

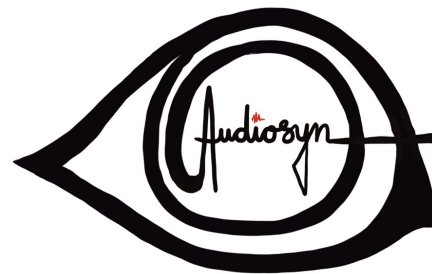
Recorded Audio Description as an integral part of the LIVE dance performance of Miramos

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Theoretical background

There is growing interest in making dance performances accessible for individuals with visual impairment and blindness (BVI) (Bläsing & Zimmermann (2021) to strengthen cultural participation of a non-sighted audience in aesthetic experience of dance and to elicit positive emotional reactions (Karkou et al 2017).

One way is to provide live audio description (AD) that enhances mental imagery (Holsanova 2021, Johansson 2016) and gives BVI audiences means to engage with the work of art and immerse in the mood and feelings that the artwork evokes (Perego 2019).

Apart from locomotion (movement dynamics, spatial direction, body shape and attitude) (Geiger 2005), dance is also a part of a narrative (Fryer 2009).

There is therefore a call for an enriched AD (Neves 2016) that includes description of facial expressions, glances, gestures, body postures, emotions and uses a visually intense poetic language (Margolies 2015).

All these aspects create a better context not only for understanding and imagination but also for empathy, engagement and aesthetic emotions in the experience of choreographic performances (Fertier 2017).

Dance Company *Spinn* and performance *Miramos*

The Swedish Dance Company *Spinn* was founded by the artistic leader Veera Suvalo Grimberg in 2010

- professional dance company, supported by the City of Gothenburg, Västra Götaland Region and the Swedish Arts Council
- passionate about new ways of creating and presenting the art of dance by including performers and audiences with disabilities and by challenging stereotypes about what dance is and can be

Miramos (35 minutes) is a family performance for children (4-8 years old)

- magical and playful journey beyond time, among colours, shapes and fantasy. The audience meets four imaginative creatures who are on a temporary visit on our blue-green planet. Curious and wondering, they explore the world.



Veera Suvalo Grimberg

1. Challenges and advances in AD of dance

The biggest challenge was to create a balance between the form of *artistic expression* i.e., to preserve choreographic details which constitute the dance performance, and *the narrative* so that the recipients can create inner images, interpret the story, and create their own aesthetic experience of the performance.

Analytical description
Body movements, spatial directions, body shape, attitudes, manner, Artistic expression
Choreography

Description of facial expressions
Emotions, gazes
Interaction between the characters

Narrative descriptions
Events and activities relevant to the story
Short narrative summaries

Degree of Interpretation

Examples:

Curious and unafraid, Tip-Toe trips along on bare feet. With bright eyes, Tip-Toe investigates the room. Its round body rocks from side to side while it walks with quick, short steps. ...

Stick lifts its head and smiles mischievously. It bends down again and studies the ground. Thoughtfully, it scratches its very long head, taking a few steps, supported by its long arm. ...

Tip-Toe dances behind Stick and jumps up on its back. Stick carries its friend for a while, and then Tip-Toe lands softly on the floor, on its knees They sneak up on each other. With playful, light steps, Tip-Toe moves towards Stick, who cheerfully puts its arm around Tip-Toe, lifts the purple friend up, and puts it down again. They continue playing.

2. Team work around the creation of AD

- The audio describer was invited to rehearsals, and the team – the audio describer, art director, choreographer and performers – started an intense, open and permissive dialogue
- By reading and processing the script together, the team was able to identify vague places and decide how to improve them
- The synchronization of music and AD was then created in QLab software via cues (cf method)
- Including a reference group: Have some parts become unclear?, Did you get inner images?, Was anything hard to understand?, Do you like anything in particular? What about amount of words, pace of AD, the overall experience, other thoughts?
- Feedback from the BVI reference group was important in the process. Certain expressions were clarified (*screen wall - fabric screen*), BVI asked for a repetition of *colours* (to recognise and remember the characters), complained about too long pauses in AD (solution: very slowly pronounced phrases *centimeter by centimeter*), did not understand how the character *moved sideways* and *suggested zig-zag movement*

