

Down to the Struts

Episode 6: Artreach, Part 2

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For more information: www.downtothestruts.com

Introduction

[jazzy piano chords, bass strumming with smooth R&B]

Qudsiya 0:12

Hi, this is Qudsiya Naqui and welcome to part two of this week's episode of down to the struts. We'll listen in on my conversation with Nicole Sardella, a Philadelphia based audio describer. Nicole will explore the art of audio description and its power to transform our experience of visual art. If you haven't done so already, check out part one of this episode, which features Charlie Miller, the director of strategic partnerships at Artreach in Philadelphia. As you settle into the holiday season, during the pandemic, these conversations offer a feast for the senses and a new perspective on our experience of the arts. Okay, let's get down to it.

Hi, Nicole, thank you so much for joining me from Philadelphia. Thanks for being here.

Nicole 1:07

Thank you for having me. I'm really grateful to be here.

Qudsiya 1:09

I want to start off by asking you to tell us a little bit about your story, how you became involved with the organization called Artreach.

Nicole 1:17

I am an audio describer in the Philadelphia area. I've been describing for about eight years, going on nine years through primarily through Artreach. I became more familiar with audio description through art reach in terms of how I kind of became an audio describer. One day I got a phone call from one of the staff members at Artreach. And she asked me if I would be interested in getting training and audio description. And I immediately said yes, because it

combines so many things that I love. And I got trained in February of 2012. And I have been audio describing ever since. I just fell in love with it. So I kind of haven't stopped.

Qudsiya 2:03

That's really cool. And sounds like this was something that kind of started off as a thing you were exploring and now has become a huge part of your life. So can you tell us a little bit about the sorts of things that you drive in the course of your work?

Nicole 2:17

Yes, I've had the great privilege to describe a variety of different types of mediums. So I kind of divide them, if you divide them into categories, we could say live art, like plays, musicals, dance performances, I would also include like films, shorts, and other video clips, and then more visual arts like museum galleries, exhibits, including the Flower Show.

Qudsiya 2:44

Yeah. So can you tell our listeners a little bit about the Philadelphia Flower Show, which was one of my personal favorite things about living in Philly?

Nicole 2:52

Yes, it occurs every spring and Philadelphia. And I would say probably hundreds of exhibits are displayed throughout the Philadelphia Convention Center. And they're from local, national and international floral designers. Every year, there's a different theme, the most recent theme was I think it was Riviera holiday. And so it was really focused on sort of the Italian and French Riviera, and how that was all expressed through flowers, and landscape design.

Qudsiya 3:25

That's really cool. And I love the different themes of the Flower Show and the different color schemes. And it's a really cool experience for anyone who ever has the opportunity to attend the show. So you mentioned earlier that audio description brought together a lot of different things that you love. Can you talk a little bit about what you love about audio description? And what are your favorite aspects of doing it?

Nicole 3:46

I honestly love everything about it, nothing has brought me the joy that audio describing brings being able to connect with people and to share the art or cultural experience. And to play a small role in facilitating that is very, very rewarding. And being able to in terms of like creating the audio description, I love being able to observe the art and understand the art and really like analyze it and then come up with words for it. I love writing and I love speaking and so being able to combine that with accessibility has been honestly like one of the greatest joys that I could ever experience.

Qudsiya 4:30

That's really, really fantastic that you've found so many elements of audio description that you enjoy and that you're simultaneously able to provide access for others. So you know, related to

that theme you were mentioning while you're speaking earlier that oftentimes you are in a separate area in a big theater or if you're if you're interpreting or audio describing, for example, some sort of a performance and you're describing for a whole group of people, like ones also at the Flower Show you describe experience of taking, you know, 20, 25, 30 people around in a big group and kind of describing the Flower Show and the different exhibitions there. So can you talk about how you think about your role as an audio describer? On the one hand, there's providing someone with a literal kind of picture of what is the visual elements in the built environment. But then there's also, there is some level of interpretation that happens as you're doing that. So can you talk a little bit about your experience in kind of balancing those two things as you're crafting a description for someone who is not experiencing the visual aspects of the thing that you're describing?

