

# The Artistic Access Residency Creazioni Accessibili: Audio Description Dramaturgy in Contemporary Dance

Giuseppe Comuniello, Flavia Dalila D'Amico, and Camilla Guarino

This article focuses on the access dramaturgy experiments of the artistic residency Creazioni Accessibili (Accessible Creations) in 2022 and 2023. The residency features Giuseppe Comuniello (blind performer and choreographer) and Camilla Guarino (dramaturg) as mentors, is curated by Flavia Dalila D'Amico, and is produced by the National Centre of Dance Production Orbita Spellbound in Rome. Creazioni Accessibili is a one-week residency with an annual open call, which supports artistic research in the development of dramaturgies that consider the sensory needs of blind and visually impaired people. The project has generated, and continues to advance, a methodology that merges co-design techniques, dance practices, and embodied knowledge and is innovative in the Italian context. This methodology focuses on the particular dramaturgical characteristics of each performance and involves co-design in the forms of blind process mentorship and testing approaches in development with blind community members. It respects the selected artists' aesthetics, and considers accessible practices both (1) instruments of use "for" a particular community and (2) opportunities to experiment with multisensory dramaturgy.

This article combines Flavia Dalila D'Amico's views as scholar and residency curator with Giuseppe Comuniello and Camilla Guarino's notes as mentors and dance artists. These three authors describe and discuss how different solutions were tried out in the first two years of the residency. Despite their aesthetic differences, the two project teams in residency elected to work on audio description (hereafter AD), which is why the article focuses particularly on this tool and how it can be integrated into choreography.

## The Italian Context

In Italy there are still many communities, in particular the blind and visually impaired people, who are excluded by various types of performance events (i.e., dance and theatre). Even when accessibility tools such as AD are present, they are most often conceived and used on the sidelines so as “not to disturb” nondisabled audience members. In contrast, the objective of Creazioni Accessibili is to offer a space for artistic research and creation based on accessibility, so that it can be integrated into the design phase of the performance making and not merely as an auxiliary tool. Therefore, the nature of this project must be contextualized within a frame (that of Italian cultural policies) that finds it difficult to consider cultural accessibility as a right, even though it is protected by a law (no. 104 of 1992). Italian activist and scholar Ilaria Crippi writes:

There are types of people whose ability to participate is taken for granted and others whose presence remains negotiable. . . . [C]alling oneself anti-ableist has a number of uncomfortable practical consequences: rejecting the normalization of the exclusion of people with disabilities due to physical and sensory barriers, . . . stopping considering accessibility as an extemporaneous emergency to be plugged in when someone complains, and instead treating it as one of the tasks to be anticipated and managed on a routine basis. If such an approach seems strange to us, it is because the ableist system has accustomed us to thinking that it is exclusion that is normal. (2024, 88, 187, and 190)

Attention to the accessibility of blind and visually impaired communities to cultural products has spread in Italy since the 1990s, initially in the fields of exhibit design and audiovisual communication, and only in more recent years in the performing arts field. This means that the presence of blind and visually impaired people has been considered “negotiable,” to quote Crippi, for much of Italian cultural history. Although AD and touch tours facilitate participation in theatre performances or film screenings, they are still not very popular tools for contemporary dance performances. There are several reasons for this gap. The most obvious one is that the nonverbal and continuously dynamic character of dance can be less available for translation into speech. As the scholars Bettina Bläsing and Esther Zimmermann suggest:

Dance provides specific challenges for audio description—unlike works of the fine arts, dance works are fleeting and constantly in motion; unlike film and drama, they are often entirely non-verbal, and their content is often emotional, associative and metaphorical, rather than

semantic. Dance, like music, is not communicative in the sense of sharing declarative information, but feelings, experiences and social cues. (2021, 5)

Like Bläsing and Zimmermann, we ask, How can one describe a synchronous multitude of movements? Facial expressions? How about the relationship between choreography, bodies, light, sound, objects, costumes? With identity awareness, we add questions about how to name moving bodies in order to distinguish them from each other? How much leeway do those who describe have over the subjects described and, for example, their political positions, racialization, (dis)ability, gender/sexuality, and age?

