also active in advocacy in New York City.

When the ADA was passed, the League For Hard of Hearing set up a volunteer advocacy committee called "ABC: Advocates for Better Communication. We are a group of very dedicated and diligent advocates. And usually when you advocate for people who have hearing loss, your story kind of pushes you into areas of personal interest. I tell people who would like to become involved to advocate for their own needs; to find something they are passionate about and to get involved in that area.

I had always been an attendee of live theater. In my town we have a wonderful theater: The Paper Mill Playhouse, and it is a model of accessibility. They have just about everything that you could imagine for people with disabilities. They have an infrared system. They are wheelchair accessible. They have audio descriptive performances for the blind. People who are blind would get an FM system and hear what the sets and the movement on the stage was like while the

performance was going on; which is called audio description. They also have touch tours for people who were blind before the performances, and they have sign-interpreted performances. And this was all before the ADA. They did it because they thought it was the correct thing to do. As the producer said, he felt that people should go to the theater with dignity.

What they did not have, which is what I needed, was captioning. I always had a subscription there, and as my hearing deteriorated, I used the infrared system, but I asked that I sit in front because I wanted to lip read as well, and then by the end of my hearing loss, before my implant, they would give me a script in advance to read and follow. But the only thing that was keeping me at the theater was that my husband and I went with another couple, all hearing people. I became active in obtaining access, and let it be known that if they could have interpreters standing in front of the orchestra, then certainly there shouldn't be any objection to having captioning. So in the fall of 1996, with some additional advocating by the A.G. Bell Association, the very first performance in the Paper Mill Playhouse was captioned.

Then I got to thinking that real-time captioning wasn't the best way to go for live theater because everybody on that stage knows what they're going to say, so why caption it in real-time? Why not just beam it up as the dialogue is going along? So the second captioned performance had a digital screen.

Well. We knew that this theatre was a hop, skip, and a jump from Broadway, and by 1997 Broadway picked up on captioned live theater for selected performances. You cannot just show up for these special performances, it is by advance order. To do that you must be on their mailing list (you may contact The Theater Development's Fund Theater Access Project at tap@tdf.org for more information) It is also available in London. (www.stagetext.co.uk)

So you can advocate for these things. I will be happy to help you do so and you can contact me by e-mail. (aromoff@aol.com) The theater development fund runs this Theater Access Project for people with disabilities, and it's their mailing list that you want to get on. It's at their web site. The Access Project, runs captioned and interpreted performances separately. The Paper Mill Playhouse in New Jersey runs them together so they'll have interpreters and captioning, or as it has been named, open captioning.

This concept is slowly making its way across the country. There is now a theater in Orange County near Los Angeles that had captioned performances. And another near San Francisco, and OC is becoming the logo for open captioned.

Tickets for these performances are usually half price, which makes it a real bargain. Though one should add that the general public should not be made aware that the tickets are half price, so that they don't just buy them to get a cheap ticket. Otherwise the people who really need these seats will not be able to benefit from them.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I have a concern that people may confuse O.C. with open captioned videotape. Why not use C.T. meaning captioned theater? Then it could create its own identity?

ARLENE ROMOFF: At this stage, obviously, we are all pioneers seeking the best solutions. There was a need to try to minimize the number of logos that are out there, and if you're purchasing Broadway tickets, you know it's not going to be a video. Then too we needed to distinguish it from closed-captioned television or the rear-window captioning, which is a closed system. Also, on a personal level, it was my feeling that since there were so many objections to open captioned movies from the studios and the theater owners, I was kind of daring them to find a problem with open captioned live theater, as there were already interpreters doing this. So this is also giving some visibility to the needs of people with hearing loss who need captioning. Unlike with movies, there has not been any objection to the open captioning in the theater. What we have found is that the only objection from the audience is that they are often not in a seat where they can see the captioning. People who feel their hearing is normal and won't wear an infrared device if they can't see the captioning they complain at the intermission.

And that is interesting. It tells us that there is a need out there for what we call universal access. That is, access available without the pigeon holing as a provision for disabilities only. Ramps, hearing equipment, blind access and so forth. That way whoever wants it can have it. It's universal.

