Hadley

Hadley Presents: Behind the Scenes of SEE from Apple TV Plus

Presented by Ricky Enger

November 5, 2019

Ricky Enger: Welcome to Hadley Presents. I'm your host Ricky Enger, inviting you to sit back, relax and enjoy a conversation with the experts. In this episode we talk with associate producer Joe Strechay about his work on the Apple TV Plus series SEE. Welcome to the show Joe.

Joe Strechay: Hey. Thank you so much for having me on. It's a great pleasure. I believe in what Hadley does. The Hadley Institute for the Blind has been a part of my life and also my family's life as well.

Ricky Enger: Awesome. That's always great to hear. We love hearing from our learners, past, present, and future. So before we jump into a pretty much spoiler-free discussion of the new series, tell us a little about you and kind of how you came to be a part of the show.

Joe Strechay: It's been a roundabout way, I guess. I've worked in entertainment really part-time and full-time for little pieces of time. When I was working for the American Foundation for the Blind, I worked there seven years, once in a while we'd get requests from different entertainment pieces, like I helped on some documentaries, helped find some people who are blind or low vision for them. And then for casting for some shows when they were looking for actors who are blind or low vision or commercials or something like that. And then I worked with the writer's room on a show for the USA Network called Royal Pains for three episodes, giving them ideas and slang as a person who is blind and things that they could write into the story about the movements of the character or whatever. And later on we got this request from a production and it was very vague, and we didn't know whether it was a reality show and there was a person who was blind on the reality show or if it was a character.

And they sent it to me because I was an orientation and mobility instructor and I'd worked on a lot of the entertainment and stuff and written about it as well. And so I reached out to them and they didn't know what they really needed. I helped them design the job description and it turned out to be Marvel's Daredevil on Netflix. I worked on season one of that, working on scripts and props. And so I also helped train the actors and some background and later on I left the American Foundation for the Blind and… Funny story, I moved on a Thursday to Pennsylvania. I was going to start on Monday as the director of the Bureau of Blindness and Visual Services for Pennsylvania. I arrived on Thursday. Friday morning I get a phone call.

This individual says, "I'm a producer on a show and one of our other producers worked with you on Marvel's Daredevil. We have this character in our show who's the lead character and actually the show has been created by that lead actor and we want you to work with her and we were wondering what your schedule is like over the next month. If you could come in and spend that time with her." And I'm like, "Well, I'm starting a new job on Monday full time."

And to leave a full-time job, it's a big deal. But Apple, I guess I seemed to be one of the top people, but they interviewed apparently other people and they said they learned quickly that I was the person they wanted. I met with the head of the studio, Jenno Topping and Steven Knight, the creator of the show, and that they told me I had the job. I started reviewing scripts. It turned out the job was going to be full-time after a while we realized. I left my job on July 27th, started on July 30th in British Columbia where we filmed for nine months and then another month, so about 10 months.

Ricky Enger: For people that have not really heard about the show or just have a very basic familiarity with it, what's a synopsis? What is this thing about?

Joe Strechay: What I would tell you, a viral apocalypse happens somewhere between now and maybe a 100 or 200 years from now. Most of the population of the Earth is killed off. We're down to a few million people left on earth and those emerge blind. And then our show takes place probably four or 500 years later than that. And so the civilizations and societies have built out small groups and tribal where infrastructure has been destroyed, but it's rebounding, and you see the plant life and the beauty of this landscape that's rebounding from that abuse earlier on. But these populations are isolated areas living off what is available in those areas. They all have different aspects to their societies. Our main group are the of the Alkenny, you'll see is in a mountain area and so they have access to their, have a lot of rope stuff. They have a lot of rock and some limited metal and other supplies. But you'll see how they build their civilization is due to what surrounds them, what they have access to.

But really the story is not really about blindness. It's about a family trying to protect their own. And vision is seen as a heresy, something that's maybe it caused some problems, like helped destroy their Earth, they feel. And the world seems to be doing better in some ways. There's these people trying, that believe that vision is a heresy and they're searching out where these twins who are born with vision. So the family's trying to protect them and you see their journey as a family. And I would tell you that it was kind of like building a plane while you're flying it and figuring all the different aspects out. But it was exciting to work on.