Creazioni Accessibili was created to answer these questions and integrate AD into the dance dramaturgies at the outset and discuss them in the rehearsal studio with all parties involved. Giuseppe Comuniello and Camilla Guarino, dramaturgical mentors for the artists hosted each year, have been carrying out artistic research since 2018 aimed at returning the poetics of the dance works to and with blind people while questioning the idea that a description can be said to be “neutral.” As scholar Eleanor Margolies writes:

Like a translator, a describer makes decisions about the intended meaning of the original and the frame of reference of the audience. The process always involves some loss, but the compensations and substitutions can sometimes be felicitous, metaphorical. At best, a description is a negotiation between members of the creative team, but it will always be partial, reflecting the viewpoint, experience and limitations of the describer. (2015, 23)

For Comuniello and Guarino, it is not a question of whether or how much to use neutrality as a guiding principle. Rather, the aim is to incorporate a further semantic level into the dance work: an access dramaturgy that is always poetic and subjective. In accordance with the mentors’ vision, the residency offers the possibility for a dance work, which remains open to development, to discover suitable access strategies. These should remain in keeping with the artists’ dramaturgical idea for the dance work and aim to communicate creatively the sensations, emotions, and frictions that one or more bodies in motion convey to mixed blind and seeing audiences.

In this context, the AD is conceived as a creative tool with the aim of addressing the gap between privileged and underprivileged access to dance performances. However, a crucial question remains open: How to gain the trust of communities that have been excluded from dance events for decades and therefore have little or no experience with stage dance? To answer this question Creazioni Accessibili adopts the methodology of co-design. As Theodore Zamenopoulos and Katerina Alexiou write:

As a social movement, co-design is about challenging where there is an imbalance of power within selected groups of individuals who make important decisions about others' lives, livelihoods and bodies. These decisions are often made with little to no meaningful involvement of the people who will be most impacted by them. (2018, 11)

During the work phases, the residency includes feedback sessions with blind and visually impaired spectators. By drawing on their suggestions and experiences for co-design, we hope to use accessibility strategies in ways that reflect the concrete concerns and desires of access-deserving people. In the next section, we will discuss questions and analyze discoveries that have fuelled the creative experimentation of the two projects hosted in residence so far:

*Trespass\_Processing an Emerging Choreography* by Marta Olivieri (2022 residency) and *Acquittrini* by Marta Bellu/Trifoglio (2023 residency).

## **The First Year of Creazioni Accessibili**

In Marta Olivieri's *Trespass\_Processing an Emerging Choreography* (premiered in 2021), two dancers generate behaviour and movement based on input received from the environment, those who pass through it, and the sounds and the clothes they wear.

The mentors' methodology generally is to entrust the initial part of the residence facilitation to the dramaturg Camilla Guarino, leaving Giuseppe Comuniello to arrive at a later stage to assess the effectiveness for a blind person of the developed AD with reference to the soundscape. Comuniello also arrives at a later stage to ensure that the evaluation of the AD simulates the experience of a spectator attending the performance for the first time, without familiarity with artistic intentions or preconditioning from witnessing the early residency work.

The initial creation of the AD is preceded by a series of exercises proposed by Guarino to stimulate questions and the imagination while clarifying artistic necessities.

### ***The Dramaturg's Notes from the Process***

Camilla Guarino

In the residency, *Trespass* became a performance involving two spaces: one dedicated to sound, including the two voices of the live AD, and the other designated for the dancers' movement. The audience is free to move through both spaces, which are separated in part by a black curtain. We selected specific sections and features in the dance work for improvised generation of audio description during performance. These were the clothes, body postures, the surrounding space, some phrases that while describing evoke a poetic tone.