This theatre program has been so well received that our British counter-parts in London have taken it upon themselves to do a similar program. They started a non-profit organization last year, and they too have a web site (www.stagetext.co.uk) The British love their theatre OC and is marching rapidly throughout the country. If you vacation in Britain this is a real resource to have. Also, the Kennedy center in Washington now holds regularly scheduled open-captioned performances.

Now, there are certainly other technologies that are being worked on to also deliver this. The equipment that is being used is portable and while it was chosen simply because it was large enough to read, it also fit in the trunk of a car. So theatres can opt for this on a very transient basis. Now that it has taken root there is an understanding that this is a service that is needed. Not everybody knows sign language, and that was a huge point to get across in the beginning. So often it is assumed that sign language is all that is needed. That if you are deaf or hard of hearing you know how to sign. But we know that is not true. And even if you do know sign language, acquiring it at a later stage in life means that your skills will probably not be sufficient to allow you to enjoy a live-theater performance. And of course there is the issue of whether you want, for example, to be able to watch a Shakespearean play and understand every word. I've seen two so far. I've seen "Anthony and Cleopatra" in London, which was the very first captioned performance in London. It was three hours of reading that on the screen, and it was really amazing. And it was really good. It was a little tiring but wonderful. We also "Twelfth Night" in Lincoln center with live captions.

If you know of a theatre that you would like to see captioning I have put down a contact or the person who has been working on this for New York and New Jersey. (Donald DePew, drdepew@compuserve.com) There are other places in the country that also do captioned live theater. Chicago has one theater that has their own system. I think it's a projection system. They did this all on their own. And in Houston, Texas, they have a lot of captioning going on in their theaters, in their stadiums, and their convention centers.

Each one of us has the ability to make these things happen. Most of this information and technology is totally unknown and often in many cases, all you have to do is take the information you have and ask. It can be easy--not in every case, of course – to get the accommodations that you require. In this country in many cases in terms of accessibility for deaf and hard-of-hearing people, we're 100 years behind all the other disabilities. And the reason is quite clear: we are only now developing the technology that we need, and with this technology we are finally becoming empowered and able to effectively advocate for ourselves. This is important because when you advocate for your own needs you are far more effective than if you send a hearing person to do it for you.

Remember too that if you have any kind of residual hearing, either through the use of hearing aids or cochlear implants, it can be very very helpful to try to use assistive listening equipment. I know many people with cochlear implants are not aware that they can use them effectively, but they can.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Is there a difference in quality of the assistive listening devices in the different theatres?

ARLENE ROMOFF: Yes. There are two basic systems. You have infrared systems, and you have FM systems. I found with my cochlear implant I'm having some problems with interference in some theaters that have put in FM systems. All the Broadway theaters have infrared systems. Most live theaters have infrared. But some of the new systems being put in may be FM. Personally, I prefer the infrared systems in the theaters because I know that I won't have any interference problems. Cochlear implants have their own radio frequencies, and also theaters have lights and microphones that can interfere with FM systems.

We are in that situation right now in New Jersey. I was able to get funding for the theater alliance there to install assistive listening systems, but I can't approve FM systems if I can't use them. So we're trying to hammer out a solution.

When you go to a theater that has an infrared system, sometimes there are dead spots. Sometimes they don't have enough emitters to bring the signal to every seat. So sometimes under a balcony for example, the signal won't reach that area. If the emitters are on the sides of the theater, the seats in the middle may not get it, or sometimes if you're in the front row, you will actually be physically in front of the emitters, so you don't get the signal. So in general if you have a choice, you want to sit a few seats back, and actually, with captioning, you probably want to sit a little further back as that can make it easier to see.

FROM THE AUDIENCE: What do you have to do to get the script of a show ahead of time?

ARLENE ROMOFF: For a Broadway shows, there are copyright considerations, but there are bookstores. Samuel French is a bookstore in Manhattan that has the scripts of the new plays. The Lincoln Center Library for the Performing Arts has the scripts, but they do not allow them out of the library so you have to read them there. But, of course, if you go to a captioned performance, the script is right there.

FROM THE AUDIENCE: Often times organizations aren't sure if they should go ahead and purchase the FM system or the infrared systems. I receive telephone calls inquiring about which products they should purchase, and I'm never able to efficiently answer that because, I don't know. How can they go ahead and make the best-educated decision?