Nicole 5:42

Yes, everyone always laughs, but I always say, my audio description motto is "say what you see." And for me, it's really important to not editorialize or do too much interpretation in terms of providing audio description, because my role, I view my role as being an observer, and observing and then putting those observations into words. When you're describing, there's an element of analysis that you have to do prior to describing. So when I describe, I'll preview, whatever I'm describing, several times, so that I can analyze the essential visual elements, because you could really spend hours describing anything, because you could, you could go down to the color of the buttons, the color of the stitching, each individual square inch of a painting. And so as a describer, you're sort of thinking about what is essential, what is the central visual element of this specific piece that you're describing, the medium that you're describing. And I think that what is so interesting, and what is so unique about audio description is that each person brings their own experience and their own background to their audio description. And in terms of audio describing, one of the techniques that I found to be effective is when you have a reference point in terms of like, size, or what something looks like. So, saying that I've been told that I do a lot of food based descriptions. So I compare a lot of things to food. And so as an example, like I audio described a brain exhibit and I described the brain like a walnut with like the ridges and the size and sort of the shape. To me, it looked like the top, it looks like the top half of a walnut. That's a way that you're bringing a bit of yourself to the description. And in another example, I was describing at a museum and there was a piece that had kind of 10 sort of dodgeball-like balls that were connected by a string, a larger ball, 10 balls, a larger ball. And that repeated five times. And to me, as someone who was raised Catholic that looked like a rosary. And to someone else, it just looked like dodgeballs. And so that was an instance where, you know, I brought part of my own background and my own history to the description that I had. And if someone else has that similar cultural reference point that can create a clear visual. Because not everyone does, I always try to also describe what it looks like visually, because I think that it's my job as a describer to not only describe what I see, but describe it in a meaningful way and in an accessible way that everyone who is listening will be able to experience the description.

Qudsiya 8:45

That's really interesting. And I love the example of the dodgeballs versus the rosary beads. I guess one person's dodgeball is another person's rosary beads. I think that's so fantastic and interesting. And I wonder, I know, you were explaining that, you know, you often describe to people that you're not necessarily like directly interacting in an individual way. But I'm curious if you have had any kind of feedback with people at any point with respect to your audio descriptions, and like, what that experience has been or like how you have developed the skill based on input that you're getting from someone who is hearing your description, do you get that kind of feedback ever? And like how does that influence your future audio describing?

Nicole 9:28

Yes, one of the ways that I think that I've been able to develop my skills as an audio describer is from feedback that people I described for have provided for me. It has been the most valuable and most influential part of my description. It has, it has helped me to grow as a describer and I hope to provide better, more concise, more robust and more accurate description. As a few examples, when I first started describing I had probably five pages of pre show notes that I was reading before every performance really describing a lot of details about the costumes, the sets. And when I spoke to people afterward, they were very kind to say not all that detail is necessary, we don't need to know every single color that's, that is in someone's costume, the overall color, the overall color scheme is okay. And even in terms of being more concise, and being more pointed in my description, and trying to use language that has, that's tangible in a way, trying to use words that really have a pull to them. Like saying something like this is the classic audio describer example. But saying something like walk doesn't have the visual impact that saying something like stroll or strut or saunter has. Or even saying something like hug, like, are people embracing? So really thinking about those words and the language that I use, and so much of, of that has come from speaking with people and listening to what they found to be more effective or to be less effective. Another example was, I described like someone was wearing a kitten heel. And I didn't say what that was, just assuming that people knew. And then, before I started, someone was like, what's a kitten heel? And I was like, Oh, my gosh, I should have said that. And so now every time I use a specific term with a, with a name like that, I always say what it is after because I never want anyone to leave my description with more questions. I want all everyone's questions to be answered.

Qudsiya 11:44

Yeah, I think that that's a tall order for you. But I love what you're, as someone who is a consumer of audio, a lot of audio description, I think for me, that you were talking about, like being really visceral and your descriptions and kind of using other evoking other types of senses as you describe so someone can like sort of be inside of your description and experience the other senses that you're explaining, I think that helps to create the experience for someone who is not experiencing it visually. So I think that makes a lot of sense. And you know, a lot of the things you've been describing are in person experiences with art in a museum or performances. So I'm curious about how the pandemic has shaped the work that you do, and how it's affected how you're able to do your work as an audio describer now that everything is on a screen.