In the choreography, we see an accumulation of progressive movements over time. The AD tries to repeat the same dynamic, accumulating anatomical descriptions of the movements. The exercises proposed on the first day were chosen to investigate different, but related, points of view on to the same choreographic score. While recording ourselves with a phone, each of us described what we were experiencing. Vera described from her perspective as a solo performer; I (Camilla) verbalized as an outside observer, and Marta described as the choreographer. After the first session, we listened to all of the recorded voices simultaneously so that we could hear differences and similarities between our descriptions in any given moment.

The first element that interested us was the different timing with which we annotated the images or sensations experienced (evoked or concrete in space). The unveiling of some images took place almost simultaneously for all of us. When that happened, we decided to keep the discovered timing for the AD. In other cases, each of us had different observation times, leading us to discuss how to manage these times. On the one hand, our AD construction aimed to remain as faithful as possible to what an external observer could grasp. On the other hand, we played with anticipated actions and perceptions from an immersed vantage point that would otherwise remain hidden from external observers (e.g., "she has a mole under her right heel").

We worked with the different interpretations that similar words and phrases can have. For example, “she wears a certain weight on her shoulders” refers both to an emotional weight (e.g., an ambiguous facial expression) and a physical weight (e.g., a coat worn over the shoulders only).

Another point, which was at the heart of our artistic research, is to experiment with different dramaturgical modes of description that shift the audience’s attention. Depending on what I choose to describe, the listener will most likely rest his or her gaze on the object described: a muscle, an anatomical part, an external landscape, or a posture of a person in the audience. Here, another theme opens up: incorporating the presence of the spectator into the AD, something that the performance *Trespass* already enacted, both on a physical and spatial level.

Initially, we described actions that belong to both the audience and the performing dancers (breathing, swallowing, lying down), then we shifted our attention to postures and clothing by narrowing our focus. The costumes are an integral part of *Trespass*. In addition, to accurately describe costumes alongside spectators’ clothes, we therefore explored their tactile and other perceptual aspects: the excessively warm fur coat, the uncomfortable dressing gown, and the T-shirt in which the performer’s body disappears.

Finally, throughout the adaptive AD text created for performance, we maintained subjective nuances, as well as those suggested by the choreographer. These were often words that could grasp a specific moment or reflect on the listener (e.g., “glances across”) and actions that both performers and audience members may do.

On the second day, the foci for our audio description was expanded to include anatomy, reality, surrounding space, imaginary digressions, and repetitions/mantras. We then posed the more practical problem of how to handle the blind and visually impaired audience in the space, as the audience of this dance work can walk freely through the space and enter or exit at will.

We thought of offering a description of the theatrical space before the start of the performance and of having a reference person who could verbalize the movements of the audience and guide any groups in case of need.

Returning to the practices of the day before, we resumed the descriptive exercise, but this time with two dancers, Vera and Loredana. In this case, we faced the difficulty of describing two bodies on stage. We asked ourselves whether it is

necessary to always name them in order to understand who we are referring to. In some situations we can leave the attribution of the action or object free (when it is confusing even for the sighted audience), while only specifying it when an action clearly belongs to one of the two people. We also found verbal phrases that could provide information about space using the spatial relationship between bodies. For example, “the cheek looks toward her back” or “I don’t know if Vera knows” refers to Loredana’s posture and communicates that Vera probably has her back to Loredana. The statement “I have to decide who to look at” makes it clear that it refers to the distance between the dancers without saying “they are far apart.”

Just like the choreography, the first words, phrases, and foci described this far emerged through practical exploration, and they became part of the AD of the adapted version of the project, which was retitled *Trespass. Tales of the Unexpected* (2023).

