

## CASE STUDY: Arts For All

# An audio-described performance of The Pohutukawa Tree

**March 2011**

Sarah Adams graduated from Toi Whakaari: New Zealand Drama School in 2010 with a Bachelor of Performing Arts (Management). She was also the production manager of *The Pohutukawa Tree*, Toi Whakaari's graduating production. She talks to Arts Access Aotearoa about the challenges and rewards of providing an audio-described performance of this iconic New Zealand play.

## 1. Background: about Toi Whakaari

Toi Whakaari ([toiwhakaari.ac.nz](http://toiwhakaari.ac.nz)) is New Zealand's leading training institution for the dramatic arts. It offers a range of courses and degree options, including Bachelor of Performing Arts degrees in acting and in management; a Master of Theatre Arts in directing (with Victoria University of Wellington); a Bachelor of Design for stage and screen; and a Diploma of Costume Construction.

Toi Whakaari and the New Zealand School of Dance work from the Te Whaea National Dance and Drama Centre in Newtown, Wellington. These facilities were purpose-designed and are among the best in the southern hemisphere.

## 2. The project: audio-described performance of The Pohutukawa Tree

As production manager of *The Pohutukawa Tree*, my job was to manage crew, budget and resources. That meant overseeing all the behind-the-scene elements such as the lighting, sound, set design, props and costumes.

Getting involved in the audio description came about when the Wellington branch of the Association of Blind Citizens of New Zealand ([abcnz.org.nz](http://abcnz.org.nz)) asked Toi Whakaari about doing audio-described performances. As production manager, I was asked if I'd be interested in taking it on. I was really keen, partly because it was a challenge and partly because my nana has been blind for the past five years. I know how much she misses the things she used to do, like going to the theatre.

## 3. What was the process in making it happen?

The first thing I did was meet up with three members of the Association of Blind Citizens of New Zealand to find out what they wanted and whether it was feasible. Then I got in touch with Arts Access Aotearoa and read the *Arts For All*



*Arts For All* is an Arts Access Aotearoa/Creative New Zealand partnership programme. The aim of this programme is to encourage arts organisations, venues and producers to improve their access to disabled audiences.

Download *Arts For All*, published in 2014 by Arts Access Aotearoa, at [artsaccess.org.nz](http://artsaccess.org.nz) or call 04 802 4349 for a hard copy.



publication, which was very helpful. Arts Access Aotearoa also put me in touch with Mary Schnackenberg, one of the few people in New Zealand with experience in audio description. She was really willing to help and excited about what we were planning to do.

Mary gave me an outline of what I needed to do and then I did a lot of research – going online and also talking to lots of theatre practitioners to find out the best way to realise an audio-descriptive production.

In the end, we contracted International Conference Services in Wellington. They provided two vital ingredients: the gear and the knowledge. On the day, they came in and set up the AM transmitter and microphone, which transmitted the audio description to the AM wireless receivers and headsets worn by our blind patrons.

We did several tests and I found that if I sat up the back with the lighting and sound operators, I could see the whole stage and talk into the microphone without distracting anyone. That was great because it meant we didn't need a sound-proof box, which may have been necessary under different circumstances.

At the beginning of the actual performance, we tested the equipment to make sure everyone in the audience could hear my voice and had their receivers set at a volume level that suited them.

Then I read the programme notes to the audience although we also provided the notes in Braille, thanks to the Association of Blind Citizens. We also provided a large-print version of the programme notes. And after the show, the audience met up with the cast and the ushers took them on a touch tour of the stage.

In terms of marketing to the blind and vision-impaired community, it wasn't an issue. The Association of Blind Citizens of New Zealand got the word out through its networks. We were sold out very quickly and had a waiting list of people we couldn't accommodate.

#### **4. How does audio description work and who was the audio describer?**

I was the audio describer. Basically, I talked into the microphone and transmitter, describing what was happening on stage in between the dialogue. So, for instance:

“Roy puts on the gramophone and starts dancing. He takes Queenie's hands and they dance in the backyard across the front of the stage.”

