Accessible theatre-making for spectators with visual impairment: Cahoots NI's *The Gift.*

**Belfast Children's Festival**
**6 - 13 March 2015**
**at**
**Unit 70, Upper Mall**
**CastleCourt**

*The Gift* is a sensory & evocative theatre journey suitable for 8+

W: cahootsni.com

---

Tom Maguire
Ulster University
March 2015
## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE CONTEXT</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEFINING VISUAL IMPAIRMENT</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHALLENGES FOR THE SPECTATOR WITH VI</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EXISTING STRATEGIES</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAHOOTS NI'S <em>THE GIFT</em></td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RECOMMENDATIONS</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report, completed by Tom Maguire on behalf of CAHOOTS NI, was commissioned to document and assess the ways in which the production, The Gift, would be able to provide an experience of a theatrical performance for spectators with visual impairment in which they would be fully integrated with sighted spectators.

The project identified and through a variety of strategies and number of stages of development attempted to address a number of issues. The principles of universal design were adopted from the outset to overcome the barriers to full access within an integrated experience. Evaluating the effectiveness of these strategies was constrained by the limited funding to support an in-depth reception study. There were further limits on the capacity to access child spectators individually and within groups, without repeating in the research process the very discrimination between sighted spectators and those with visual impairment that the project aimed to overcome. There were also some negative impacts on the aesthetic experience of the production for sighted spectators that were neither intended nor expected.

Nonetheless, it is clear that there are a number of ways in which the processes used within this production might be adopted by or adapted for any new performance, provided that they are built-in from the outset.

The report commences with an explanation of the broad context of the work, before surveying existing approaches to making theatre accessible. This is followed by a detailed analysis of the approaches utilised within the production to make an accessible performance, from the perspective of a participant-observer.

This work was supported by funding from Invest NI in the form of an Innovation Voucher. It relied on the contribution of the director, playwright, members of the cast and production team and spectators.
THE CONTEXT

Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that:

Every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts. (OHCHR, 1996 [online])

Yet, notwithstanding the obligations that the Convention places on signatory states, children who have any form of disability encounter numerous challenges in societies more broadly and specifically as spectators of theatre. Such challenges are constrained in part by legislation that requires providers of goods and services to make these accessible to those with an impairment in the form of reasonable adjustments, though these are usually additions, rather than designed in from the outset.

In Northern Ireland, there have been a number of initiatives towards the inclusion of children with visual impairments, particularly within mainstream education (Gray 2005). Yet here, as in other parts of the United Kingdom and Ireland, theatre makers have been much slower to find ways to include spectators with visual impairment as part of their audiences by design, rather than through compensatory measures.

In 2013, the Artistic Director of CAHOOTS NI, Northern Ireland's leading Theatre for Young Audiences' company, initiated a project to specifically identify strategies that would integrate spectators with visual impairments alongside sighted spectators. That project became The Gift. Following a long period of development with the playwright, Charles Way, the production premiered at the Belfast Children's Festival in March 2015, promoted as 'a sensory and evocative theatre journey for spectators 8 years and older'. This report documents the processes through which the project was developed, assesses the efficacy of the outcome and presents some recommendations as to how the work carried out here might be developed in the future by CAHOOTS or other TYA practitioners.
In approaching the project, my principal role was to advise on its curatorship, with a view to disseminating any aspects that might be disseminated more widely. The first aspect of this was to place the project in a wider context of practice and relating its aims to published research findings. This was done through an extended literature review, evidenced in the bibliography and the next main sections of this report. An initial briefing document was provided to the company for dissemination to the production and design team during the development week as a result of this literature review.

The second aspect was to advise on a method of documentation. A strategy was agreed whereby the company's Creative Engagement Manager, Victoria Vettese, would video a series of set piece interviews with the writer, director, production team, cast and, where possible audience. I advised on the focus of questions that would explore the relationship between intention, reflection and evaluation as the project developed.

