Hadley

What is Audio Description?

Presented by Ricky Enger

**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, Hadley member Judy Davis joins us as we define and discuss audio description for TV shows, movies, and more. Welcome to the show, Judy.

**Judy Davis:** Thank you so much. I'm so happy to be here.

**Ricky Enger:** I am delighted to have you, and you've actually been here before. You've done a podcast with us on low vision support groups, and that was fantastic. And again, really happy to have you back, and we're going to have a great time talking about audio description today. But before we get into that, why don't you just give us a brief introduction, tell us a bit about yourself, and as much as you're comfortable sharing about your vision loss journey.

**Judy Davis:** I was diagnosed with my eye disease, retinitis pigmentosa, when I was quite young. I had pretty normal vision through my teens into my early twenties. I did not drive, I never felt safe driving, but in my mid-twenties, late twenties, I did start using a white cane. I learned braille through Hadley.

**Ricky Enger:** Yay.

**Judy Davis:** So that was my initial contact with Hadley many, many years ago. And my vision is now to the point where I have enough vision when I wake up, it's like, oh, it's still dark outside, go back to sleep. Or it's light outside, you probably should check the time and see if it's time to get up. And my background, education-wise, is library science. I've worked for different state agencies helping people learn how to use computers with vision loss and learning daily living skills with vision loss, so a wide range of things. I'm so glad you invited me for this because the two passions I have that relate to my vision loss, one is support groups, so I'm so happy to do that one. The other one is audio description. I have been involved with audio description probably from almost its conception, so it's just lovely.

**Ricky Enger:** Wow. I definitely picked the perfect person to come and talk about this then. We're going to chat about ways that you can get audio description, maybe some things to think about as you are looking for material on audio description, all of those things. But before we do that, it's probably a good idea to actually set the stage and talk about what audio description is. How would you describe audio description?

**Judy Davis:** So what audio description does is ideally when none of the characters are talking, then you will hear this extra voice that will describe what's happening, what the scenery is. If there's a title that comes up across, it will read you that. And of course they can't do every little detail, but they work really hard. The producers of audio description watch something over and over again, trying to figure out what key details you need to carry the show, to understand the show.

**Ricky Enger:** It really is just phenomenal how they do this and the amount of work that has to go into doing it right, because not only do they have to give you these important details that you would otherwise be getting visually, they have to squeeze those things in where there isn't dialogue or other things that you don't want someone talking over, so it certainly is an art. If you think back, what was your very first experience with audio description? How did you get introduced to it and what was your reaction? What were you feeling?

**Judy Davis:** It was like a miracle. That's the best way to describe it. As people know when they have vision loss, it's loss. It's a loss. And anytime you can feel that loss is no longer there, it's just phenomenal. And so I was at American Council of the Blind Conference, and that's one of the consumer organizations that coordinate people with vision loss nationwide. They help change laws and a wide range of things. I was at the ACB conference with a friend, and we learned that they were going to be showing a movie with audio description. I don't even know if at that point I knew very much about audio description, and who on earth has heard of the movie, Girl of the Limberlost? But anyway, that was my first exposure. Just hearing those details to understand the movie without having to lean over and say, "What just happened? What did that person do? What is that making that sound?" Because you hear this dramatic music, and you have no clue what is happening.

So that was my first exposure. I was so excited. I went back to a support group that I was involved with back in Pennsylvania, and at that point you could order, I think there were six movies on VHS that had description. And we were all in our twenties and didn't have a lot of money, so we each picked a different movie. So I picked Top Gun, one of my friends picked Pretty Woman, and another person picked Honey, I Shrunk the Kids. And we’d watch them and then we'd swap them around. I chose Top Gun because I had a friend and family member who was trying to describe what happened in Top Gun. But if any of you have ever watched Top Gun, that is a very visual movie. Lots of dramatic scenes, lots of music, and just not knowing what happened, and so that was my first experience.

**Ricky Enger:** This is such a fascinating discussion because you came to this in a different way than I did. I have been blind since birth, and my first experience with audio description was on TV. There was a series, it was a comedy called That Seventies Show, and there was audio description for it, and the narrator was very, very flat, and just, "So and so does such and such."

I was watching this with sighted people, and having gone my whole life doing exactly what you said, leaning over to people, "What just happened?" Or I thought I was clever enough, mistakenly as it turned out, to be able to figure out what was happening during these scenes. And I just thought, oh, audio description, I don't need that. I was feeling, honestly, a little bit self-conscious watching this with someone else who didn't need it. So I'm curious, did you ever have that feeling of self-consciousness or anything like that? Because when you're watching a movie or a TV show, usually it's with other people. Did you feel a certain way or how did they respond to audio description if it was happening, and they didn't need it?

