BBC Radio Nottingham interview with Kathryn McAuley, Media and Communications Manager at Nottingham Playhouse, as well as Captioner
for Stagetext, talking with Dino from BBC Radio Nottingham.

DINO: Now, yesterday we were chatting about all things War Horse. It's currently on at Nottingham Royal Concert Hall and hopefully, you got a sense through the chat that I had with the horse, Joey, and with the people who operate it, you got a sense of how it moves, how it acts, the little twitches of the ears and the tail kind of swishing all over the place. If you'd like to see... By the way, that whole chat that I had was videoed as well and if you'd like to see that then go over to the BBC Radio Nottingham Facebook page, where you can see that video on Instagram as well. Go and have a look at that. It is incredible. And one of the great things about the show is the way that they've really tried to make it inclusive for everyone. And I mentioned that you go to some shows and you see the, the person signing at the corner of the stage or you see it on TV shows and I'm always amazed by that, because I find myself watching that, because it's not a world that I truly understand, if I'm honest. And then I realise there's something as well and that's what my next guest does.

Kathryn McAuley is from the media and communications, or is the Media and Communications Manager at Nottingham Playhouse, but, in her spare time, she's busy as a captioner for stage productions, including War Horse. And Kathryn joins me now. Good morning.

KATHRYN MCAULEY: Good morning.

DINO: Now, I mentioned, I think a lot of people will know and have seen, you know, the British Sign Language signer at the corner of a stage, but captioning is something that I don't know a great deal about and you do that, so, if you don't mind, explain!

KM: Absolutely. So captioning is when there are generally two boxes either side of the stage which display three lines of text. As the, as the play goes on, the script basically gets displayed. So it's for deaf, deafened and hard of hearing people, primarily, but it can also help people who've got auditory processing issues or those who've got English as a second language. And the, the sort of, the special technique to it, the reason that you need training is that, clearly, you don't want to put a line up, onscreen, before an actor's said it, you know, especially if it's a comedy.

DINO: Yeah, yeah.

KM: You don't wanna spoil the punchline. But, equally, you don't want to be too far behind, because then the rest of the audience are laughing, the deaf person doesn't know what the joke is. So you're basically trying to make the experience for a deaf or hard of hearing person equal to that of a hearing person. That's the objective really.

DINO: And why was it that you, you know, because, as I said, you know, Media and Communications Manager at Nottingham Playhouse. It's not like you've got a lot of spare time and just thought, "What am I gonna do with all this excess spare time?" What was it that made you want to do that?

KM: I actually did my training in 2019. That was before I was working here, so I was working part-time in other things, so I felt I did have the time. I did the training, then we had a bit of a pandemic, so there wasn't much happening, but obviously the captioning's now back up because theatres are back to sort of running at full pelt again. And, to be honest, I love it. So it is, it is tricky, I do have to do it on my weekends and evenings, just squeeze it in. But I love it because you're part of the live production, you know?

DINO: Yeah.

KM: You're delivering it live, as the actors say the lines, so it's really exciting to be part of that.

DINO: You mentioned the importance of timing. How... How nerve-racking is that for you, to make sure that all of that works and happens the way it needs to?

KM: I think, certainly when I was doing my exams, it was very nerve-racking, but once you've got over the first kind of couple of lines and you get into the rhythm of it, it actually, it all flows very well. Obviously, sometimes, you know, it's live theatre and sometimes an actor might miss a piece and jump around and then you're kind of frantically scrolling down your screen to see where they've gone to, so that that you can try and catch up as quickly as possible. So there are always those little adrenaline-inducing moments!

DINO: That's a very nice way of putting it! What was the training like? What did that involve?

KM: So it was actually three days of intensive training. The first thing that they did, it was with a company called Stagetext who train most of the captioners in the UK, and the first thing they did was they brought in a deaf person to talk to us about their experiences, because most of us had not met a deaf person and therefore, we needed to understand the importance of the service and what it was.

And then it's just very detailed, going through how to format a script with special software that Stagetext provide. You have to put the script into a particular format. So there's quite a lot of prep work goes into it before you actually get it to the screen. And then you need to sort of go into the theatre and do a script check, which I did last night for War Horse, and just check that you have got the rhythm of when the actors are delivering things, that the sounds and so on are all matched up. So you have to add in music and, you know, Joey whinnying or neighing or screaming or whatever, whatever the various animals are doing. So you have to add in all the sounds and the music that are not written in the script, so that the deaf people can see them and understand what's happening.

DINO: And, and what do you do... Cos the thing is, as you've said, you're now part of live theatre, you're part of what... We've all been to productions where, all of a sudden, it goes a little bit off-script and there's an ad-lib thrown. What do you do there?

KM: Well, I mean, pantos are the best, of course, for ad-libs and sometimes, if it's an occasional line, there is a box that you can type live in.

DINO: Right, OK.

KM: But people that do live typing, that's a completely different skill. You know, you've gotta... That's sort of like court reporting and you've gotta have a very particular skill. I'm a fast typist and I can get the odd line in there, but I can't do a whole, you know, a whole paragraph. So you just, you just have to leave the screen blank, unfortunately. But it is really panto that's the worst for that.

DINO: And how important is it to you, personally, to make sure that theatre, on the whole, is inclusive?

KM: I mean, it's incredibly important. Obviously, at Nottingham Playhouse, we've just won the Inclusivity and Accessibility Award for Notts Tourism. It's really important to everything that we do here on a daily basis, but, you know, I've loved theatre since I was a child and it has to be accessible to everyone. And, you know, I think, with BSL interpretation and we do dementia-friendly performances and all sorts of different types of performances to allow people to access live theatre. It's just a given, you know, it should be equal for everyone, so, yeah, I'm really passionate about it.

DINO: It's, I mean, it's fantastic that you're doing, you know, what you do, but also I mentioned, and you just mentioned the BSL. I find myself focusing, looking at what they're doing, cos it's so incredibly impressive and the same, you know, with what you do. I'd find myself in that situation going, "I want to know how all of this works!" like the conversation we're having now. But it is fabulous and it is so incredibly important. But do you get to enjoy the time that you're there? As in, do... Or are you always on that kind of heightened feeling inside of you all the time?

KM: Yeah, it's interesting, because when you're checking the script and when you're delivering, you're basically listening. So occasionally you'll glance up, if you need a visual cue, but essentially you're just listening to the show, so you don't actually get to watch it. So sometimes I go and do a separate visit, so I can actually watch it and get the feel of the whole thing. You do get sent a video to help you prepare, but a video is not the same. But I still, I still can enjoy it and sometimes actually just listening to it is a different experience from watching it.

DINO: Yeah.

KM: So, yeah, I still love it.

DINO: Oh, fantastic. Thank you, Kathryn, for coming on to talk to us today. It's been lovely to talk to you.

KM: And you, thanks very much.

DINO: Thank you. That's Kathryn McAuley there, who is Media and Communications Manager at Nottingham Playhouse, but, in her spare time, goes off and is a captioner for stage productions, including, as you just heard us chatting about, the brilliant War Horse, which is on at the Concert Hall at the moment. Thank you so much, Kathryn, good to talk to you.