On the third day, Giuseppe arrived in the rehearsal studio. In an attempt to enrich our vocabulary, the phrases were expanded with descriptions of situations and sudden movement dynamics that broke the given balance. We added narrative connotations to our descriptions of costumes in order to open imaginary windows on possible narratives. The costumes were also described both from the inside, by the performer wearing them, and from the outside, by an observer. In this way, tactile descriptions were combined with adjectives such as “comfortable” and “light,” providing the subjective perspective of the wearer alongside the more aesthetic one of the observer. We repeated a description session with Camilla’s and Marta’s voices for Giuseppe to listen to. We kept an open structure while restricting ourselves to the vocabulary developed over the previous days. Giuseppe pointed out to us that it is necessary to iterate certain terms to make it easier for the blind and visually impaired audience to enter the narrative. For example: “she closes her eyes” (the first time they are closed); “she closes her eyes, darkness” (the second time); “darkness” (the third time). In this way, it becomes clearer that when “dark” is pronounced, it means the performers have closed their eyes. According to Giuseppe, it is also beneficial to use the same words to describe movements that are repeated in the same way.

On the fourth day, the two describing voices (Camilla and Marta) each took on a different dramaturgical direction. Camilla tended to describe movement as general actions or images, while Marta described the anatomical, motor interaction involved. For example, if Camilla interpreted a movement as “she squats,” Marta would describe it as “she touches her ischium with her heels.” At the same time,

however, Marta opened imaginative windows and digressions that added virtual interpretation planes to what was happening on stage, while Camilla remained focused on the description of the actual space, on the precise perception of what was happening.

On the last day of the residency, we reflected on the possible development of the work: Since the sound was distributed through the speakers, maybe the dancers on stage could be influenced by our descriptions, generating other reactions to the movement and thus offering new feedback for our descriptions. Marta and Camilla could also physically enter the auditory performance by adding description of their own bodies to the description of the performers and space.

*Trespass* stimulated ideas for how AD can become a means for the creative adaptation of an existing dance work. *Trespass* invites spontaneous responses through which time is transformed, the audience is immersed in the performance, and the points of view involved become multiplied. The fact that we, therefore, cannot audio-describe a fixed performance has opened up many creative possibilities for us. The first observation that struck us was that we used principles to generate AD that are similar to Marta's choreographic methods. Using words, shifting the subject from the performer to the audience, drawing out rhythms of the neutral but participatory voices, and working on the transformation of such rhythms over time were all dramaturgical principles that mirror Marta's compositional work.

The opportunity to collaborate on the development of AD with four artists, bringing different but complementary perspectives to the work, made *Trespass\_Processing an Emerging Choreography* what it is today: *Trespass. Tales of the Unexpected ...* a new performance.

### ***An External Eye. The Curator's Point of View***

Flavia Dalila D'Amico

The performance features a dancer and two AD describers (Camilla Guarino and Marta Olivieri), who offer two points of view on a single body moving in continuity and next to the audience. The narrated point of view is twofold, reflecting the number of AD describers and their position in space. Distributed in space, they find moments of connection, pauses, and repetitions of words to create a sonorous rhythmicity that corresponds to the gestural movement observed. The words of each narrator are always different because their embodied knowledge and their point of observation are different. A part of the AD describes the

movements of the dancer (which is different at every iteration) using technical and anatomical terminology (breathing, inhaling, resting weight on the ischium, shifting the centre of gravity to the left foot, etc.), and is in turn influenced by the reactions of those crossing the space. Another part of the AD opens imaginative windows that do not find a correspondence in the actual space (e.g., “she thinks of the film she saw yesterday”; “perhaps she wonders when the bus will arrive”). The vocal and choreographic scores inform each other in a game of mirroring and live feedback.

Thus, both the sighted and the blind audience are called upon to question the boundary between the real and the imaginary, the visible and the invisible, and question their trust in their own senses, which are simultaneously involved without hierarchy. In *Trespass. Tales of the Unexpected*, the audio description interrogates the AD device *per se* (in and of itself) along with the construction of the performance reality. The end result is a movement-based narrative that is accessible to a blind and visually impaired audience, while subverting the planes of reality, imagination, power, and access for those who see and those who do not.

During a feedback session with a group of people from the Unione Ciechi di Roma (Rome’s Union of the Blind), the aspect that was emphasized as interesting is a technical access choice. The wearable loudspeakers (speakers that can be attached to dancers’ costumes) produce a sonic spatialization without the use of headphones, enhancing the clarity with which the describing voices interact with the space. In addition, the fact that the AD is performed in real time and therefore audible in the performance space enables nonmarginalizing accessibility for blind and visually impaired audiences. When AD is accessed this way, *Trespass. Tales of the Unexpected* becomes a powerful example of how accessible devices can be organically integrated with aesthetic choices.