**Judy Davis:** My children grew up with me having audio description. So for them, it was just a natural thing. They were probably only three or four when I got exposed to the first VHS thing. So we all watched Honey, I Shrunk the Kids, and to them it was just, "Oh, they're there." And I still remember eventually audio description became available in movie theaters. And then the closest theater at one time was Atlanta, which is three or four hours away, depending on where the movie theater is, from where I live. And then it got to Charlotte, which was two hours from where I live. So occasionally we would all troop down there for a movie. And I cannot remember if we went and saw Spider-Man or if it was one of the Harry Potter movies with description. And one of my daughters walked out and she said, "Mom, I am so glad that I had description, because there's just no way we could have told you everything that was happening in that movie."

So for them, it was part of their life. Also, most family members love you and they want you to be independent. They want you to have that positive experience. So I don't think I've ever felt awkward with any of my friends or my family members using that opportunity to enjoy something with them.

**Ricky Enger:** You are so right that your friends and family love you, they want you to have a good time. And maybe there's a bit of self-interest there where it's like, "I don't have to describe that because now you have it being described for you." I've also found that, as self-conscious as I was about it, it turns out that not only do my friends and family not mind it, but they also actually tend to get something out of it as well. So if you're walking into the kitchen and getting a drink or more popcorn or whatever as you're watching things, you don't have to miss what's happening on the screen because it's being narrated, or sometimes the audio description points out something that the sighted people in my life wouldn't otherwise have noticed. So I've been just so happy to not have to think about that, "Oh, no, they're not going to like this. It's going to be annoying for them."

What I am curious about though is I know that you did have some vision at one time, and certainly watched movies and TV with vision. And then now as an avid consumer of audio description, what are some things from that perspective? What can people expect for audio description to do well? What things is it probably not going to give you that you would've had with vision?

**Judy Davis:** As you said, there's just not enough time to give us all the details. That old expression of a picture is worth a thousand words. They can't squeeze in a thousand words in that 30-second musical interlude, so they try their best. Facial expressions, I think if they're key to what's happening, then they will describe them, but you're not going to get that. I know with some of the TV series I watch, I'm sure maybe when the series first started, they described what the physical attributes of that person was, but it's like, okay, I've watched this series with audio description now for two or three seasons, and I have no clue or no memory of what the people look like. Because if they spend a lot of time saying, "Oh, this person is in their forties, they have brown hair and they have a mustache," that's going to take away from describing the action and the key elements.

So I can't say that I can visualize very many of the characters just because, like I said, there's not enough time to do everything. Sometimes there are those musical interludes where they take the time to describe the scenery, and that's really nice to build up that image of the scenery. But again, there's not always that amount of time to do it.

**Ricky Enger:** That makes sense. There have been discussions about maybe doing some alternate audio description where you could choose to watch a pre-audio description thing where maybe you have 10 minutes that talk about the characters and what they're wearing, especially if the outfits are integral to what you're watching and so on. So there have been discussions about that, but just in general, you're not going to see that. So I know what some people will do if they are still curious about those things is they may go and search for the screenplay. That's a bit outside anything that I want to do, but there are those options. Look for the screenplay, or maybe now that your friends and family don't have to tell you what was happening in the movie, they can fill you in afterward about anything that you are curious about. What was she wearing? Or what were the decorations in that Christmas movie, or what have you?

**Judy Davis:** Depending on what the type of description you're watching, if you go to live theater, oftentimes at life theater, they will read you the program and describe the sets 15 or 30 minutes before the play or musical actually starts. So it depends on the situation of what you're going to have access to as well.

**Ricky Enger:** That's a really good point. And talking about things like live theater, we've come a long way from just having audio description available on certain VHS tapes. Now it's available not only on live cable TV, and on your streaming services like Netflix and Hulu, things like that. Even in the movie theater, you'll have that, and in some cases, live theater like you said. So it's available in all these different scenarios, but people may be sitting there going, "Okay, how do I even get started or what can I expect in these different scenarios?" So I guess let's talk in general about what you might do to figure out where the audio description is and some things that you might think about in a couple of these scenarios. So let's say going to a movie theater. How are you going to get audio description there? How's it going to work?

**Judy Davis:** Movie theaters I think are pretty widespread with audio description. The tricky thing is the first person you talk to at that movie theater may not know what you're talking about. They say, "Oh yeah, we have things that make it louder." It's like, "No, no, I think you missed the part where I said I was blind. I don't need it louder. I need it with the description." And of course, you can do internet research and that's an option. I worked really hard to get the ones here in my hometown keyed into it, and unfortunately not all movies are described yet. So that's something else you have to do research on is to see, before you go to the movie theater, if it has description.