Alongside this, I was to meet with the various personnel at key stages, acting as a participant-observer during development week and the rehearsal period, both taking notes and intervening to clarify the decision-making process and advise on decisions being made. With restricted funded time on the project, and that a curatorial role is unusual within theatre production, the extent of my participation was limited necessarily. Nonetheless, judicious timing of my attendance meant that I was able to engage at critical moments of the production's evolution.

The final aspect of the work was to create materials that would allow the findings of the project to be disseminated more widely. In addition to giving an internal research seminar at Ulster, a more complete presentation was developed and delivered at St Patrick's College, Dublin City University in February 2015, with the presentation script and slides provided to the company. It is anticipated that these will form part of an international symposium during a major ASSITEJ event in Birmingham in 2016. The video material has been collated and edited into a short documentary, with this report the final piece of documentation for dissemination.
DEFINING VISUAL IMPAIRMENT (VI)

There are huge variations in the extent to which visual impairment is experienced, from total sight loss to low vision (Gray 2005: 180, 184-85; Gray 2009: 170-71; Fryer 2013). Some people with VI will be able to detect outline shapes, others changes in lighting, others still no visual stimuli. Here, VI is used as a short-hand term that also covers those who are blind. There are variations too between those who are born with visual impairment and others who lose their sight over time or due to trauma and as to how the timing of that in relation to the person’s age affects them. This makes it very difficult to generalize as to what constitutes the experience of visual impairment.

The use of the term ‘visually impaired’ derives from a social model of disability that emphasises the way in which physical, cultural and social environments exclude or disadvantage people who are labelled as disabled (Bolt 2005: 548; Frame 2004). As Bolt puts it, ‘people with impaired vision are not necessarily disabled, but when they are so, the society in which they live is necessarily disabling’ (2005: 548). The Gift was initiated in part to identify ways to address such societal disabling.

CHALLENGES FOR THE SPECTATOR WITH VI

The need for augmentation

The sense in which it is society rather than the impairment that is disabling is critical in understanding the effects on an individual child. Davis and Hopwood (2002) identify that VI may have an impact on the development of social and life skills and on cognitive development. Here we can see the indirect effect of the impairment coinciding with the tendency to isolate children with VI within separate educational and social environments.

Such isolation may be justified as a response to the specific needs of children with VI: Davis and Hopwood (2002) note that children with VI may rely on sound and touch and therefore learn and experience the world differently to sighted children. As Gray puts it, ‘The information they obtain through their other senses is often fragmented, inconsistent (objects are not always safe to touch, do not always make noise or always produce an odour) and passive (are not under the child’s control)” (2005: 180). Such a reliance on sound and touch emphasises the importance of
'alternative or augmented forms of communication' for children with VI as they enter into environments that are designed primarily for those with sight. This might be particularly through the 'provision of tactile or kinaesthetic materials' (Davis and Hopwood 2002: 43). Thus, for the child with VI, integration within an environment with sighted people may require them to access additional learning around mobility and orientation skills, for example. Alternatively, it may mean that such environments might be designed to allow their access.

**Space-making**

For theatre-makers and venues, then, making the whole of the theatrical experience open to children with VI requires an element of rethinking assumptions about how the spectator will make sense of the spaces they will encounter: both the space of the venue and the fictional spaces within the performance. The term 'mobile spatial field' helps to focus on the way people create space and places by moving through them (Anvik 2009: 151). As Anvik terms it, 'space is created from the way a body experiences it' (Anvik 2009: 154). For people with visual impairment, the body in all its sensory aspects is critical in the construction of meaningful spaces (Anvik 2009); whereas sighted people give primacy to their sight. Space is therefore an embodied experience in which physical objects might not be regarded as obstacles or barriers, but as means of orientating the individual in the space.

Acknowledging this emphasizes the need for the spectator's to be able to move within the space: confining spectators with VI in a single place may inhibit their ability to answer the need to come into contact with objects within the environment to construct themselves in relation to it. Handmarks can act as landmarks. Thus, movement within space and in relation to the physical environment provides the very sensory clues and cues that allow people with VI to generate spatial representations. This is important even where these are less rich or differentiated than the visual cues available to sighted people. As Anvik argues, 'For visually impaired people things and material surroundings are important reference spots, physical and natural objects containing information which makes movement and orientation possible' (2009: 148).