## **The Second Year of Creazioni Accessibili**

### ***The Dramaturgs’ Notes***

Camilla Guarino and Giuseppe Comuniello

The project selected for the second year of Creazioni Accessibili was *Acquitrini* by Marta Bellu/Trifoglio. The performance is a musical, choreographic, and visual recreation of a pond, an ecosystem on the borderline between the terrestrial and aquatic environment. The peculiarity of this landscape is translated to the stage through an abstract set design—a white space on which only three elements rest: a reflecting sphere, a stone with metal Bluetooth speakers, and transparent sheets.

The dancer, dressed in black, relates to these elements in three different and distant moments. Her gestures and movements evoke the fluidity of the underwater world, changing shapes and positions continuously and eluding the possibility of being embedded in a stable figure. How could we adapt such an environment to AD in ways that find vitality in the continuous flow of the choreographic score and the sound dimension of this dance work?

An initial issue of the residency was to understand when it was useful to reveal the objects on stage, without anticipating their appearance in advance. An important subject for us, also addressed in *Trespass*, is that of trying to maintain synchronicity between the AD and what appears visually on stage, so that blind and visually impaired audience members' encounters continue to reflect the dramaturgical choices made by the choreographer. To offer an example: If the sheet is on the stage floor from the beginning, but it is not initially noticeable because of its transparency, should we describe it to the blind audience members up front? Or do we, rather, describe it at the moment when the stage action leads the seeing spectators' gaze toward it?

We decided to maintain the viewing timing of the sighted spectator. The interesting aspect of the dramaturgical work in this case was the relationship between the words, the rhythm of the choreography, and the soundtrack. There was a collaboration with the sound designer that made it possible to create an AD script that was harmoniously fused with the set sounds, as if the words were elements immersed in the fluid, in the tin, in this case in the texture of the sound.

An excerpt from the AD (with corresponding sounds):

The stone raised on one hand goes up / Bipbip  
The heavy arm and leg upwards / uuuu  
The stability of the objects contrasts with the lightness of the body  
almost without gravity / pluf  
(change sound )  
Dark hair pulled back, thin wrists and ankles/ trill

Listen to an audio description of *Acquitrini*:

<https://soundcloud.com/diana-ciuffo/audio-descrizione-di-acquitrinicollettivo-trifoglio/s-PofJvIDRur3>

In this residency, our intervention did not disrupt the original work but was added as an additional verbal trace, which we were able to refine and adjust thanks to the feedback from blind and visually impaired audience members.

### ***The Curator's Point of View***

Flavia Dalila D'Amico

Compared to the first case, *Acquitrini* is a performance with a well-defined dance dramaturgy. Camilla Guarino proposed the same exercises as in the previous residency, but the result when listening to the voice recordings opened up a crucial question: Should the describer adopt the human point of view of the observer of the pond—thus retaining sensations, memories, perceptions, and free associations—or should they embody the environmental point of view of the pond?

It might sound like a question about descriptive neutrality again, but in reality, it is closely connected with the dramaturgy of the performance, which intentionally lets boundaries between subject and object, figure and landscape, slide in a perpetual motion. On first reflection, Camilla Guarino and Marta Bellu (the choreographer of *Acquitrini*) decided to maintain this continuous perceptual slippage between subject and object and construct a description that similarly slips between the first and third person. The idea was for the description to reflect both the performer's perceptions and the sensations emanating from the observer.

Choices of vocabulary and how to word descriptions were then added to this slippage approach. All metaphors that associate the dancer's movement with natural elements—for instance, "like a floating seaweed," "like a wave on the surface of the water"—turned out to be problematic. After the first days, when Giuseppe Comuniello entered the creative process, he posed a series of critical questions. He is not congenitally blind (born with little to no vision), so he can mentally recreate what he hears based, in part, on visual memory. How might those who are congenitally blind imagine the changing shape of a seaweed under the water? How can they imagine a mirrored sphere if they have never had the visual experience of a mirror reflection?

