

Filter

by Darren Daly

On behalf of the company

<https://www.derbytheatre.co.uk/filter>

Filter is a performative exploration of theatre for sighted and non-sighted audiences by fully sighted and visually impaired performers. It is concerned with 'Aesthetics of Access' (Sealey & Hope-Lynch, 2012), specifically access related to visual impairment (VI). *Filter* explores the use of ambisonic sound in a live space, integrated character-led audio description and obfuscation of the visual sense to develop a theatrical narrative. It was created following an extended research period involving community sight-support groups and local charities and supported by Derby Theatre, Arts Council England and the University of Derby. The script comprises of excerpts from two extant texts, *The Blind* (or *The Sightless*) by Maurice Maeterlinck (1911) and *Smudge* by Alex Bulmer (Bulmer, 2006) and devised material by the company. *Filter* was first performed to an invited audience of sighted, non-sighted and visually impaired audiences at Derby Theatre on 23 June 2016.



Does anyone know where we are?

We want to know where we are!

I will come to you.

There is something between us.

It is better to stay where one is.

Martin Welton notes how physiologically, we are built to honour sight over the other senses , hence 'vision seeming to dominate the means by which we understand on a neurological level' and the fact that it 'remains the dominant sense culturally.' (Welton, 2012, p. 149). Indeed , etymologically, it is well noted that theatre comes from the Greek Theatron, which, literally translates as place of seeing (Alston, 2013, p. 217; Welton, 2012, p. 146). Inevitably, this raises questions around access for theatre audiences that are unable to see or have difficulty seeing and a number of theatre companies such as Graeae and Extant have engaged in creating performance that seeks to address access for blind and visually impaired (VI) audiences as well as for other disabilities. Theatre company for VI artists, Extant's work *Sheer* (Oshidi, 2012) was performed with audience in complete darkness in an effort to replicate the sense of blindness. Other companies such as Sound and Fury have also created live performance work in pitch black such as *Going Dark* (Naylor, 2012) to negate the primacy of vision and focus primarily on other senses such as sound. Welton suggests that a lack of visual reference undermines 'one of the central means by which "theatre" is most often defined'(2012, p. 147) but for VI or blind audiences a focus on other sensory elements is essential and encourages far more engagement with the theatrical. In *Filter*, rather than a complete lack of visual reference, the visual is disturbed. The obfuscation of the visual sense is borne from the wide range of visual impairment and experiences expressed by the research participants. Interviewees' responses indicated that a host of factors such as changes of light, colour, stages of degenerative condition etc. meant that visual impairment and 'blindness' was rarely a constant. In order to investigate (and represent) this in performance, *Filter*'s scenographic design utilises textiles of various weave tightness to inhibit visual reception. The tyrannies of the gaze are confronted.



On entering the space, the audience are seated on four sides and faced with a layered array of textiles hanging from the ceiling, obscuring the square performance space like an opaque box. These are manipulated by actors at various points in the narrative to reveal or obscure more of the visual action dependent on the position of the audience member. The various weaves let through different amounts of light thus making objects/performers more or less visible.

This creates an inconsistency and disruption of the visual and other senses throughout the performance, forcing a constant re-adjustment of the sensory reception for audience.

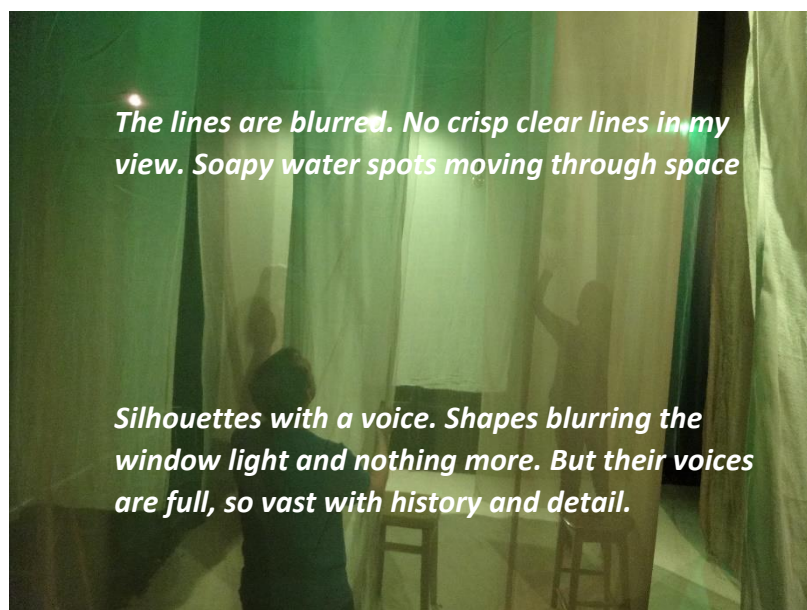
Visual perception is also disturbed for the sighted performers with the material interfering with spatial awareness of the performance area and the proximity of the other actors. The edge of the set is marked by bark chippings to act as a haptic signal to the VI actor Karina. The use of bark integrates the functional element of the necessary signal into the aesthetic of the forest created for Maeterlinck's extracts, combining aesthetics with access.