Ricky Enger: And as an associate producer you probably had a hand in a number of these aspects of the show. Which parts of the machinery of producing a show were you able to work on?

Joe Strechay: I worked on scripts early on and providing suggestions. In the script wise, you see aspects, I had lists of suggestions, little things around blindness. I became more and more involved in the show as we shot. But even before in the prep, we spent couple months prepping in-person, working with a movement team, a movement director, and these people specialize in looking at the little movements that most people don't pay attention to. We helped create postures for the different groups that have been in these isolation. We created different types of movement, how they would move, what they use, their tools. Really in the blindness stuff, I worked with the lead actors, I worked with the other actors, I worked with the production designers, working with the stunt team as well. I got to work, touch everything.

You see pieces throughout like figuring out, working with the fight coordinator to figure out fighting and how we could do it. We did some experimenting and I've been in a few fights in my day and, but we just played around a bit and how you sound and it's a sensitive thing talking about the portrayal of blindness. And we start out, I met with every person that came onto the production, whether they're cast or production crew and talked to them about the misconceptions around blindness. And there've been a lot of comical portrayals of blindness and disability, and this is not one of them. Apple and our production SEE, are committed to respect around blindness and really Dan Shotz who was our show runner really emphasized that. And him and I worked really closely together to make sure we built a community and built a culture that respected blindness and disability in a different way.

Ricky Enger: And I think for a lot of people, this is their first experience with blindness in kind of a non-stereotyped way. And yet they're tasked with creating this world where everybody's blind and it has to be believable, it has to be authentic. And so what was that process like in training people to kind of think blind? And did you have any surprises during that whole process?

Joe Strechay: I learned as much as our cast did and when working with the actors, I always start with that conversation of education and awareness. And I moved to training them in the skills that people who are blind use every day. I use sleep shades for training just as I've trained thousands of people who are blind or low vision in the US and making sure that they're concentrating on their senses, not so they know what it's like to be blind, but it's so they get those skills and they focus on those senses and how sound changes. And it was interesting to see how actors, their skill with hearing or how able they are to hear things or to feel things was different. And our show's science fiction, so we play on some of that with these expanded senses in this future time period where people have been blind for hundreds and hundreds of years.

And so we brought in these actors who are blind or low vision. We had… who are extremely talented and beat out people with sight for those roles. They weren't chosen for their blindness or their low vision. They were chosen for their talent. And throughout the process I had an orientation around blindness, 10 pages that each person got everyone in the production talking about blindness and misconceptions, but also about our world. And then also shared videos about successful people who are blind or low vision. Friends that recorded five minutes or less videos about themselves and their path and how different each person is and their experiences. And being able to bring people and to help them understand that, that each person is different, and their skills are different, their life has been different.

And I think that's the greater awareness that cast and our production had. And you saw that every day when these actors who are blind or low vision or background who are blind or low vision or stunt performers who are blind or low vision came and the crew embraced it and learned from them. The cast learned from the other cast who are blind or low vision. It was kind of a very cool and unique thing. Something I've never seen in my life.

Ricky Enger: Yeah, no doubt it helped to kind of put a face on blindness because it's not just one representative. It's we're all human and we're all different. And being able to show that in an authentic way probably went a long way toward bringing this all together and making it an inclusive place to be. How about the cast who are blind or low vision? How was the casting process any different? Were there differences in how filming was done just with these cast members as opposed to other people, or things that helped to create a more inclusive environment for everyone with cast members who were blind and those who weren't?

Joe Strechay: I like to talk about our show as we were building the plane while flying it. I came on and I ended up, part of my job became making sure we accommodated the actors who are blind or low vision or other disabilities as well. And making sure that what they needed to do their jobs so they could focus on the day on acting so they don't have to be an advocate all the time. But in the beginning, it was a work in progress. A lot of people are used to having to really seek out and advocate for themselves constantly. And when you're offering that assistance, sometimes they feel that you're treating them differently, but we're just trying to make their job easier and make sure that they're able to just focus on why they're there.