**Segmentation**

As Erving Goffman (1974) argued everyone makes sense of experiences by creating or applying appropriate frames to these experiences. Such frames segment the experience into meaningful units within which we might engage in appropriate
behaviour. In the theatre, for example, the spectator engages with one frame on entering the building and another in attending to the performance itself.

In confronting a drama onstage too, being able to break up the experience of what is being staged into meaningful segments is a critical process in understanding the action (Huff et al 2012). It is important in regulating and maintaining the spectator’s attention. For sighted spectators at the theatre, this is predominantly a visual experience. Lights go down and up, or narrow or widen their focus to guide the sighted spectator as to where to attend and when one scene moves to another. From the late Nineteenth Century and the experiments of the Duke of Saxe-Meinegen, in Western theatre the visual arrangement of the actors on the stage, the blocking of the action, has also been a critical strategy in guiding the attention of the spectator. Attention is allocated according to the viewer’s understanding of the visual impact of the physical arrangement of actors on the set. Thus, cueing the spectator as to where to pay attention is done primarily through the visual. The spectator has also to identify when and where one moment or event gives way to another (the event boundary). Louise Fryer cites Roder, Kramer & Lange's (2007) suggestion that ‘blind people benefit from enhanced attention rather than enhanced non-visual senses per se’ (2013: 38); that is that the VI spectator will more actively attend to non-visual cues for what is happening than their sighted counterpart.

*Not 'special needs'*

A final challenge for the inclusion of the spectator with VI is the attitude and approach of other spectators to his or her presence and the spectator with VI’s own sense of self in the environment. The spectator with VI likewise may not want to be marked out by having to wear earphones or a special headset, or use a tablet computer to magnify a performance that would otherwise remain inaccessible to her. The needs of the spectator with VI may come into conflict with those of the sighted spectator who doesn't want to have the pleasure of viewing interrupted by other people talking, for example, or the distraction of her using her tablet.

"Very often additional services for blind and partially sighted people can feel a little patronising or a little ‘special needs’.
- Steph, 13 year old blogger
EXISTING STRATEGIES

According to van der Linden et al,

While there has been much interest in developing cultural experiences for visually impaired and blind people, efforts so far have focused largely on compensatory measures, such as the use of audio descriptions, tactile artifacts, raised images or through social interaction with sighted people. The experiences are limited, often depending on an accompanying sighted describer helping out, making it difficult for blind and partially sighted people to access the work directly by themselves (2011: 1).

This sense of 'compensatory measures' draws attention to the ways in which existing strategies most commonly are added to existing work after it has been completed. Indeed, CAHOOTS NI would routinely offer two of them (audio description and touch tours) as part of making its work accessible. The aim is to make the pre-existing performance accessible, while not disrupting or changing the nature of the performance itself. I will examine these existing strategies, under three broad headings: audio-description, touch tours and workshops.

**Audio-description (AD)**

The most commonplace compensatory measure is the use of audio-description. In AD, a trained describer will provide a verbal narrative that will represent the visual aspects of the performance, with words replacing the unavailable visual information. Georgina Kleege notes, 'it is assumed that the actors’ speeches, along with any onstage sounds, deliver the majority of necessary information. The main trick is to time the description to fit in the intervals between dialogue and determine how much peripheral information about gestures, facial expressions, sets, and costumes will enhance understanding of the script' (2014: 9). There may be an additional set of audio programme notes that further aid the spectator's engagement, with Scottish Opera for example making a CD available in advance of the performance, 'which gives an excellent introduction to the production, including interviews, a synopsis, musical excerpts and details about the costumes, sets and individual characters' [online].