ARELENE ROMOFF: I share your pain. That is the situation we have here in New Jersey. I was able to get \$25,000 earmarked for assistive listening devices in as many theaters as that amount of money would cover. So obviously, the cheaper the system we chose the more theatres we can cover. However, that's counter-productive if we install a system that I can't use. So right now I am at this juncture on this question: there are infrared receivers (Audex and several other companies make them) that accommodate a neck loop for people who have a T switch on their hearing aids. Many people don't even know that their hearing aids have a T switch. If you have a T switch then you can use a loop and you will be able to get the signal from the infrared system and hear it through your hearing aid.

If you are a cochlear implant user, you would use the jack on this with a patch cord, and depending on your processor you would plug it into speech processor.

Assistive listening equipment has become part of my life. I have written a book on the first year of my experience with my cochlear implant. It's called "Hear Again." And covers my experiences from the first day of being hooked-up and the year that followed. So reading it is like being a fly on my shoulder. Now, interestingly, the first captioned performance on Broadway was in September 1997. I had the surgery for my cochlear implant in October 1997. So I was really, really deaf when I saw that first captioned performance. And after that, I was able to hear, using the infrared system with my implant. And this broadened my options. But just because you get an implant and can hear with FM or infrared does not mean that you don't want captions. Many of us want and use both.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: My question concern funding. If I initiated doing these things in my home city, would I be asking the theater to provide everything?

ARELENE ROMOFF: Essentially, yes. But what is usually the procedure is that the theaters are looking for grant money to cover the costs of this. For example, in New Jersey, Verizon, was the benefactor for one of the theaters. So that's usually the way to go. The cost for it is not astronomical. It's actually probably less than interpreters, so it's not

out of the question to provide it. It's not an undue burden, no. But the costs would be borne by the theater. They usually have funds for accessibility, so it would come under that. The producer of any theater is the one who makes these decisions. So if you're thinking of working on this it is the producer that you want to be speaking to.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: In terms of CART reporting: does this take special training to do in the theater?

ARLENE ROMOFF: Inputting the script does not require a real time reporter. Because the script can be just typed in, though a real time reporter might get it in faster than somebody who is just typing. As far as the performance itself, there is no real skill involved -- although it can be an art. You want to synchronize it so those words come up at just the right time. However, there are times when there may be some adlibbing in the show, in which case they would need to bring their real time equipment. Also, for any announcements they would use the real time equipment for that. But other than that, for the actual performance, if they stick to the script, there's no compelling reason for a person to be a court reporter, and in fact, one of the people doing the captioning in the Broadway shows is not.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Can I buy my own unit to use—an FM or infrared?

ARLENE ROMOFF: With FM receivers you can't really have your own, because of the different frequencies that are used. And each unit has to be tuned to the particular frequency that is being used. The frequency that one theatre uses may differ from the one used at another theatre. That's not the case with infrared receivers, so I strongly suggest, that if you do use assistive equipment that you purchase your own infrared receiver.

Which would bring me to my next topic: the movies. In the movies, they're required to have assistive listening systems. Some of the theaters have FMs that you can use. But many of the theaters have infrared in them, and usually they only have the kinds of headsets that people without any kind of equipment use, they just -- the kind that you put over your ears, and you can adjust the volume. Those headphones are not good for people who want to use their hearing aids or who want to use their cochlear implants.

Now when you go to that movie theatre and they have those headphones if they have a little red dot on the top that tells you that those are infrared. So then you know that that theater has infrared. The box office attendant is more often than not not going to know if their system is infrared or FM, and that is how you can tell. If it is infrared I usually bring my own.

Now in movie houses with infrareds sometimes they have the infrared emitter in the back, and that works fine if you use their headphones. But if you are using your own and it is worn in front and you are facing forward while it is being beamed from the back, you are just going to get static. So you have to kind of find the signal, and put your unit on your shoulder and find the emitter, which looks like a box with dots on it, sometimes with a red light, sometimes not, and sit near it so you get a strong signal. Outdoor events usually cannot use infrared since light breaks the signal.

I know a lot of people who are using cochlear implants think, oh, I can hear now. I don't need to bother with these things and they don't optimize their hearing with these personal systems. But with these things you can cancel out all the extraneous noise, and get an almost perfect signal.

