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Did you think just because you lost some or all of your hearing that you would have to miss out on going to the theater? The author launched open-captioned performances on Broadway in 1997, with groundbreaking impact on thousands of potential audience members in the New York City metropolitan area who were previously excluded from theater events due to hearing loss.

Open Captioning: How and Why It Works With Live Theater Productions

By Lisa Carling

October 1997: I stood in the back of New York's Plymouth Theatre with Arlene Romoff during the intermission at *Jekyll & Hyde*. Arlene, an SHHH member Saddle River, New Jersey, couldn't hear anymore. No assistive listening devices worked at this point. She didn't even offer me her small, hand-held auxiliary microphone to help her understand what I was saying. She was "falling off the edge" as she put it. A progressive hearing loss left Arlene deaf and she faced elective cochlear implant surgery in the coming weeks. Yet, even with Arlene's profound hearing loss, here we were, enjoying a Broadway production, now accessible to her and countless others through open captioning.

We first met in **1995** at an Arts Access conference held in New York City. Arlene asked me if Communication Access Real-Time Translation (CART), also known as real-time transcription or real-time captioning, could be adapted for Broadway to scroll text during a performance. CART utilizes a stenotype machine, notebook computer and real-time software for display on a

projector, large monitor or light emitting diode (LED) signboard with a permanent or portable installation. Real-time captioning is the instant translation of the spoken word into visible text, a method used for any live, unscripted event such as an accessibility symposium, museum lecture or group discussion. A Registered Professional Reporter (RPR) provides the verbatim record at speeds ranging from 180 to 225 words per minute with a minimum accuracy of 95 percent.

Since Theatre Development Fund (TDF) had presented the first sign-language-interpreted performance on Broadway in 1980, I thought Arlene's idea had great merit so I investigated its possibilities for success in New York. She encouraged me to attend an open-captioned production at New Jersey's Paper Mill Playhouse, which planned to incorporate open captioning into its 1996-97 season. As a New Jersey resident, Arlene's advocacy efforts had begun with her local theater. Her ally in this Broadway proposal was a nationally recognized court reporter, Donald R. DePew. As I watched Don's CART equipment display the pre-scripted text one evening at the Paper Mill Playhouse without real-time captions, I realized their suggestion would work.

Communication Access

Hearing loss, an invisible disability, affects an estimated 28 million people (the largest disability group in our country). Of this population, over 98 percent do not use sign language as their primary means of communication. For some people, assistive listening devices provide inadequate support.

Consequently, a potential audience had slipped away until strong advocacy efforts by people like Arlene and Don, as well as associates from the Center for Hearing and Communication and members of local HLAA Chapters, brought to light a means of inclusiveness through open captioning.

TDF introduced open-captioned performances to Broadway in 1997 with *Barrymore* starring Christopher Plummer, and to London in 2000 with the Royal Shakespeare Company's *Antony and Cleopatra*. Since then, TDF has captioned approximately 150 performances, accessing 100 different productions, both on Broadway and off-Broadway, with 15,000 admissions of theatergoers who otherwise would be denied these events.

Open-captioning highlights include the following Tony Award-winning Broadway shows: *Aida*; *Annie Get Your Gun*; *Art*; *Barrymore*; *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*; *Cabaret*; *Chicago*; *Copenhagen*; *Death of a Salesman*; *Fortune's Fool*; *42nd Street*; *Fosse*; *The Goat or Who is Sylvia?*; *King Hedley II*; *Kiss Me, Kate*; *The Life*; *Metamorphoses*; *Oklahoma!*; *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*; *Private Lives*; *Proof*; *Ragtime*; *The Real Thing*; *Side Man*; *Stones in His Pockets*; *The Tale of the Allergist's Wife*; *Thoroughly Modern Millie*; and *Titanic*.

TDF contracts open-captioning services on a per show basis using qualified professionals who provide their own equipment. To display text in the theater, an LED signboard is either suspended from the side of the proscenium or raised on a stand for optimal visibility. Using a laptop, the caption operator produces text in bold red letters, appearing in three-line increments concurrently with the performance. The CART option takes over, if needed, for improvisational exchanges between actor and audience or for an unscripted performance. This is open captioning -- *open to everyone* -- contrary to the broadcast term "closed captioning," which is activated by a signal decoder on your television set.

Open-captioned theater is considered "passive assistance." The text display is simply there and people can refer to it or not without alerting the world to their hearing loss.

Open-captioned theater has universal appeal. In addition to being a tremendous equalizer for people with hearing loss, it helps children learning to read; people studying English as a second language; and any hearing individuals following heavy dialects, complicated terminology or foreign phrases. It's a service that builds audiences, increases attendance, enlists a tremendous show of support from its constituents, never garners any complaints from other audience members and is easily accepted by performers, because it offers no distractions -- only rewards.

To learn more about open captioning, contact TAP at:

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212/221-1103 Voice; 212/719-4537 TTY; 212/768-1563 Fax

Or, check the website at www.tdf.org.

Lisa Carling is the director of the Theatre Access Project (TAP) and has managed the Theatre Development Fund's program for people with physical disabilities since 1984. Lisa serves as a consultant to regional theaters wishing to establish similar programs. She also manages TAP Plus, a grants program established in 1999 by Theatre Development Fund in partnership with the New York State Council on the Arts, which provides additional funding to eligible state arts organizations for interpreting and captioning services. Lisa designed TDF's Talking Hands program in 1995, the first outreach to elementary and secondary school students with hearing loss, making Broadway theater accessible to a new audience. Lisa holds a master of fine arts degree from Yale University School of Drama.