Accessible Black Box Performance for Hard of Hearing? Well Almost…

By Community Members Vickie Pacheco and Wynne Whyman

We, as two hard of hearing patrons, recently went to a black box theater performance. This means the space had black walls, a black ceiling, and a black floor. Everything possible was checked ahead of time:

Receiver with neckloop and headphones

- The director understood the needs of hard of hearing people. (Check)
- An FM assistive listening system was available. (Check)
- Caption screens were on the wall. (Check)
- A field trip to the venue was made prior to see the signage and physically verify that neckloops* were available. (Check)
- A short assistive listening system description and “blue ear” symbol were in the program. (Check)
- Accommodation was requested prior. (Check)
- Patrons arrived early to pick up and verify that the FM receivers had batteries. (Check)

It seemed like everything was in order. Right? Wrong: There were two problems. The performers did not use any body-worn microphones, and the overhead microphones did not adequately pick up their voices. However, those microphones picked up all stage and audience sounds. Assistive listening systems do not work unless there is excellent audio input. Plus, the caption screens were not in the line of sight with the performers, resulting in "ping-pong" watching. Theater lighting caused a glare on the screens, set decorations covered some of the captions, and the captioning font was too small and lacked sufficient color contrast with the screen’s background color. It was a frustrating experience to miss the dialogue. Volume is not enough – people with hearing loss need clarity.

How could this have been prevented? Three ways. During a tech check of the audio design, a person with typical hearing could borrow an FM/RF receiver and headphones to listen to the sound quality and make adjustments. The same person could also evaluate whether the captions were satisfactory in placement, size, and color by watching them. Better yet, involve a person who relies on captions to give feedback.

Alternatively, the performers could have worn discreet body-worn microphones, and the AV team could have directed the sound only to the assistive listening system. Under this approach, both needs are met: performers use their voice-only projection without using microphones, and people with hearing loss can fully enjoy the production too. And the venue would meet ADA requirements for providing assistive listening and equal access.

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Two additions to the article, post publication.

A) *neckloops are used by people with telecoils in their hearing aids, cochlear implants, or bone-anchored devices to pick up the audio from an FM/RF receiver. If a person tries to use headphones instead, there are four problems:

1) They would need to wear the headphones over their device microphones instead of over their ears (awkward fit);
2) Headphones can result in poor, unclear sound quality;
3) Headphones frequently cause feedback when used with the hearing instruments (squealing heard by people around them); and
4) In some cases, there is audible leakage of the amplified sound from headphones, which other patrons find disturbing.

B) Another technique for capturing the performer's voices is to plan the placement of hidden microphones in strategic locations in the sets themselves. Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago has a great reputation for doing this!