

What's On

The Visually Impaired 'Watch' *The Orphan*

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Listening to the movies? Absolutely right! These people need to rely on an audio describer in order to enjoy a movie. Some of them can only hear it, whilst some can 'see' it with their blurred vision, but they can all feel it with their hearts. This is because they have either lost their sight completely or only have residual vision.

Audio description utilises concise, vivid and imaginative language so that the audio describer can accurately tell the audience what is happening on the silver screen, effectively becoming their eyes. A volunteer takes on the role of the audio describer, whose task is to describe the images they see, such as the characters' facial expressions and scene settings without interrupting the original dialogue. This allows the audience to be up to speed with the film's plot development so that they will have a better understanding of what is going on.

Movies nowadays tend to use large amounts of special effects and the actors' body language to explain the plot, which makes it extremely difficult for the visually impaired to follow. Audio description breaks this barrier so that they can better enjoy the cinematic experience.

The Hong Kong Society for the Blind (HKSB) has always been at the forefront of promoting audio description services at local theatres, having organised regular screening sessions since March 2009. As of May 2011, the HKSB has been collaborating with CreateHK, a Commerce and Economic Development Bureau agency, on a programme called 'Development of Audio Description Services for Hong Kong Films'. The year-long programme serves to provide audio describers with learning and hands-on opportunities. It has garnered much public interest as the programme will help expand the Chinese language audio description market, as well as make Hong Kong a barrier-free and innovative metropolis.

Through the HKSB's screening sessions, the visually impaired have the opportunity to enjoy this popular pastime of the general public, giving them more topics to talk about when socialising. This event has been rather well-received by visually-impaired persons and has gained the support of the film and broadcasting industries, performing arts professionals, as well as the general public. In addition to signing up as volunteers for our audio description service, they have also provided us with assistance in other aspects of the programme.

The Hong Kong Film Archive has also been kind enough to lend us their facilities, making top-notch arrangements for our visit. On 27 November 2011, the

late Bruce Lee's birthday, members of the HKSB and visually-impaired senior citizens from the TWGHs Jockey Club Rehabilitation Complex attended a screening of *The Orphan* at the Archive cinema, accompanied by their families. The version which was shown was the uncut one in colour and, of course, audio description services were provided to cater to the audience's needs.

This particular screening was a hands-on session of the 'Development of Audio Description Services for Hong Kong Films' programme, with Ms Lo Kar-ling narrating the audio description script written by Ms Wong Ka-yi. Ms Lo's performance was a downright crowd-pleaser. Using precise language, an animated interpretation and her sweet voice, she gave a vivid depiction of each scene. Her description of the characters' expressions also allowed the audience to better understand their respective temperaments. Every glance and movement from Pak Yin, who plays a bullied teacher, as well as the multitude of expressions on Ah Saam (played by Bruce Lee)'s face, were described to the tiniest detail, evoking the audience's sympathy.

The more elderly of the participants told us that they used to watch this film in black and white on the television when they were young and could still see properly – they know the plot like the back of their hand as it was telecast frequently. Unfortunately, they cannot enjoy watching television or movies anymore due to impaired vision. Thus, they were overjoyed when they found out that audio description services were available at our screening event.

'I haven't seen a movie for over 20 years! I found this cinematic experience to be moving and exciting at the same time. I hope there'll be opportunities to "watch" more movies in the future,' one of the participants shared with our staff.

Audio description service is a helping profession which has been developed for over 30 years in the Western world. Japan began providing this type of service more than 20 years ago, whilst Mainland China and Taiwan have also been actively promoting its development. The HKSB has put an enormous effort into this area over the past two years with the support of our dedicated volunteers who have persevered with our trial and error approach, learning as they went. We are extremely grateful for the backing from CreateHK which has given the development of audio description in Hong Kong a huge boost! (Translated by Johnny Ko)

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