Nicole 12:33

Yes, I've gone from fully in person description to fully remote description. It has definitely changed so much of my normal describing process, although I still sort of follow the same outline of what I normally do, which is preview the piece and then describe it. Now I have the opportunity to rerecord myself. And if I say something that I think, Oh, this could use a little bit of tweaking, this could be more accurate, this could be more concise, I have the opportunity to make those changes, which for me, I think has, I hope, been able to create and provide a more effective, robust, and a better version of audio description. And my process and the technology that I've been using has changed slightly since the beginning. And in terms of describing sort of at the root, it's the same, but the way that the way that it happens is a bit different.

Qudsiya 13:37

Can you explain that a little bit more? You're saying like the general elements are the same, but how is it, how is it different in terms of process for you now?

Nicole 13:44

Normally, when I'm describing in person, it's one take. So it's like there's no opportunity to go back and rerecord because you are experiencing a different, sometimes I noticed when I described the first time when I do my first run through, I notice I'm like okay, a little bit, a little bit quicker with this language a little okay, change this, change this word, change that word. And one of the interesting parts I think is with live live theater, any live performance, the pacing of what you're describing can change every night. So sometimes there's more applause, less applause, no applause sometimes, standing ovation. So you get this variety of how the pacing of the show goes and it definitely is a different experience when all you do is rewind, go back re record. So it's definitely been different and it has challenged me to continue to what I hope is continue to improve the description that I'm providing because I have the opportunity now to go back and make sure that the description that I'm providing really is reflective of the visuals that that are on the screen. Whereas I think in person, you know, you don't have the opportunity to rewind yourself. So although i think

Qudsiya 15:10

I'm sure people wish they could do that in life.

Nicole 15:12

Oh, I know! And I think for me, I've been able to describe, because I describe in one region, I've been able to describe four people on multiple occasions and been able to connect with people and you know, have those relationships and that I hope continue to grow over time. And it's definitely been different to just describe to myself in my closet, and it, it really makes me realize how valuable those relationships are and how meaningful that they have been.

Qudsiya 15:47

Yeah. So you and me both we are reporting live from our closets.

Nicole 15:53

Yeah.

Qudsiya 15:53

So I'm curious about, I assume you're still working mostly with, you know, local Philadelphia organizations on some of this remote describing, but I'm, what sorts of virtual programming have been available that you've been participating in describing?

Nicole 16:08

Yes, there was a festival in Philadelphia. And in prior years, I described one performance. And this year, I described nine. So having description from home has opened up some opportunities, I think, for actually creating more accessible content in terms of that specific organization. And so I did not expect that to happen. But I was really pleasantly surprised. Because I think, I think for everyone, for myself, the pandemic has forced people to slow down a bit. And I think that that opportunity to describe more and to have more accessibility was not what I thought would have happened in a pandemic, but I was, I was really pleasantly surprised. I think that in general, I hope that organizations can see that creating accessible art and accessible videos is within their capability, and that it's something that is it's able to be done, and that it's something that I hope becomes part of organizations DNA, for lack of a better term, that it becomes a part of every performance like yes, we're doing a video, great, we're going to audio describe it, we're going to put captions on it, and it's gonna have ASL.

Qudsiya 17:26

Yeah. So a couple of questions emanate from me from that. So have you noticed in the virtual environment that people have been a lot like more focused on making it accessible than they maybe were when it was just an exhibit in a museum or performance in a theater?

Nicole 17:40

I have worked with organizations that I had not worked with before the pandemic in terms of making content accessible, including like galleries, dance performances. One of the dancers that I have had the privilege of describing for, she created a piece where there was no music, only her dancing and my audio description. And it was an opportunity, I think, to put accessibility as the focus of the piece. And I think that I think that she would have done that outside of the pandemic. But I think that it's the audience that she was able to reach because of, you know, it being virtual and, and people having broader access to the arts in general was, I was really grateful to be a part of that.

Qudsiya 18:28

I love that, it's like the audio describing and the visual of the dancing. It's that was it was it was an art piece in and of itself, your description was a part of the art.

Nicole 18:38

Yeah, I'm really grateful to have been a part of that.