One website you can visit to learn just about everything you want to know about audio description is that organization I mentioned before, the American Council of the Blind. They have a website, acb.org/adp, which stands for Audio Description Project. And on that website, you can explore how you can get access through Netflix, how you can get access through your cable television, how you can find out about movie theaters and which movies have descriptions, so that's a good starting place.

One key thing that I still do to this day, because things do go wrong at movie theaters, is I make sure I have the phone number for the box office. What used to happen was the audio description wouldn't work, and whoever I went with ended up having to be the one to take the equipment out and say, "This isn't working." And so they'd miss the movie. I'd be sitting there not getting as much from the movie as I would like. So it was my responsibility. It's one of those things where we have to advocate, we have to be responsible for ourselves. So I had my phone on, and I had the phone number in my favorites, and I would just call the box office and say, "There's an issue," and they would come and get it figured out. So I think that is probably still necessary for the day because as most of us know, movie theaters have a lot of turnover. So having that contact so that you can get it sorted out, hopefully with somebody that knows what they're doing this second time around.

**Ricky Enger:** Yes, that's a really good idea. And if you've never been to a movie theater with audio description, the way that it will work is you'll get this little device, and it happens to look pretty similar to the one that they would hand you for amplification of sound. So I guess that's one reason that the movie theater staff can get a little confused. It is a little box, and it has a set of headphones with it, but I always bring my own just because I feel better about that. So you can plug in your headphones, and you will hear all of the lovely movie theater soundtrack and noise and all of that stuff coming out of the theater speakers, but you will also have the audio description coming through that headset, assuming that everything is working properly.

When it comes to live TV, there's something called secondary audio programming that you can switch your TV to, and it's not always going to be audio description that comes out of that channel. It may be Spanish, so be aware of that, but that's one way you can do that. I am curious about live theater performances. Have you been to one, Judy, that has audio description provided? Because I have not. So I know that in larger cities, certainly this does happen where you can arrange for this, and I'm assuming it's a similar sort of thing where you get a listening device, and someone is there describing that?

**Judy Davis:** Yes, I am very lucky. Even though I live in a fairly small city, about 90,000, I think we've had audio described theater now for 20, 25 years. It's all done by volunteers, so you can't expect perfection. But yes, you get a similar headset. There's somebody in the back of the theater that has a mask over their mouth, so the people that are sitting around them do not hear the description, and they do do research. These volunteers go to two or three different performances during the rehearsals and everything and figure out, "Okay, this is what I want to say. How can I say it?" And they do their best to respect so that they're only talking when nobody on the stage is actually talking. And it's lovely. It is just fantastic. And like I said, we get there 15 or 20 minutes early, somebody reads the program, because usually there are two people that are trading off.

Somebody reads the program, somebody describes the staging, and then another describer will step in when the play or the musical actually starts. It's just a really neat experience, just like at the movie theater, and I can just get as much out of it as everybody else can for the most part. And this is something we didn't mention before. Just having exposure to audio description gives us that same opportunity to discuss when you're out with friends, "Oh, did you see this movie?" And we can join in on that discussion because we did see that movie.

**Ricky Enger:** I love that feeling, especially for, and I think I can't really say it often enough, these movies that may have a 20-minute wonderful chase scene music, and it's clearly all very dramatic. There was a time in my life where I had no idea what was happening. So even if I were to discuss a movie like this with other people, I didn't feel like I had seen the same movie because I hadn't. It was not so impactful because whatever was happening during that last 20 minutes was just the pinnacle of everything that it's been building up this whole time, and here's how it ends. It had to be summed up in two or three sentences by a family member later. And that wasn't the same at all. So you're so right about being able to just be on that level playing field and have that same experience as everyone else.

I think that anything like this, any entertainment, art, all of that, is a shared experience, and it feels just very impactful to have all of the information as opposed to very little of it. So if someone is sitting here and maybe their eyes glazed over in the middle a little bit when it's like, okay, streaming and Netflix and live, blah, blah, blah, and they're like, "Okay, I would love to experience audio description, but this all feels a bit much. Is there some way that I can just get an intro to this? Some low stakes way to experience audio description without a lot of technical know-how or whatever?"

**Judy Davis:** One thing I enjoy, there's an organization out in Texas called IBU Today. So their website is iBUG, and it's a letter I, and then bug as an insect, B-U-G, and then today.org. And every week they show a movie via Zoom with audio description. There's no video at all. It's just the audio description. And if you're comfortable joining a Zoom meeting, then that may be one of the quickest, easiest ways to access it. And you can get an email that comes to you every week to show you what movie's being described. And I think right now they're focusing on movies that are up for Oscars. So last week I saw The Holdovers, which I had not even heard of, with descriptions, and it was a very good movie. And to me, that's one of the quickest ways to do it.