The segmentation of the action can be cued and the attention of the spectator guided by the description. The describer may be directly present with the spectator with VI, or more usually, will describe live with the description relayed through a headset or earphones. In TYA, the presence of adults as mediators of a performance for the
child spectator is commonplace, though something that the theatre makers would prefer didn’t happen. Louise Fryer’s (2013) doctoral thesis argues persuasively that such verbal description can stimulate vivid mental imagery for the spectator and that, ‘the image will be as rich if triggered by a verbal cue as by a sensory one’ (2013: 276). Thus, AD addresses a number of the challenges set out above in providing information that compensates for an impaired experience of the visual elements of the performance. Fryer notes, however, that the experience can vary enormously from person to person. There is much to commend in the skill, professionalism and commitment of the audio-describers. Yet, there are limitations too, to approaches that may be added as augmentations after the production has been completed and outside of the production process and network of artistic relationships.

One example of the experience of AD is provided by Steph, whose blog I have previously mentioned:

[In The Beginning was the End] was an unconventional performance which you walked through independently ... Usually the audio description is through a headset but this time it was live. Two describers told us what was in the strange rooms and underground passages and what the characters were doing. The describers had their work cut out to explain what was happening without giving a version of what we might be supposed to be thinking. (2013: [online])

While this blog is generally welcoming of the access that AD has provided and acknowledges the skills of the describers, there are some telling phrases that hint at the tensions faced by the describers in describing the performance without interpreting it. An editorial by David Feeney in the *British Journal of Visual Impairment* provides an even more robust critique of the role of audio-description in determining the experience of art works and performances for spectators with VI:

While misgivings about attributing epistemic or aesthetic credibility to the opinions volunteered by individuals with visual impairment persist, the inequity of the rationale informing them is clearly manifest within gallery environments, for example, where these individuals are expected to take on faith the descriptions, instructions, and values presented to them by fully sighted individuals in the name of access. (2014, 3)

For the child spectator, the effect of this mediation amplifies further the ways in which it is adults who ‘write the plays, who act and direct the performances, and who choose the plays to be watched by the young audiences. So here we face a complicated situation in which the world of the young will always be constructed through the eyes of the adults and their perceptions’ (Schonmann 2006: 20).
**Touch Tours**

A more direct experience of the materiality of the performance can be provided through a touch tour, something that takes place in conjunction with AD. Guidance provided by VocalEyes summarises the process and function of the touch tour:

> Having access to the stage and set before a performance is a way of firming up the descriptive information [the spectator] 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. (2014: [online])

The spectator with VI, then, through the touch tour is able to gain an embodied sense of the stage space and the ways in which it generates the fictional world. Through touch, the spectator has the opportunity to build up the mental image of the world of the play.

As with audience description, however, the touch tour provides a separate experience for the spectator with VI, happening before the performance takes place, and usually only for selected performances through an additional booking procedure. Touch tours too are conditioned by the selective nature of what the spectator may touch, a selection over which she has little or no control. Furthermore, changes in the physical set may not be available in the touch tour, particularly in the short time that may be allocated to it prior to a performance: VocalEyes (2014) recommend thirty minutes for the touch tour.

**Workshops**

A further extension to the physical access of the performance is through additional workshops offered to spectators with VI. These are frequently offered for Dance performances and offer,

> 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. (VisualEyes 2014: 4)

Such workshops overcome the limitations of AD for dance performances outlined by Kleege (2014), for example. Such workshops also offer opportunities to overcome the social isolation that may be an effect of VI as well as offering an embodied experience of key aspects of the narrative or performance in advance of the show.

Yet as with AD and touch tours, these are nonetheless largely 'post-production'
approaches, taking a pre-existing performance and introducing adaptations or augmentations for the visually-impaired spectator.

Without sight approaches
A further, and much less commonplace, strategy has been the development of performance modes that involve the deliberate removal of the visual to encourage other forms of largely haptic experience. One such project was The Blind Theater that used a body suit to create a haptic experience for spectators that eliminated the need for sight:

Entering the theatre, the user is blindfolded. Then s/he is dressed in an electronic, computer-controlled bodysuit. This bodysuit becomes the new skin of the user, slipping him or her into the corpus of a story told through touch and binaural, 3 dimensional sound. The suit imprints one of the five different stories about being a woman directly on the body. The bodysuit renders the story physical, the experience becomes a real, personal and intimate play with female identity. As the stories are physically told, they really do happen. With and through your body. (Blind Theater 2010 [online]).