Qudsiya 18:41

So I'm curious, you mentioned also that maybe this artist would have produced this piece of work regardless, but it reached a broader audience. Have you found that to be true with the other things you've been audio describing remotely? Like has the, do you feel like you're reaching a bigger and wider and more diverse audience because of the fact that things are available online now?

Nicole 19:00

I can only speak anecdotally, just because I'm not on like the producing end, or the people who put out the content. But I can say that from my own experience. Now, for the pieces that I'm describing, there's like the video without audio description and the video with audio description on the same page. And so it's present in the way that the content is being displayed on the website and the way that it is accessible. And it's not only in the sort of language section, like it is on a on TV or on an internet streaming service. But the audio description is included in the main page. And often times the people who produce and create the content will explain what audio description is and have the video like right underneath.

Qudsiya 19:50

That's really cool. So it's kind of it's becoming more like front and center to the process as opposed to just like something that's only available for a specific set of people.

Nicole 19:59

Yeah. I think a lot of, so I'm like local to Philadelphia, but I think a lot of the organizations that I work with are including Artreach are really advocating for more accessibility and having the accessibility more readily available and available in an accessible way so that people can, people can access it in a straightforward way.

Qudsiya 20:23

Yeah, that's awesome. So, you know, I, I definitely have a lot of friends and people in my life who describe things for me like pictures and things like that, that I would love for you to share and your expertise. So what what are sort of the key elements of a good audio description if you wanted to share some tips with people who want to become good audio describers?

Nicole 20:48

Yes, I'm not sure of expertise. But, I will say that what I tell everyone who I train is, say what you see, that's the most important rule of audio description. And I think it's, it's important not to interpret and editorialize the content, because your listener will do that, or themselves, they'll hear the words that you're saying, and they'll interpret the piece the way that they interpret it. And that, to me, that's what audio describing is, is really about at its core. And if you're describing something that has dialogue, I always try to make a really concerted effort not to speak over the dialogue, although you're a human. So it, it does happen. But that, I think it all, to me comes back to say what you see.

Qudsiya 21:41

Very good advice. So Nicole, as we wrap up our conversation, I just wanted to see if you've shared so much interesting and helpful information. And it's been great to hear about your experiences of audio describing so I wanted to see if you had any any final parting words to share about your work as an audio describer and your experiences?

Nicole 22:01

Yeah, I really encourage everyone that I speak to about audio description to look into it to, to become, to get training, if that's possible. And to incorporate audio description in your everyday life. I think it's such an incredible service. And it's such an incredible tool to facilitate accessibility and accessible experiences. And I encourage everyone who even has a little bit of an interest in it, to explore it more and to look into it, whether as an audio describer yourself, or as someone who is going to utilize audio description, or someone who's going to advocate for audio description, I think that the more that it's available, the better everyone will be.

Qudsiya 22:44

That's fantastic. So Nicole, can you, can you tell folks where they can find you and learn more about your services as a as an audio describer?

Nicole 22:53

Yes, I have a website. It's audiodescriber.com and I also have an Instagram account at [audio describer](https://www.instagram.com/audio_describer). I'm Nicole at [audio describer dot com](http://audiodescriber.com). Please feel free to reach out in any of those ways. And I'm happy to talk more about audio description and share anything that I can to help facilitate audio description.

Qudsiya 23:14

Thanks so much, Nicole, and we'll share all that information out in our show notes. So thanks again for being with us.

Nicole 23:20

Thank you. Thank you so much. It's been incredible. Thank you.

Qudsiya 23:26

Thank you for listening to this episode of down to the struts. This podcast would not be possible without the energy and creativity of Anna Woo, Adrian Kong, Ilana Nevins and Avery Anapol. And thanks to you, the listeners for tuning in for season one. We are so excited to bring you more great episodes coming up in season two, where we will explore topics like immigration, the virtual world of the pandemic, and so much more. In the meantime, to read more about this episode, and see photos of Artreach in action, visit our website at www.downtothestruts.com also remember to subscribe rate and review the podcast on Apple podcasts, Spotify, Stitcher or wherever you love to listen. We also want to hear from you. If you have questions about the podcast or ideas for future episodes or just want to share your thoughts you can email us downtothestruts@gmail.com. Thank you again and best wishes for a happy healthy and safe holiday season. Join me soon for season two so we can get back down to it.

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