Another way to do it is if you have a family member or friend who has Netflix or has cable and would be willing to do a little bit of research with your assistance from that ACB website I mentioned, they might be able to turn it on for a movie without too much trouble. Usually, and help me out here if you have better thoughts about this, Ricky. Usually if you go under languages for something and then look under the different types of languages or maybe under audio, you should see Audio Description English, so it's not too hard to turn on, from my understanding.

**Ricky Enger:** That's exactly right.

**Judy Davis:** And I think it's on Disney+ and Netflix, and yes, lots of different formats.

**Ricky Enger:** Unfortunately, it's not all exactly the same set of button presses or going into the same menus for every service that's out there. I wish that were standardized, but it is the same general concept. We will have a lot of these links in the show notes, and of course you can contact Hadley and we can help talk you through, "Here's my service, how in the world can I get to audio description on it?" I would certainly say that if you're feeling a little bit hesitant, again, maybe you have that same self-consciousness I did, or maybe you just think that it's going to be a little bit overwhelming to get it set up, or any number of other things that might make you hesitate, I feel like it's really well worth it. Anything that you would add to that, Judy?

**Judy Davis:** No. I am finding myself, and I have not cut my cable yet. I still watch cable television. And I live alone, and there's just something about being able to settle in and watch a series that I know has audio description so that I don't have to say, "Wow, I just wonder what happened," because my guide dog will not fill in the details.

**Ricky Enger:** They don't train them for that.

**Judy Davis:** No, no. So having that audio description is just so fantastic. And more and more television shows are having it. The list is just incredible about which TV shows have it, and so you just don't know what's going to have description until you do your research.

**Ricky Enger:** Yeah. Even things that you might not think would have description, so things that are maybe older movies or older TV shows, those are being described retroactively now. So maybe they weren't at the time they were released, but studios are recognizing the importance of this and just how much it adds to the experience and how important this is for people. So we're getting more and more description all the time, and that's a beautiful thing.

**Judy Davis:** And there's even some commercials with description, which I find charming. Usually, I fast-forward through commercials, but there are some commercials that have descriptions, and it's like, why not? They should.

**Ricky Enger:** Exactly.

**Judy Davis:** We're part of the buyer's market.

**Ricky Enger:** Right? And we found a car commercial, believe it or not, that has really good audio description. So, I should say that we are not associated with Subaru in any way. They're not sponsoring us or anything. But this is just a really good example of how audio description works. So, yeah, let's take a listen.

**[Subaru Commercial plays]**

**Women 1:** Does this map show the Peninsula Trail?

**Audio Describer:** Man interrupts.

**Man 1:** Peninsula Trail? You won't find that on a map.

**Audio Describer:** He's blind.

**Man 1:** I'll take you there.

**Audio Describer:** The couple looks doubtful but follows him to their Subaru. He directs them along the trail and asks.

**Man 1:** You hungry? Me too. Take this left.

**Audio Describer** They pull into an old diner.

**Man 1:** Now don't eat just yet.

**Audio Describer:** They sit at the counter, savoring the smells from the grill. Continuing on, they arrive at the ocean and walk to the cliffs.

**Man 1:** Feel the wind. If you listen real hard, you can hear the whales.

**Audio Describer:** They listen. Back in their Subaru, they pass a beautiful lake.

**Man 1:** This is my favorite part of the forest.

**Audio Describer:** They stop the Subaru, get out and follow the man through tall trees in the moonlight.

**Man 1:** Shhh. Just listen.

**Audio Describer:** The couple smiles,

**Man 1:** Hear that?

**Audio Describer:** Appreciating the journey.

**Man 2:** Our Subaru outback lets us see the world. Sometimes in ways we never imagined.

**Audio Describer:** They drive away satisfied in their Subaru.

**[End of Subaru commercial]**

**Ricky Enger:** That is really cool. And I just feel like it illustrates that we don't have to be locked out of anything just because it happens to have a big visual component to it.

**Judy Davis:** Yeah. We all love listening to our books, but it's nice to have other options for entertainment.

**Ricky Enger:** You got it.

**Judy Davis:** And the movie theaters and the television options are just fantastic.

**Ricky Enger:** Well, Judy, your passion about this is really clear, and I knew it. I knew I picked the perfect person to come in and talk about this. Thank you so much for stopping by and, again, just sharing your enthusiasm about audio description. We will have lots of links in the show notes, and I hope that if you're listening and you've never experienced audio description before, this will give you that little push you need to give it a shot.

**Judy Davis:** Do try. Please do try.

**Ricky Enger:** Thanks so much.

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