This approach clearly addresses a number of the challenges for the spectator with VI outlined above. Yet, there is something odd about removing sight from the sighted as a way of integrating the spectator with VI, imposing an impairment or limitation where none previously existed.

THE GIFT

CAHOOTS NI
According to its website,

Cahoots NI is a professional children's touring theatre company based in Belfast, Northern Ireland [that] concentrates on the visual potential of theatre and capitalises upon the age-old popularity of magic and illusion as an essential ingredient in the art of entertaining. Each production is at the centre of a body of outreach work designed to maximise artistic potential, customise the individual theatre experience and extend the imaginative life of the piece beyond the actual event.

In some respects, this project would seem to be at odds with this emphasis on the visual in CAHOOTS's productions to this point. Artistic Director, Paul McEneaney, however, has had a long-standing relationship with Jordanstown School just outside Belfast. The school provides specialist education to children who are deaf or have
visual impairments, tracing its history back 150 years. McEneaney had already explored how magic might be experienced by children with visual impairment and this project was to be driven by his curiosity as to how the child with visual impairment might experience a full theatrical production and be integrated with sighted spectators. This was not merely an altruistic departure: McEneaney relished the challenge of working for this audience as a stimulus to his own creative development. This was his first experience of making theatre with a spectator with VI in mind.

An initial script was commissioned from Charles Way. Already one of Britain’s most established writers for TYA, Way had met McEneaney in the USA in 2010 where each had a production on the Imagination Stage. That was the beginning of a relationship that would see CAHOOTS NI stage Way’s *A Spell of Cold Weather* (2012) and the originally commissioned *Nivelli’s War* (2014). As with McEneaney, Way had no previous of experience of writing specifically to include the spectator with VI, regarding this as an experiment, breaking new ground for him as a writer. That first script contained the main elements of what would become *The Gift*. It is the story of how a young woman in Ireland, Mary, was bequeathed a financial gift that supported her to become an internationally acclaimed concert pianist, turning her back on the heritage of Irish traditional music that her brother, Keith, took up instead. It was informed by interviews with two musicians, one performing a classical repertoire, the other working within a folk tradition. Following Mary’s car accident with which the play would open, this was to be a memory play through which the audience would reconstruct the story of her life.

Based on Way’s first script, the project was chosen for development as part of the *New Visions/New Voices* week at Washington DC’s Kennedy Center, in May 2014. *New Visions/New Voices* is a biennial program supporting the creation of new plays and musicals for young audiences and families. The intense developmental process, culminating in a rehearsed reading, involved the company working with blind and partially-sighted theatre-makers and spectators, alongside other peers, who raised questions and challenged the company to think about the work in new ways. One practical issue, for example, was when a blind spectator arrived with his guide dog, a circumstance that had not been anticipated. Director, Paul McEneaney, felt that this period moved the

"The Gift is at once a memory play and a play for voices, a family saga and a sensory pathway. Most tantalisingly, it is a play about music, about the struggle between the classical and traditional genres, between the discipline of the concert artiste and the instinctive touch of a natural fiddler – about what it means to have a gift."
- Jane Coyle, CultureNI
issues of staging much further forward than any particular aspect of the script or narrative. Nonetheless, following this experience, Way began rewriting to produce a more focused and clearer narrative. In December 2014, he and McEneaney worked through a further development week in Belfast with director, actors, the sound designer and set builders. This development week was a crucial stage of decision-making. The narrative of the play was to be further honed through a series of rewrites that continued into the rehearsal process. The experiential and sensory aspects of the production and their relationship to the plot and the weight that would be given to the spoken word were brought into sharper focus.

Critical at this point was that the production was to be staged in a large empty retail unit in one of Belfast's leading shopping centres that CAHOOTS had secured through a unique collaboration with property consultants Osborne King. The wide open interior of the unit would allow the company to build a bespoke theatrical space in which the audience would access the different fictional locales of the story by moving through a series of interlocking rooms. Mocking this up provided an opportunity to focus on the journey of the spectator and to explore the relationship between the narrative aspects and the spaces through which the spectators would travel. Sound Designer, Garth McConagie, was brought in to create a specific sound landscape for each space that would include a range of music, sound effects and voice overs. Each space was to be the site for a specific moment of narrative; have a different texture to its floor, a different smell associated with it; and, in some instances even a different temperature (an outdoor scene in a park was to be much colder).