I had written the audio-description script, concentrating on the costuming, physical descriptions of the characters and the props, as well as the entrances and exits. I described the set at the beginning of the performance and

because it didn't change, I didn't have to do it again. If there had been any scene changes, I would have had to describe those.

As production manager, I had a thorough understanding of the production and this allowed me to improvise at times, rather than sticking to the audio-description script.

## 5. What were the main challenges and how did you overcome them?

- **COST:** The biggest challenge was the cost. It took me three weeks of research to find International Conference Services and once that happened, things were a lot easier. They gave us a really good rate and we were very grateful for that.
- **HEALTH AND SAFETY:** Mary Schnackenberg was very helpful and provided me with a lot of advice. We had a maximum of 80 people in the theatre and increased our ushers from two to 12 so we could minimise the risk in an emergency. The ushers met our guests and brought them through the side door to avoid a lot of steps, and helped them to their seats. The ushers also assisted the patrons in putting on the headsets, and made sure they were comfortable.
- **KNOWLEDGE:** We were starting from the unknown and so research was vital. Mary gave me a fantastic resource called *Making Theatre Accessible: A Guide to Audio Description in the Performing Arts* ([acb.org/baystate/audioguide.htm](http://acb.org/baystate/audioguide.htm)), published in the United States. It really had everything you need to know.

## 6. What was the audience response?

We had a full house – 80 people – and the response was overwhelming. For example, Ann Bain, branch chair of the Association of Blind Citizens of New Zealand, said her experience of the play was greatly enhanced by the audio description.

“As a blind person, I am not able to see the stage setting; the movements and gestures of the actors; the costumes; and the lighting effects. All this information was provided by the narrator in such a skilful way that it did not intrude into the dialogue. Some parts of the play such as the falling of the blooms from the pohutukawa tree were made significant as they were described to us. It was great to work with the Toi Whakaari students. I only wish there were more opportunities for blind people to attend live theatre performances without missing out on large chunks that need eyes to appreciate.”

Other comments from audience members include:

"I was thrilled to find that each moment in the play when I was about to think, 'I wonder what that is', the quiet voice in my ear told me what it was. I appreciated knowing what the props were as they appeared. It was also helpful to be told the name of each character as I learned to identify each one by voice and to be told about the respective costumes."

"It was helpful to be told that there would be a 15-minute interval and to have a courteous stage manager offer to direct anyone who needed to find the toilets. Having welcomers at the entrance on the look-out when we arrived was a thoughtful touch."

"I am pleased to report that the drama was definitely enhanced for me by the audio supplement. In fact, on the way home afterwards, I felt confident enough to discuss the drama instead of producing my usual list of questions about what had actually happened."

## **7. Can you provide four tips to anyone interested in providing audio description?**

- Always involve the visually impaired in the process: e.g. invite them to attend an audio-description rehearsal and ask for their feedback.
- Research as much as you can. Talk to anyone interested in the project, including experts like Mary Schnackenberg.
- Don't turn the audio description into an event or circus. Remember it's just part of the production and keep things as simple as possible.
- Don't give up. We hit a lot of roadblocks but eventually, we found something that worked for us and fitted into our budget.

## **8. Was it worth all the work involved?**

Yes, definitely. The most important thing is that it's incredibly rewarding. It was an amazing experience and I think everyone who was involved would agree with me. I was really impressed with the way the Toi Whakaari students related to the blind community.

After the performance, a member of the Association of Blind Citizens of New Zealand gave a speech and presented us with a birthday card for Toi's 40<sup>th</sup> birthday celebrations.

It was a lot of work because I was starting from scratch but really, it wasn't that hard. Theatres could work together to simplify the process, and share costs and resources. The biggest factor, I think, is the cost. But there are funding and sponsorship possibilities.

## 9. Would you do it again?

Yes, definitely.

**Footnote:** In March 2011, The Pohutukawa Tree Company received The Blind Bit of Difference Award from the Association of Blind Citizens of New Zealand, recognising an individual or entity that goes the extra mile to make a difference in the lives of blind or vision-impaired people.