The interruption and disturbance in visual information creates an imbalance for sighted audience as well as VI audience, subverting a reliance on the dominant sense to unsettle and intrude upon their usual form of reception at the theatre. It demands a closer attention to the other senses and to the imaginative cognitive function as they seek to negotiate the various sensory elements at play and the fragmented narrative of the script in order to perceive the various characters. This is consistent with how one receives audio drama or radio plays where voice can be heard but the body is unseen. Dolar (2006) refers to this as the acousmatic voice. The listener, in the absence of witnessing a physical manifestation of the body to which the voice belongs, creates their own interpretation of the owner of the voice – stature, status, gender etc.

The acousmatic voice is simply a voice whose source one cannot see, a voice whose origin cannot be identified, a voice one cannot place...(Dolar, 2006, p. 221)

In Filter, there is no absolute absence of the physical representation but visual hints, shadows, visual echoes for those able to perceive them - a physical shape without features might be witnessed, a gesture noticed, a hand or arm glimpsed. The origin can be partially identified but without all of the features necessary to render it fully recognisable.



Instead, it relies on an emphasis on the use of sonic narrative to create space, movement and character. As in audio drama, this requires a heightened style of vocal expression from the actors. This is particularly necessary to align with the sound design used to create space and movement for the audience. The environments within the narrative such as Maeterlinck's forest, Bulmer's cinema and our devised café scene are experienced through ambisonic 360-degree sound whereby speakers are placed equidistant around the auditorium perimeter to surround audience and localise sound. This allows for movement within the auditory landscape to create a sense of 3-dimensional space for performers and audience. The live mixing of the sonic environment allows for interaction and real time response from the sound technician/performer.

In addition to the detailed audio environment, the devised material incorporates integrated audio description (AD) into the script. As Louise Fryer explains, the role of audio describer is inter-modal where modal is thought of as:

Relating to different sensory modes: namely, information received through one sense (vision) must be translated into information that can be received through another sense (audition).

(Fryer, 2016, p. 3)

Usually, live audio description is an additional element to the performance, offered by theatres as part of their accessibility options to those who request it. This is usually delivered through headphones or an earpiece providing listeners with extra information that other audience members do not have. Fryer notes that often AD can be reduced to the content of the visual information merely translated into words, overlooking the performance element of AD delivery to support the theatrical *mise-en-scene* (ibid). Whilst the performative element and the concept of audio describer 'neutrality' have been fiercely debated (Fryer, 2016, p. 4), the performance element of audio description is embraced and integrated into *Filter*. As Fryer notes, Theatre companies Extant and Graeae have both incorporated audio description into the action of performance with characters that operate in roles which allow them to commentate on others' movements within the performance. Fryer suggests that this does lead to the need for a 'meta level of AD' whereby the describer is described but acknowledges the benefits of integrating the AD into performance rather than adding it as an 'afterthought' (Fryer, 2016, p. 138). In *Filter*, AD is integrated into the devised script, mainly as internal monologue to describe what the character or other characters may be thinking and subsequently doing. This shares the AD around the characters, embracing the idea of meta-AD to not only describe visual action but also support character development.



Eye contact; a flicker, a nod of her head, a clear signal. I'm going over. Here goes nothing.

To my left...a shape looming, male, I think, slim.

I was at the counter and your red dress, so vibrant, it caught my eye. I mean ... I... noticed you... looking over from your table... and...

I'm sorry. I'm blind I didn't see you.

The juxtaposition of Maeterlinck's late 19th century text which presents the sightless as a symbolic, hegemonic group with disabled writer Alex Bulmer's contemporary script drawing on her subjective experience of sight loss references both the significant change in societal attitudes and theatrical representation of blind and visually impaired citizens. It also provides a rich tapestry of symbolic imagery and realistic dialogue to develop an aesthetic within which to work with access in mind. In *Filter*, the disruption of perception scenographically, the development of sonic narrative and movement, and the integration of AD into the structure and content of the text provide an aesthetics and dramaturgy of access for VI audiences. The integration of fully sighted and VI actors into the company not only ensures an authenticity of representation regarding content but also shapes a dramaturgy of access in the rehearsal room. The consideration of this access from the beginning of the devising period offers a plethora of creative options to shape the aesthetic and dramaturgy of a devised performance. It should and for us, will, inform all future devised performance and the teaching of devising technique.

***I hear them, I hear them, almost beside us! Listen!
Listen! – What is it that you see? What is it that...?***

They are here! They are here in our midst!

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<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203965924>