A lot of people embraced it and Marilee Talkington is a fantastic talent and she has been on NCIS and New Amsterdam and yeah, Bree Klauser who's in the low 20s, 21 or 23 or something. And these people are amazing. Pretty cool stuff. Talented people. We had a Canadian para-Olympian who has world records in swimming in our show. We did change the casting process. We learned from it as we went, and our casting team really changed how they did things. We looked for people that had some experience in acting or theater or some kind of training or interest around it so when they came in, the casting team would work with them and also give them feedback they could take to other auditions in the future whether they made it for our show or some other show. Plus we did, used a self-tape method, which is not uncommon, but where people can record their videos.

But most of these people who are blind or low vision hadn't done that. They hadn't had that opportunity and maybe they've been cast for theater or something else. But we would coach them, our casting team, and give them tips and advice on how to do it and what they're looking for. And then even feedback after the fact. Typically you put in an audition and you might not hear back at all. And so they changed the process and I think we're better for it. And maybe that'll be something new for other productions.

Ricky Enger: And were there differences in blocking or differences in helping people to kind of hit their mark during filming that might've been different from say if you're doing something on a stage in the theater and you have that experience. What was different about filming, do you think?

Joe Strechay: That was one of my initial questions and points. First mark and last mark we call it, right?

 Making sure that there are visible marks sometimes that you can use or tactile. And so we made sure that we had marks that the people could access and until they get it down the movements, and it could be just as simple as a putting down some kind of surface in that spot and the last spot, or it could have been moving some rocks around so you can feel it with your feet. Every actor who is blind or low vision, especially as we moved on, we gave them that opportunity to go and explore and figure out what works best and make sure that we met their needs, whatever that was.

One of the actors who's a prominent actor who lost vision later in life and she said she's never had anyone contact them and ask, "What format do you want your script in? Do you want a PDF? Do you want a Word document? Do you want that? Do you also want your lines cut out specifically by scene to have that separate as well?" All that we asked ahead of time as we went on. We learned what we were doing and made it better and better. It was a continual process and we'll continue to learn from what we did in season one if we have the opportunity in season two to take it there and build on it.

Ricky Enger: And I think that's super cool that you're inclusive to the point that you want everyone to be able to use the tools that they're accustomed to be able to, as you say, concentrate on acting rather than having to think about learning a new tool or using a new tool and doing what they're there for, which is to act.

Joe Strechay: The addition to that is though, what I really thought about is every actor prepares differently, whether they're sighted, blind or low vision and you're just meeting their needs and you would do it for anyone else. It's just asking a few different questions that you might not ask another actor. Some of the things that we used with the actors who are blind or low vision, or I use in my life, I showed the actors with sight or the directors or producers and they started using those tools. Like Voice Dream Reader, that app to read scripts, to go over them initially. If you have low vision you can highlight stuff too, but you can cut stuff. And so a lot of the people who are not blind or low vision started using some of the technology and that they all learned about VoiceOver and how it works on an iPhone.

And actually VoiceOver inspired one of the pieces in our, in episode one, Jason Momoa and I spent a lot of time together and everyone was pretty much like, I use VoiceOver on my iPhone and I use it at the fastest speed you can. He was listening to the speech and he listens to some metal music, speed metal and other things. And he heard this band, I think they're called Arcspire or something like that. And they're one of the fastest drummers and the fastest lyrics out there and he's native Hawaiian. He does this Haka and he brought in that band because it sounded like VoiceOver to him. He's like, I think I want to do something like that. That sounds like voiceover, but in a Haka in my world to get people pumped up. And so that's what inspired that.

Ricky Enger: That's an interesting story. And just one way that technology that you use just in your daily life ended up influencing people who aren't blind or low vision. And that happens a lot, I think. Do you think that, SEE, even though we never really thought about well hmm, let's go live in a dystopian world where everyone's blind and there is no technology, do you think that SEE even if you hadn't thought about that, have they done a nice job of creating a believable world? This is how things could have played out if this actually happened?

Joe Strechay: I do. I think the show's a big what if. Steven Knight would say, "What if this happened? What if this was the case?" Because you have to think, if you look how the ropes are in the Alkenny village, in a world where you don't have to worry about people with sight design for them. It's designed to make your life easier and simpler. If you go to Europe or Asia, they have raised lines in the sidewalks in different places to help guide people or if you walk into a train station in certain parts of Europe, there'll be different lines going in different directions to guide you to different points. Going off of something like that, this world, our production designer, Caroline and also our, our costume designer, Trish Somerville, who you'll never experience what those costumes were. They had scents soaked into them or kind of dyed into the clothing so it would be specific.