2. Team work around creation of AD

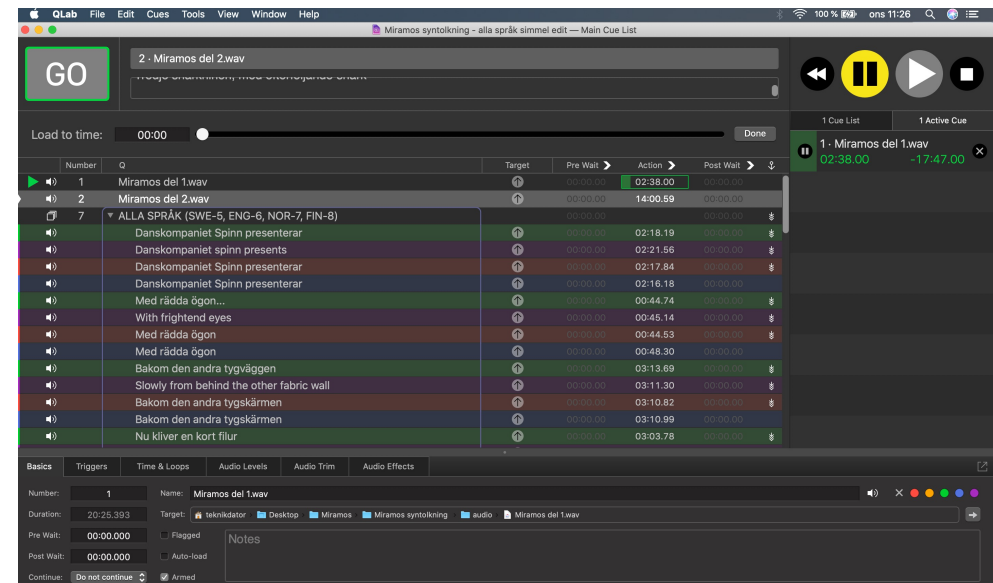
- The collaborative efforts resulted in a final version of the script with visually intense language, rich vocabulary, vivid descriptions of movements, facial expressions, emotions, gazes and narrative elements.
- Apart from that, the teamwork also led to changes in choreography, changes in wording and formulations (as suggested by the reference group), and to additions of choreographic details (as reliable cues for AD).
- The artistic experience has been further enhanced and the dancers have become clearer in their expressions after taking part in the process of recorded AD.

3. Method: inclusive and accessible live performance of dance via recorded AD

- First draft of AD written on the basis of a filmed performance, discussed with the team, BVI, and perfected in further collaboration.
- Delimitation of (meaningful) thematic and interactional units and establishing cues for synchronisation of AD based on:
 - clear new start of a thematic episode
 - new character enters the scene
 - change in music (male choir, new motif)
 - change in light
 - change in activity (yawning, playing)
 - pause with a character snoring between two musical parts
 - and other reliable cues

Segmentation into narrative event units and recognition of their Boundaries are important both for perception by the audiences and for practical reasons of synchronisation.

- Qlab, a powerful software tool, used for synchronising and playing of sound, video, light & control cues for the AD
- Technician starts the AD during the performance according to the cues



4. Conclusions & lessons learnt

- Recorded AD can be offered at every live performance which improves accessibility which contributes to aesthetic experiences for a larger group of BVI audiences
- Qlab is a suitable tool for synchronisation of music, dance and AD via time cues
- Collaborative team work is crucial - Start a dialogue between the audio describer, the dancers and the choreographer early in the creative process
- Include a reference group in the creative process and use their feedback to improve the AD script
- Be aware of various interpretations, misunderstandings, differences in the choice of vocabulary
- Add both choreographic details and narrative summaries for the benefit of the BVI audiences
- Use vivid descriptions of movements, facial expressions, emotions, gazes to enhance mental imagery
- Find a skilled technician who can operate the Qlab during the performance and include him/her early in the production process

Thanks for your attention!

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