

Guidelines for Touch Tours

What is a touch tour?

For many blind or partially sighted theatre-goers, a touch tour is an essential part of the theatre experience. Having access to the stage and set before a performance is a way of firming up the descriptive information they may have already received and provides them with extra detail to allow them to engage with the production. Patrons will explore the space, and may like to handle selected props, costumes and furniture. Touch tours usually last approximately 30 minutes. They need the involvement of the audio describers, front of house staff, technical staff, stage management and the company in order to work smoothly.

Preparing for the tour

The time for the touch tour should be agreed with the CSM well in advance and the time should be communicated to everyone who is likely to be involved. This includes box-office staff and staff in a theatre's call centre. Normally the tour is planned for about an hour to an hour-and-a-half before the performance, but if the stage is needed for fight or dance calls or warm-ups, it's understood that these times are negotiable.

Information about the times and meeting places for touch tours should be made available in advance to the blind and partially sighted audience. This can be done through a seasonal CD offering information about future audio described productions in your venue.

In addition, the information about the dates and times of audio described performances and details of the touch tour should be available on printed material such as flyers and brochures as well as the theatre website.

Audience members are normally encouraged to book a place on the touch tour and should be given a telephone number in the theatre to call rather than trying to book through a call centre. Advance booking allows front of house managers to plan for staff coverage.

It's important that the stage management and audio describers work together in choosing items of furniture, props and costumes for the touch tour, excluding those which may be too fragile or dangerous, or which may give away too much of the plot in advance.

Sometimes there isn't the time to describe something vital during the performance and the describers would like to bring it to the audience's attention during the touch tour. Describers should develop a 'wish list', but should be prepared to have some items refused. These decisions need to be taken in advance of the touch tour.

Prior to the touch tour

The meeting place for the touch tour should be under cover and accessible to the audience at least fifteen minutes before the start of the tour.

The blind and partially sighted audience members will appreciate having access to toilets and somewhere secure to leave their coats and bags. They may ask for their guide dog to be cared for while they are onstage.

For insurance reasons it's the responsibility of the front of house staff to take patrons from this pre-arranged meeting place onto the stage. Routes to the stage should be planned to be as straightforward as possible for blind and partially sighted people to negotiate. It's wise to check just prior to the tour to make sure items that may cause trip hazards haven't been left in corridors or on stairs. There should be enough ushers to guide patrons safely, and these people should be trained in visual awareness and guiding skills. Pan-disability training may not be sufficient in this case. Some people might be a little late, so have someone responsible for meeting them and guiding them to the stage.

If any of your audience are wheelchair users you'll need to plan how to get them onstage, or if this is not possible, how to enable them to participate in the touch tour from the auditorium. You might do this by bringing props and costumes for them to handle, and introducing members of the company.

Blind and partially sighted people appreciate knowing about their surroundings. On your way to the stage, tell them a little about what they're passing - perhaps a corridor with framed playbills going back to the 19th century, or the company's austere dressing rooms. When you've gathered the group together let them know if they're in the wings or actually onstage, what their surroundings are like and which way the auditorium faces.

Onstage

It is important that the stage is well lit. Good lighting will help those who have some sight to better appreciate scenery and costumes. It will also create a safer environment, so make sure a technician is available at the appropriate time.

If you have a number of items to show the audience, don't crowd them into a small area, distribute them around the stage so that people can negotiate their way between them safely. This also helps audibility issues; if two groups are crowded together they'll find it difficult to hear the information you're giving.

It's wise to have a couple of chairs handy in case any of the audience has mobility difficulties and need to sit down for part of the tour.

During the touch tour

A touch tour is an opportunity for tactile exploration; it should not be treated as an opportunity to give the blind and partially sighted audience a lecture or simply reiterate the material in the pre-show introduction.

Discuss who will introduce the touch tour in advance. Often this will be one of the audio describers, but in some cases a member of the stage management team may want to do this. Wait until everyone is onstage before beginning the introduction and make sure everyone is settled and has oriented themselves so they are facing you. Other people onstage, such as ASMs or wardrobe staff should introduce themselves. Often a describer will give a brief overview of the set before handing over to the company. Patrons are then free to make a closer examination of the set, furniture, props, costumes and wigs.

If you have a large number of participants you may want to divide them into groups and show props to one group in the auditorium while you bring the second group onstage, before swapping over. Ushers may be needed to guide individuals, or guard potential hazards such as the front of the stage. If the set is unsuitable for guide dogs, extra ushers should be available to care for them.

It's very helpful to have members of the cast participate in the touch tour and encouragement from CSMs is always appreciated. This is a way for the audience to become familiar with the actors' voices.

Actors are sometimes asked to introduce themselves both as themselves and in the voice of the character they are playing if this is very different. This is particularly helpful if roles are being doubled.

If actors are able to attend in costume or with a prop that's associated with them it provides a good talking point.

As an adjunct to this information sheet, VocalEyes also produces a handout of advice for company members that can be laminated and pinned up in the Green Room or given to CSMs on arrival. A copy is included on the Resources page of the VocalEyes website.

After the touch tour

Audience members will need to know where they can pick up their headsets prior to the performance. This should be a place that is easily identifiable and if at all possible away from the main traffic of the incoming audience. Immediately after the touch tour is a good time to check whether people know how to use the headsets, to offer a demonstration in a relatively quiet environment, to remind them about the starting time of the pre-show introduction and to give any other information that will help them make the most of their visit.

There is likely to be some time between the end of the touch tour and the beginning of the pre-show introduction, which normally start 15 minutes before the start of the performance. Patrons may wish to eat before the performance and some theatres provide refreshments while others give directions to the bar or nearby cafés. You may like to make contact with local businesses to ensure that they are able to welcome blind and partially sighted patrons, so that you can recommend them with confidence.

Dance workshops

Audio described ballet or contemporary dance benefits from more detailed dance workshops, giving the audience members the chance to feel the dancers' bodies as they make certain shapes. Many people will even try a modified version themselves; this helps to build muscle memory and assists with the understanding of the movement. It also enables the describers to use shorthand for repeated motifs during the description, knowing the audience will understand what the terms mean.

The audience also has an opportunity to handle props and costumes and to understand how a heavy cloak or a padded belly will affect a dancer's movement.

For more information about how to run a dance workshop for blind and partially sighted patrons, please contact enquiries@vocaleyeyes.co.uk

Finally, a VocalEyes patron reminds us of the importance of being treated like a human being.

"Very often when you're visually impaired you get dragged like a parcel from one place to another and nobody thinks you might be human and need to go to the toilet or that you'd like anything to eat or drink. Our usher really took the time to make sure we had everything so we could sit back and enjoy the show. We were really impressed, as it's that sort of thing that can really make or break the day. When it goes wrong it puts you off going somewhere again but when it goes well, it really leaves you feeling it's worth making the effort to do these things, even if it's hard to get there."