They have sounds to them. It's all meant to be something that you would appreciate as a person who is blind versus the sighted world. Production design, it was so talented. They had amazing teams thinking about this and I would meet with them and they would bounce off ideas. One of my mentees, his name's Kai and he's from Georgia, he came up to visit and we brought him to set and he spent a day with me and seeing some of the work I did and we went to meetings, we bounced around ideas for future sets and they got to participate in that and see how we think about things and, but it was great to bring him up and show him that world too and show what's possible. I'm a person who's blind and I'm getting to help guide and work with an amazing team like that.

Ricky Enger: Was there ever a point where either something that he suggested or something that you suggested, maybe the designers or a script writer had this really cool thing in mind and you all went, "Yeah, no that's not going to work." And the direction really had to change.

Joe Strechay: Definitely. Definitely. And you see more and more, episodes four through seven, especially of my suggestions around what could be in the scripts and little aspects and things from my life. Our movement director brought in these experts, like a guy on wilderness survival, one, a whip master. I spent time with all these people. Little things like wilderness survival and blindness have some similarities. Wilderness survival, as you enter a new environment, you stop and you plant your feet and you start to breathe, take some deep breaths and slow down your breathing and try to bring your body to the pulse of the environment you're entering. When I teach orientation and mobility, I would tell people to plant their feet when they're unsure and become a tree. Listen, stop and listen. And I listen to the environment, whether it's listening to an intersection or just listening to where the traffic is, what direction the traffic's going in or what's around you? What are the sounds you hear? And the layers of sound and peel them back. And that's a lot of wilderness survival and you'll see that in our world, in the scripts because of it.

Episodes one through three, I was on set, but as we got further in, I got closer and closer to the director Francis Lawrence, who's a genius. Into the episodes I was start in the video village, then get closer to set, closer to set by episode three. I was close to him by episode four and five where Anders was the director, I had been bringing these suggestions here and there and he said, made this announcement, stopped everyone at set.

“I want you every day standing right next to me as we're directing." And so I was involved in all the blocking of the scenes. And then from then on that was the norm for the rest of the episodes. And even later on in scenes where there's no character who’s blind in it, I had input on stuff. I think about things differently, sound or the study of behaviors or how people might react to something. And I brought that to our show, and they allowed me to do that. I just feel so lucky.

Ricky Enger: As we wrap up here, I just have one last thing that I'm really curious about and that is obviously this show is not, here's your reference manual for what it's like to be blind or whatever. It's fantasy. But up to now we really haven't seen blindness portrayed in the media in any way other than, as you say, comic relief or something that's really stereotypical or whatever. And so this is pretty unique. Are there things, outside the story, that you're hoping sighted and blind viewers for that matter, will take away from the show about blindness?

Joe Strechay: I will tell you that I think showing people living everyday lives as people who are blind, they're warriors, they're lovers, they're typically portrayals of blindness they're showing a person with a disability, you need help or something else. You're in the corner, whatever you're walking by. In this world that we're lovers, we're heroes, we're villains, we're warriors cutting people up, deeper than that, we're family. Parents, we're all of the above. And I think that takes what has been done in the past and throws it up on its head. It's science fiction for sure, like you said, and fantasy and expanded on in that. It's meant to be science fiction and fantasy. It's the world of SEE. It's not our current world. I think that's the big thing. And I would say the actors learn that, that so many differences in people and in blindness and how we do things, but we're just people.

Embracing disability and differences and I think the world of entertainment hasn't done a lot of that. I think, this is just a start, a stepping stone and I think there's just going to continue to move forward. We work with such an amazing talented team who care so much and really and making an entertainment show. It is entertainment when it comes down to it and we hope you enjoy it on Apple TV+, which is accessible and it offers audio description in eight or nine languages and you can access all eight or nine languages no matter where you are. Also with closed captioning. You have access to some ridiculous number of closed captioning languages too. It's unheard of. And Apple does it in all their products and then why wouldn't they do it in Apple TV+?