To address this problem, it was decided to revise the AD by replacing oculocentric terms (those that rank vision over other senses) with more tactile ones that refer to bodily sensations: for instance "the cold sphere" or "the heavy stone." With

respect to the general structure of the AD, the choice was to merge the words with the dance work's soundtrack and to thin out the narration so that it could convey the same abstraction and slowness as the performance.

Once the AD text had been sketched out, a group of blind and visually impaired people were invited to attend a rehearsal in order to test the AD. Before starting, it was decided not to reveal information about the performance.

The feedback session proved to be very important as it called into question some of the set-up choices that had been established. First of all, shifting from the first to the third person proved confusing and misleading; it distracted rather than intrigued. Among the audience was also a congenitally blind person, who showed strong perplexity about the subtle setting of the narration: "For me, as a blind learner, it is difficult to imagine while I am listening. With an interval of five minutes, I am inclined to get distracted and start the mental reconstruction of the context all over again when listening to the next words." This critique led to the decision to rethink AD as a guided meditative practice. While leaving ample nonverbal room to internalize concepts, guiding verbalization might drop in at a regular frequency to accompany different body states. This would both avoid overloading audience members with information and allow them autonomy to move and direct their attention.

During a second feedback session with the public, the choreographer proposed testing a listening practice without stage performance. The only suggestion given to the audience was to immerse themselves in the sound and verbalize their experience at the end of the event. This collective exercise led to another important discovery. Almost all of the people present, both sighted and blind, reported difficulty indulging in listening and imagining, if not frustration over an inability to anticipate and figure out the associated physical performance. Not having access to the breathing and sounds produced by the performer on stage seemed to decontextualize the soundscape for the audience. This test allowed us to understand that the soundtrack cannot work autonomously and the preferable solution is to use only one earphone, in order to retain access to the ambient noises of the performance.

The results of the two editions push us to consider that different performances require equally different access dramaturgies. The repertoire of integrated access solutions described here reflects the specific aesthetics, process, and audiences of each dance work. Instead of a set of access solutions for broad application, we

are developing methodology for how to co-design integrated access dramaturgy through exchange with blind artists and community members. Creazioni Accessibili aims to promote the idea that the incorporation of diverse embodied knowledge in art institutions is necessary for the representation of artists with disabilities in decision-making processes and for relations between presenters and their audiences. The experiences and reflections reported here are intended to convey the complexity of the research still in progress, which needs time and support to generate unpredictable paths and approaches that are sensitive to different artistic processes. This research relies on the co-design participation of blind people. Our aim is not simply to create artistic projects that match what blind audiences expect and know in our context. Rather, we hope to ensure that dance works are based on a plurality of embodied knowledge that may lead towards unexpected creative openings and multisensory connections.

## References

- Purdy, Michael W. 2000. "Listening, Culture and Structures of Consciousness: Ways of Studying Listening." *International Journal of Listening* 14 (1): 47–68.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10904018.2000.10499035>.
- Arnheim, Rudolf. 1970. *Visual thinking*. Faber.
- Bläsing, Bettina, and Esther Zimmermann. 2021. "Dance Is More Than Meets the Eye—How Can Dance Performance Be Made Accessible for a Non-Sighted Audience?" *Frontiers in Psychology* 12:1–15.  
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.643848>.
- Crippi, Ilaria. 2024. *Lo spazio non è neutro*. Tamu.
- Margolies, Eleanor. 2015. "Going to Hear a Dance: On Audio Describing." *Performance Research* 20 (6): 17–23.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2015.1111044>.
- Zamenopoulos, Theodore, and Katerina Alexiou. 2018. *Co-Design as Collaborative Research*. Connected Communities Foundation Series. University of Bristol; AHRC Connected Communities Programme.