The production period of the show saw these elements tested and refined. One critical part of this was a try-out before an invited audience from Jordanstown School a week before opening where feedback from the group allowed some decisions to be confirmed and others rejected. For example, it was decided not to have a distinctive smell of antiseptic for the final scene in the hospital ward. Here, the young spectators felt that this was unnecessary and obtrusive. While such try-outs are commonplace within TYA, the importance in this production was to confirm the strategies to enable the spectator with VI to engage fully with the world of the play as part of an integrated audience.

These strategies implemented the approach of 'universal design', summed up by Pablo Romero-Fresco thus:
Coined by the architect Ronald L. Mace, the term “universal design” is applied to buildings, products and environments that are accessible to people both without and with disabilities (Mace 1976). To abide by the principles of universal design theory, the design of a product needs to include as many potential users and uses as possible and to do so from conception. (no date, [online])

The creative team on *The Gift* embraced a set of strategies that attempted such a universal design approach. These are outlined below. While I have separated these out, it was critical that their efficacy was underpinned by the relationships between all members of the production team. It is clear that Paul McEneaney's directorial approach and charismatic leadership style generated much of the good will necessary. Thus, Charles Way's script went through iterations that engaged with the development of both the physical environment and the sound design. Likewise, Garth McConaghe's sound design had to be responsive to changes in the script and the opportunities of the physical environment. Such symbiosis was due in part to the ways in which the long lead time for development enabled relationships to develop; and that the key members had a track record of collaborating together. Moreover, it is important that the outcome provided an opportunity for multi-modal stimulation for all the spectators, including those with VI.

**Audience mobility**

The creation of a specific environment through which spectators moved segmented each scene. This necessitated a restricted audience capacity and the establishment of conventions for guiding *all* the spectators through the environment. These conventions were established as spectators entered the venue, where a guide presented them with plastic surgical overshoes and orientated them to how the performance would proceed. Of course, as a TYA performance for children over 8 years old, it was possible to anticipate that all the children would be in the company of a responsible adult and thus that the child with VI would have no need for additional guidance, either physically or through verbal direction.
Sensory stimulation
Each room within the space was designed with different sensory markers, including different flooring types, lighting states, soundscapes, smells and, in some instances specific temperatures. The opening scene and the final scene took place on a moving revolve stage and the movement of this was a significant cue to the spectators of the journey in which they were participating. The overall approach of the production might be regarded as stimulating a form of 'synaesthesia': the production of a sense impression relating to one sense or part of the body by stimulation of another sense or part of the body. This was a particular response to the issue identified by Gray of 'how the environment is modified to make it accessible through other sensory channels' (Gray 2005: 181).

"The unexpected feeling of movement in the first room is only the start as the actors and the audience move through a series of interlinked spaces – including the family house, a wooded outdoor scene and a concert hall dressing room – before coming full circle back round to the beginning. While my nose stopped working twenty or so years ago, some of the children at tonight’s show explained to me afterwards how certain rooms stank and how you could smell the trees and the fusty house"

- Alan in Belfast, blog review

Sound Design
The performance was underpinned by a sound design that was relayed through 19 different speakers located across the environment. As well as pre-recorded elements, there was attention paid also to the creation of live sounds within the space. The latter were primarily diegetic sounds created within scenes such as the sound of shoes on paving slabs, or of a cup against a saucer; a door opening and closing, or a letter being taken from an envelope, for example. The pre-recorded soundscape also included some diegetic sounds. For a scene set in a prison, the sound of locks being opened and metal doors clanging helped establish the location. Such sounds might be regarded as soundmarks, the auditory counterpart of landmarks: a type of sound that 'establishes a particular place, as does a landmark, possessing some unique quality for only that location' (Sonnenschein 2001: 183). Equally, there were aspects of the design that created what Sonnenschein terms 'keynotes', referring to 'sounds we hear so frequently that they form a background
against which other sounds are heard' (2001: 183), this was particularly noticeable in the opening scene with its sounds of the sea and beach.