I often suggest to museums that they print often up some sort of printed guided tour. It's a really low-tech and really low budget. Many museums hire retired people or have volunteers to give guided tours, and they think everybody can hear them. But you know that that's not the case. They may not have equipment. You may not want to bring your own. But you may just want to be on your own self-guided tour. So by advocating for such resources you will be doing yourself and those who come after you a favor if you are pro-active in requesting such material.

Also those of you with cochlear implants should know that if a museum has an audio guide you can patch into them. Just take your patch cord and plug into the audio guide. There are a variety of systems in use in museums. Most of them are now digital. You push the button of the exhibit, and you can hear what is being described. Those people with hearing aids and neck loops, you can use your neck loop with a hearing aid just as a person with normal hearing uses headphones.

People often don't realize this but if you turn on your T switch, and plug into whatever device people are plugging in their headphones, it will work fine assuming your T switch has enough power.

In New York City both the Metropolitan Museum and the Museum of Modern Art are offering captioned lectures. Not often, maybe once a month, if that. And it's real time captioning, and this is a big breakthrough, because they had to get funding. They are the first ones to do this. And this is why we need to advocate because to get this we need to ask now that the technology is here to do it. So be prepared to be the pioneer and explain this is what your needs are.

AUDIENCEMEMBER: How do the museums determine what to caption?

ARLENE ROMOFF: Right now it is their choice. It is really right now kind of a trial situation because it is so new and so ingrained that people with hearing loss need sign language interpreters. At the Met right now they feel safer when they have someone from their own department give the lecture. It is who they think will be agreeable to doing it and perhaps what time the lecture is given. They have been doing either Sunday afternoon or Friday early evening, late afternoon trying to figure out when is the best time to get more people to attend. I went to one lecture on Medieval Helmets and let me tell you, it was the most entertaining and informative lecture than I have ever attended, because I truly knew nothing about medieval helmets or armor, for that matter, and I was so interested after the lecture, I went and bought a book on the subject. It is an adventure no matter what the topic is.

AUDIENCENCE MEMBER: How do you advocate for funding for that kind of thing?

ARLENE ROMOFF: The New Jersey Council on the Arts, which is a division of the Department of State, their requirement is that anybody applying for funds from their Arts Council -- and every state has an arts council, have an ADA compliance plan. Now, the National Endowment for the Arts knows this but they do not have a similar policy. They should have a similar policy. It's shameful that they don't. So New Jersey is really a leader in this field. They will not approve funding for a facility, unless they have a plan that is approved, and the approval of that plan hinges on accommodation for all people with disabilities.

The problem in New Jersey is that they didn't have people reading these plans who were terribly adept in knowing the needs of people with hearing loss until I came on the scene. And when I read some of these the plans put forward for the deaf and hard of hearing I found they were often totally inadequate, such as saying they would seat you up front. I was on the task force and I said this is unacceptable and that there should be some teeth in this policy.

But in funding it really comes down to grants. Right now in the field of arts, money is so scarce because the N.E.A funding has been slashed. So everyone is scrambling to the corporations and private foundations. My personal feeling is that wherever I've gone to speak, I have found that usually there is someone with a foundation or deep pockets who has one degree of separation from someone with a significant hearing loss and would be willing to fund this kind of effort. And they have no clue about how to help until I tell them what is available. You just have to keep tapping away. There are long lists of foundations. There are web sites, and resources for where to write grants.

Verizon offers grants for technology and being that captioning or assistive equipment is certainly technology. That would be one way to go.

Also, under the ADA and the 504 law, which predates the ADA, any time there is funding from the Federal Government that program must provide accessibility.

Arlene Romoff, who holds a B.S. in mathematics, is the author of the book, *Hear Again - Back to Life with a Cochlear Implant*, a chronicle of her experience with the implant and hearing loss. She is a member of the New Jersey Division of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Advisory Council, the Board of Directors of the League for the Hard of Hearing, the New Jersey Arts Access Task Force, as well as several organizations addressing the needs of deaf and hard of hearing people. She is on the executive board of Advocates for Better Communication (a.b.c.), the advocacy committee allied with the League for the Hard of Hearing, and is editor of their newsletter, "a.b.c. Reports." She spearheaded the successful advocacy effort for open captioning at live theatrical performances on Broadway, London, and regional U.S. theaters, and has been honored by several organizations for her advocacy work. She has spoken in many forums and had articles published on issues relating to accessibility for people with hearing loss. Aromoff@aol.com