Because Sarah Herrlinger works so hard to make sure Apple's eye is on it and Tim Cook believes it. Tim Cook visited set and I got to spend time with him, and he spent time with some of our actors, who are legally blind and our actors who are not in and there was more security than if he was the president when Tim Cook comes. At the end of our time, and we spent a lot of time talking about all the stuff and the accessibility and how we thought about things. And at the end of that time we went up for a kind of a handshake thing and I pulled him into the bro hug and at first he was stiff and uncomfortable, and then he went into it.

And then later on, end of March, I was at the launch for when they talked about the different shows with all these Hollywood folks. And I was there as one of the producers of the show and I think I was talking to Jennifer Garner at the time, but he comes up from behind me and hugs me from behind. And then I got to talk to him, and he thanked me for being there and just excited. Tim Cook believes in diversity and inclusion and he believes in, he's very passionate about it. This is the first step. This is just Apple's brand. It just carries forward to the production but making sure their entertainment world is doing the same thing that their company's been doing for years.

Ricky Enger: And it's, it's definitely a welcome change and I hope we see more of that where in entertainment and in casting and so on blind people are seen as people who are complex and some of us are great and some of us maybe have a lot of work to do, but we're people. And I think that should be showcased in anything that's going to portray blindness realistically. Very, very cool.

If those of you listening, if you haven't watched SEE yet, Apple TV+, five bucks a month. That's kind of a bargain I'd say. I think the first two episodes you can watch without doing anything.

Joe Strechay: I think one episode.

Ricky Enger: One episode, yeah. Okay.

Joe Strechay: One episode's free and then you could, there are people that you can get a week free I think depending on, I guess your Apple products. If you buy a new Apple product, you get a year free. Your subscription $4.99 a month, you can access it through your iOS devices, through the TV app or else you can access it, you can download the app on your other types of devices, whether Amazon Fire or through Roku and so on.

Ricky Enger: Yeah, you can Airplay to your TV if it supports that. So a lot of different ways to do that. And again, all of the original content on Apple TV plus does have audio description, which is also nice.

Joe Strechay: And a little note about that is something that Apple did differently. And Apple accessibility, typically when you listen to audio description on a show and you have it enabled, you don't get the same sound that everyone else does. It moves to a different type of track, more of a mono track and you don't get the same sound but Apple TV+ when you're listening to the show, whether it's on with audio description or without, you get up to Dolby Atmos sound and whatever the best sound quality you can get on your system. That audio description doesn't mean you're getting less of the sound experience and our show has an amazing sound experience.

Ricky Enger: It really does. And there were design choices deliberately made where sound is super important, so you don't want to be missing any of that. Well Joe, I want to thank you so much for taking the time to tell us a few stories and join us and kind of tell us about your experiences on the show. If people want to ask you additional questions or they just want to say, "Hey, thanks for what you do," or whatever, how can they contact you?

Joe Strechay: They can reach out to me, and if we have actors who are blind or low vision out there who are interested in, hear about when we're putting out information, we'll be sending information out about auditions if we have a season two. It'll go through the American Council of the Blind, the National Federation of the Blind. It'll go through different groups. We'll probably send it Hadley, whomever can get the information out. But you can also reach out to me. My email address is J-S-T-R-E-C-H-A-Y@gmail.com and so it's like my first initial, last name @gmail.com or you can find me on YouTube. I have a YouTube channel where I talk about blindness and many different aspects of my life, but also about transitioning to employment and all those fun things. Joe Strechay, if you search on YouTube you'll find it. Also, you can find me on Instagram. Similarly, Joe Strechay and on Twitter I think @JStrechay, I think it's @JStrechay. It might be @Joe, but something like that. You can find me on there and with a little search and look for me on LinkedIn as well.

Ricky Enger: And we'll have all of those things in the show notes. For those who don't want to go looking for it, we'll take care of that and you'll be able to find Joe pretty much wherever he is, which is nice. Thank you again, Joe, for joining us. Thank you all for listening. Once you're done here with the podcast, go check out SEE if you haven't already. Thanks for joining.

Got something to say? Share your thoughts about this episode of Hadley Presents or make suggestions for future episodes. We'd love to hear from you. Send us an email at podcast@hadley.edu, that's P-O-D-C-A-S-T@hadley.edu. Or, leave us a message at (847) 784-2870. Thanks for listening.