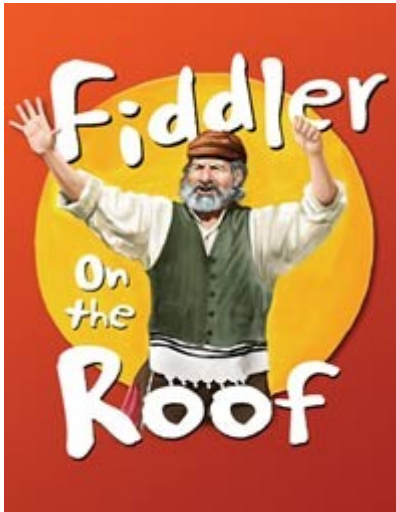


Audio Description Premieres at Walnut Street Theatre



On Saturday, July 10, [Walnut Street Theatre](#), the oldest theatre in America, reached a new milestone in its 201-year history by presenting an audio described mainstage performance for the first time. Audio description allows people who are blind or have low vision to enjoy equal access to cultural events such as live performances, film, television, and museums. Audio description provides listeners with descriptive information about visual elements during pauses in dialogue or narration. Information is transmitted to listeners through a wireless earpiece, allowing people who are blind or have low vision to sit anywhere in the audience during performances.

Audio description is a means of communicating the most essential information about significant visual elements such as actions, body language, costumes, and settings. The audio describer's role is to describe what he or she sees without interpretation or explanation. For instance, rather than describing a character as "sad," the audio describer might say, "Henry hangs his head." This allows listeners to draw their own conclusions.

For its inaugural audio described performance, [Walnut Street Theatre](#) presented "Fiddler on the Roof." Prior to the show, Art-Reach members were invited to participate in a sensory tour to enhance their experience of the performance. For the tour, two cast members of "Fiddler" shared information with members about the time period and history of the show, the cultural and religious influences on lives of the characters, and the costumes and sets. Members were invited to touch costume pieces such as hats, kerchiefs, and wigs to provide them more information about each piece. One member who is visually impaired said the sensory tour gave her "a better understanding of the play and characters," while another added, "For the things we can't see, we know what they feel like and what they look like [from the sensory tour]."

The audio describer began the performance with pre-show notes. Pre-show notes provided listeners with any essential information the describer would not have time to give during the show. This included a description of the stage and set pieces, a description of critical elements of

the costumes (e.g., all women wear headscarves and long skirts), and key characteristics of the main characters (e.g., skin color, approximate age). As the performance began, the describer gave listeners cues as to what was happening on stage, such as "curtain rises" and "blackout."

During the performance, the describer provided listeners with essential information through brief descriptions. This included set changes, such as "The fences extend across the stage, creating a village scene," information about what characters were wearing, such as "Her veil is waist length," and descriptions of the action on stage, such as "Everyone freezes except Tevye" and "Villagers enter from the right carrying a white canopy." The describer also provided listeners with information about dancing sequences in the show, such as "Dancers move to the right and bow to their knees" and "They dance, forming two concentric circles and waving their arms frantically in the air." The describer avoided interrupting dialogue unless absolutely necessary to convey key information, thus allowing listeners to fully experience the show's music and dialogue.

After the show, Art-Reach members and guests were treated to a reception to celebrate the [Walnut Street Theatre's](#) new accessibility milestone. Speaking about her afternoon at The Walnut, one member who is visually impaired said that the sensory tour and audio description "made [the show] come to life." Another commented that the tour and description "helped [me] to be a part of [the performance]." Walnut Street Theatre plans to offer audio description for future select mainstage performances.

For more information about audio description, including information on becoming an audio describer yourself, visit the Audio Description Coalition's website at www.audiodescriptioncoalition.org.

- by Jennifer Oglesbee

Jennifer is a [Special Projects Ambassador](#) in [Art-Reach's Ambassador Program](#)