The sound design also incorporated a number of other non-diegetic sounds. The use of specific musical excerpts was critical, given the subject matter of the play, with the distinctions between Mary and Keith resonant in the use of musical leitmotifs from Garth McConaghie's specially commissioned compositions. The eventual reconciliation between brother and sister is articulated in the unifying of these motifs in the final scene.

The playback of the sounds was crucial too in establishing the sense of spatiality. Slight variations in volume, energy, source and the proximity of source and spectator created both the sense of different locales and the space within such locales. This was true too of the performers' speaking, something carefully modulated through the rehearsal process, creating scenes that might be more or less intimate or public.

**Casting**

The casting of actors with distinctive accents and speech patterns was important in ensuring that the sound of the dialogue did not merge into a bland Received Pronunciation. While this may have produced anomalies for those sensitive to the different regional voices of Ireland, it ensured clarity in the vocal effects as markers of character that were as distinct as in the visual.

**Integrated narration**

As a memory play, the use of a voice-over of Mary's thoughts (as part of the sound design) as she tried to piece together the shards of her life, drew on the same power of the verbal to stimulate the spectator's imagination that underpins the efficacy of audio-description. Here, however, this is specifically linked to the protagonist's own goals, rather than from an external perspective.

**Blocking of Action**

McEneaney's direction resisted the conventions of blocking of scenes that might be either naturalistic or pictorial. Instead, the emphasis was on establishing distinctive 'hearing points' with actors positioned to best establish aurally their relationships.

The response to the production was extremely positive, with reviews in local media, online and across social media commenting favourably. Responses collated on the
door by Young at Art, the organising body for the Belfast Children's Festival, were similarly enthusiastic.

"First time to the theatre - can't wait to come back."
- Spectator feedback

There were, however, some aspects that were noted by individual spectators. One, for example, commented on how the music felt intrusive and emotionally manipulative. This was perhaps a consequence of how the production was framed. Attention was not drawn in the marketing and publicity to the specific attempt at inclusion that had driven the process: something that might itself have been counter-productive to the desire for an integrated experience for both sighted spectators and those with VI.

The complexity of the performance's multi-modal approach was also difficult where family groups included children younger than the designated target age group or at earlier stages of development. Some spectators found that the presence of such children within the contained spaces of the environment proved distracting.

There was also an issue for a very small number of spectators who found it difficult to cope with the confinement of the spaces. Provision had been made to escort anyone in such circumstances through alternative exits.
RECOMMENDATIONS

The specific approaches of *The Gift* should be disseminated as widely as possible to inform practice across the TYA sector nationally and internationally.

Funding for productions attempting innovative approaches should allow for a long lead time and multiple cycles of development. Opportunities to work with potential audiences, as well as peers and experts as ‘critical friends’ are invaluable and require support.

Budgets for future productions should include provision for the curating of the work. This would include allocations for the documentation of projects as well as for its storage and dissemination. This may require some investment in digital capacity. This would have the potential for the promotion of the work to potential funders, producers and programmers, consolidating the company’s international reputation. In addition, it would provide a valuable resource for practitioners in TYA and other related fields.

The process of inclusion by design should be adapted as a matter of course for future productions by CAHOOTS NI and other TYA companies. While this would have to be adapted for conventional venues, a number of approaches identified here might be utilised.

Further research should be developed into the reception of performances by spectators more generally and spectators with VI specifically.

The potential for the development of a more sustained research project to develop further strategies to engage spectators with VI should be explored.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Romero-Fresco, P. (2013) 'Accessible filmmaking: Joining the dots between audiovisual translation, accessibility and filmmaking.' JoSTrans 20 [online].


--- (2012b). 'Cinematic language and the description of film: Keeping AD users in the frame.' Perspectives: Studies in Translatology,


of Blind People [online]. Available:


VocalEyes (2014) Guidelines for Touch Tours [online]. Available: