>> Lauren Appelbaum: Thank you everyone for joining us here today. My name is Lauren Appelbaum and I am the Vice President of Communications of RespectAbility, a nonprofit fighting stigma and advancing opportunities so people with disabilities can fully participate in all aspects of community. I am a white woman with long brown hair and glasses wearing a navy blue shirt standing in front of a black banner with the RespectAbility logo in white and yellow. As an individual with an acquired non-visible disability, I've had the privilege of conducting trainings on the why and how to be more inclusive and accessible, and I'm so, so glad to be introducing this panel today. I wanted to let you know that we have live captioning done by a real, live person that is available in this Zoom app by clicking on the CC button, as well as via your web browser. We are posting that link in the chat box. We also have two ASL interpreters who will be alternating throughout the panel. This panel is live. We will be taking questions from you during the second half. Please add your questions to the Q&A box to do so. When it is time for Q&A, I'll read those questions for Michele to direct to our panelists. If you are watching us on Facebook during the live airing, we'll be monitoring for questions there, too. This panel is being recorded and will be available later after this event concludes. A higher resolution recording with open captions and our ASL interpreters will be posted and sent to everyone who registered next week. If you want to stay connected to RespectAbility, I invite you to sign up for our weekly newsletter on disability inclusion and equity in the entertainment industry. That link is being posted in the chat box. I want to give a really big thank you to Michele Spitz, a Woman of Her Word for pulling together such an excellent group of panelists. Everyone here attending today really has a lot of experts who can answer your questions. A little bit about Michele. She's a voiceover artist, public speaker and philanthropist, very passionate about advocating for media accessibility and disability awareness. She's really dedicated to funding audio descriptions for post production accessibility grants to ensure that media content is equally accessible to low vision and blind audiences. She has many years of experience of producing, narrating, consulting, and project managing audio description assets for film, broadcast, digital media, film festivals, museums, educational content and promotional and fundraising media. She also promotes media accessibility awareness and audience inclusion through ongoing public speaking engagements, thought provoking panels and educational settings. She currently sits on the advisory board as the Film Accessibility Specialist for the upcoming 2021 Blind Film Festival. Woman of Her Word was the first to initiate and fund the British Academy of Film and Television Arts scholarships for graduate film students with disabilities, originate and funding annual finishing film accessibility grants for New York Women in Film & Television, and Women and Film LA as well as funding assistive audience technology. She most recently produced and narrated the audio description for the 41st Media Access Awards Ceremony making the virtual event platform equally accessible to audiences with low vision. Michele's upcoming endeavors will include designing media accessibility impact campaign fellowships. Michele, the floor is yours.

>> Michele Spitz: Thank you so much, Lauren. I'm gonna describe my background as well here. I am white. I have long brown hair. I am in a black top with a studded neck line and behind me is a lamp, a sculpture of a woman with her arms up and a violin. And I have brown eyes and I'm wearing red lipstick and a smile. And I wanted to thank you all who have chosen to attend this panel because it means a great deal to me and I believe also to my panelists who are equally invested in the outcome of media accessibility and the outreach and the inclusion of it as we move forward in our careers and in the media industry. And I wanna thank all of my panelists because I have personally collaborated with everyone on this panel in some way, shape or form during the duration of my career thus far. And I can say with all my heart that they are invested in this cause in a way that really translates well into the world so we can have a deeper conversation about this and I think it's important that we have the opportunity to have this conversation with everybody. So, I would like to continue to also point out someone who we're gonna take a quick peak which is Craig Fogel who is our interpreter. And Craig was the recipient of my NYWIFT Grant for audio description for his web series called "Don't Shoot the Messenger." So, I wanna thank Craig for being here as our interpreter as well. And I'd like to give you a little bit of background for those of you who may or may not know about audio description. Perhaps more likely you are aware of captions and either way, what we don't know we have an opportunity to learn and know about. So, I encourage people to learn more about it but we're gonna give an overview, and audio description is a secondary prerecorded audio track that describes all the visual content which is then time coded between natural pauses in media. And this can also include subtitles, captions, any text on screen, which then lends itself to a fuller experience with someone who is in the audience who has low vision or is blind, or what have you. The equivalent to that of course is captions for deaf and hard of hearing audience members, and really, truly they are a pair. I personally would like to see that all media is out in the world with both audio description and captions, as opposed to one or the other because they really are a language. Each of them are language of their own. And I know a lotta people are anxious to have their media be distributed to multiple countries and in multiple languages but frankly, our own native language has two languages which sometimes are overlooked and that is the language of captions for the deaf and hard of hearing, and also the language of audio description for blind and low vision audience members. So, we wanna keep that in mind as we move forward in our careers and in the world because this subject matter is now much more expansive. It's growing exponentially now and filmmakers and people in post-production, anywhere you are in your process if you are contributing to media and film, I would imagine you'd wanna reach as many people as you can and I know for a fact because of the community that I serve that they deeply wanna be connected to everything they'd like to have access to. So we don't wanna deny any community the opportunity to participate as an audience member. Also, I want to point out that to have the experience of audio description is new to some people and it's nice to be able to experience it, close your eyes, open your eyes and feel what it would be like if you did not perhaps have your vision and understand the need and the necessity to lend itself to being more inclusive as we should all the way around. So, I'm going to have a clip that you can experience from IFC Sundance and it is called "No Man's Land," and it's a very short clip that is audio described. So you might wanna open your eyes and close your eyes as you listen to this clip and experience audio description.

[Clip Plays]

>> Michele Spitz: So that gives you a small sample of audio description. It has it's sort of continuity throughout entire film or broadcast program or episodic or what have you, but once you are invested in the process and you are listening to the entirety of it you have a momentum that you are connected to and that can be experienced for those of you that may or may not be aware when they, people are in cinemas they can ask for a headset and the headset will then give them the opportunity to listen to that secondary audio track in addition to it being broadcast or streamed or what have you, or DVDs or Blu-rays, so on and so forth, that is a mix of the audio description with the media. And at that point, it's all in one as opposed to a secondary audio track separate that you're listening to your headset. So, people have the opportunity to toggle it on and off if they're renting a movie or streaming a movie or what have you, and the same with DVDs and Blu-rays. So, there's many ways to experience this and there are more now than ever before. There are apps that are being created and those will sync sometimes in the movie theater. We are going to be moving into a digital age where I think headsets might become null and void one day and you'll be using your phone and apps to have access, but I'd like to introduce Alex. Alex is probably one of the most important people we wanna talk to because Alex is a consumer of audio description and he also writes reviews about audio description and he's doing public speaking. And Alex, we met during an audio description lab that I teach and we have stayed in touch ever since. So, I have great respect for Alex and his opinions as an input in terms of how he experiences everything. So, I'd like to turn it over to Alex now so you can share how you consume audio description and what your history's been around this.

>> Alex Howard: Yeah, so I discovered audio description about three or four years ago, and I'm low vision. I'm not completely blind. I have trouble seeing fast cutting action in especially like, superhero movies. I'm a big horror fan. And I know a lotta times horror is a lot darker and especially like, for the climax of the movie also fast cutting. And I also have trouble reading text on screen. So, for awhile I was watching movies and there are certain movies I didn't like as much as other people and I was like, I think it's 'cause my eyesight, maybe it's just cut to fast or it doesn't appeal to me 'cause I can't tell what's going on. And so, since I discovered audio description, at first I was only getting, watching it with description when I needed it. And then I started realizing that even when I didn't have it, when I didn't think I needed it, it helped me to have it all the time. So now whenever it's available, I watch it with it. And it even points out little details that I wouldn't normally notice. So, having audio description really helps a lot and I think especially for people with lower vision than me, I would like them to experience movies as much as I do. So.

>> Michele Spitz: And Alex, how did you experience "No Man's Land?" Because we know you watched the film with the audio description and I know you have some commentary about that and how it was enhanced with the audio description. Can you comment on that?

>> Alex Howard: Yeah, I think the audio description on "No Man's Land" was really great, especially, like even in that clip when she said, "The horse is running towards the barbed wire fence," I couldn't tell it was barbed wire. It coulda been chain link or anything. So, that really helped. And even there was a part where the guy who was running, he picked up a wallet and looked at a photo and it described the photo as a boy holding a baseball bat, which was significant because he was a baseball fan, the character. So that was a connection to the boy in the photo and she coulda just said a boy on the photo but she described it with a baseball bat which really enhanced my experience. And also there was a lot of Spanish in that movie and I think they cast a narrator. She pronounced the Spanish very well, and the audio descriptions all around in that movie was really great.

>> Michele Spitz: So in your case, it felt very authentic because it was well cast and the script was written. So, it defined the details that you needed. Some of the things that you were talking about, Alex, for those of you that may not necessarily know, but Alex is talking about contrast, contrast of dark and light. So when he's looking at a film, sometimes that contrast is not evident enough for him to be able to decipher what that information is and when he talks about dark films, we're not talking about dark being subject matter of horror although you like horror so we might as well say that.

>> Alex Howard: Yeah.

>> Michele Spitz: But (laughs)...

>> Alex Howard: But the lighting, yeah. The lighting of the scene. If the lighting is darker, then it's hard for me to see.

>> Michele Spitz: Yeah.

>> Alex Howard: Yeah.

>> Michele Spitz: Right. And he points out something very important, which is that his situation is low vision where there are other people in his life that are blind and he's also advocating for audio description to other people that are in your situation and also in other situations. We talk about audio descriptions sometimes as it were an audio movie as opposed to an audio book, right? People could be somewhere else in their house and it may be for all types of people that English is a second language. They just wanna hear more detail. They're moving around somewhere and they're driving and they wanna hear some audio, right?

>> Alex Howard: Cooking. Yeah.

>> Michele Spitz: But it's an audio movie. So there's a lot of different reasons people like to hear it and then some people just want more detail. And some people hear more, even though they might be sighted, they hear more than they actually were watching. So, it really lends itself to so many different people. So Alex, when you are going to movie theaters or you're streaming or you're turning on the secondary audio programming, the SAP programming, what experiences have you had in terms of accessibility in that way and which way do you prefer to take your media in?

>> Alex Howard: I think I definitely prefer the theater because it's a bigger screen and for me bigger is always better because I can see more. But I think sometimes with the theater a lotta times it's hit or miss whether it'll work and I think if they were to get, if you could get it to work all the time that'd be the ideal situation. But I think streaming has also really come a long way. Netflix has it on all their original content. Hulu, Amazon, most of the streamers have it on their original content and I think also with the DVD and Blu-rays, most modern movies have it on those as well. So, that's been really great. I think if there can be a through line of, if it's on one it's on the other. If there's an AD track on Netflix, it should be on Amazon, it should be on iTunes, it should be on the DVD. Should be everywhere if there's a track for a movie.

>> Michele Spitz: Right. So the consistency of distribution if at all possible is that that asset travels through the different layers of distribution and that is-

>> Alex Howard: Yeah, it travels with the movie, yeah.

>> Michele Spitz: That's right. For the duration of the shelf life which is sometimes more manageable than others, but part of that is very important as we talk to filmmakers in their process as they go through what steps to take in order to try to ensure that and sometimes it's possible, sometimes it's not, but in terms of the overall experience for you and as you go forward in your life and the more media you take in, because I think you're a bit of a cinephile.

>> Alex Howard: Yeah (chuckles).

>> Michele Spitz: And so, I know he is. What would you like to see? What would make your life as rich as it could be in this arena?

>> Alex Howard: I think if there could be, obviously, AD on everything would be great but I think also especially older movies, because AD I think is more common in modern filmmaking but I think back catalog of even films from 10 or 15 years ago, I think they're being remastered right now for anniversaries and especially in the pandemic since there's not much coming out they're putting out older movies. So, I think if older films can get the audio description as well, it would be great so that low vision and blind people like myself can enjoy those as well. I think also just having the quality be really good would be a great thing, too. I think like, "Queen's Gambit" I was watching and when she's playing chess, I didn't even realize I was watching it with audio description, but without audio description the matches are silent. Like you don't, they're not telling you what the moves are. That didn't even occur to me, and they really described like queen to this space, king to this space, and it really enhances the experience of watching that. And same with "The Mandalorian." It really enhances the experience of "Star Wars." So, I think if you can find the balance of enhancing the experience, that would be ideal.

>> Michele Spitz: Right. So we talked about, Alex and myself, we've talked about quality of audio description, casting of narrators, who and what he resonates with and as a consumer, this is really important because ultimately this is for you and for your community. So, we wanna serve you at the highest value that we can and provide what we can. And also Alex, some of the other things we talked about that a little bit newer, some of the other things that are now audio described, for example, the Macy's Day Parade, the inauguration was audio described on NBC. This was all really amazing progress. Some have been done before. There'll be more things that are gonna be done. I imagine that you would like to be able to tune into those things as well on television.

>> Alex Howard: Oh, yes. Yeah. Events like that would be amazing if they, yeah, have audio description describing the floats and all of that.

>> Michele Spitz: Okay. So, I think Alex has given you a taste of what this means to him and I think we understand it means a lot to Alex and the community that he associates with and that we are serving our very best to address. I'd like to move over to Ashley Eakin. And Ashley, I would like to say first of all, that we are connected because Ashley is a recipient of my NYWIFT Disability, Film, Audio Description Post Production Grant. And so, we have taken a journey together. Each filmmaker that works with me, I always say, you're going under my wings. You're taking flight. Whether you want to or not you're gonna learn something you may or may not know. And in that process, I am very honored that Ashley really adhered herself to this and continued to promote this and talk about it. The things I ask my clients that they will consider doing by receiving my grant is to continue the advocacy and share it with their fellow colleagues and filmmakers and media makers and Ashley is a perfect example of this. So, I'm gonna turn this over to Ashley and I'd like you to explain how you've come to all of this, your particular relationship to everything and as a woman with a disability, I think your voice is also very important and your film was based on the subject of disability and that is very relevant, also. A film based on a disability undoubtedly and ideally we'd want it accessible to other disabilities being those that are low vision and blind and those that are deaf and hard of hearing. So, I'm gonna turn it over to you now.

>> Ashley Eakin: Thanks so much. I'm Ashley Eakin. I'm a white woman. I have blonde grown out hair. It's brown in a low bun and I'm wearing red lipstick. I'm wearing a jean jacket in front of a red brick wall. So, I have been in the industry for about 10 years. I've done a lot of assisting different directors and I've worked on a lot of projects. I worked for Jon Chu on "Crazy Rich Asians" and I never knew about audio description and as Michele said, I was born with a rare bone disease, a disability. And I never thought about this element of filmmaking until I started making my own films and I won this grant from Michele and we went and had lunch and she explained this to me and I was like, this is an amazing part of filmmaking that no one really knows about or talks about and (coughs) excuse me. And it's something that now that I've learned about it and I've actually got to know Alex on, I was at a film independent event and he spoke out in the audience and when you see the consumers and how much it means to that community and also, I want to advocate for other disabilities. I think it's important for the film to be accessible across, to all audiences. So, it's something that Michele has really lit a fire under me to have it be a part of every project I have moving forward. And I did a production on a project recently with the studio and the first thing when we had our post conversation, I was like, this has to be audio described. Like, it's something that I'm, if you guys won't do it then we have to figure out a way to get it done because it's the most important part. Like I'd rather forego some VFX thing that we wanna do if we can pay for audio description. So, it's something that I definitely just think is an amazing element and it also, funny enough has helped me as a writer/director because I was recently writing an episode for something and I needed to write this fight scene and I was like, I don't really, I wanna get some inspiration. Instead of just going to scripts I actually went to "The King" on Netflix and turned on the audio description and while they're having this epic battle, I got to listen to how they were describing it. And it's just this like hidden art that I think is incredible and I'm so glad I got introduced to it and I actually enjoy listening to audio description just for fun and to see a different element of how the film is presented. And when we talked about "Crazy Rich Asians," me and Michele were talking about it recently, I went and watched it the other day and the audio description is amazing. And there's parts of that film where there's this really fast paced texting scene and the audio description is so on-point in such a concise, like condensed way that I think it truly helps a screenwriter as well. You're like, "How would I describe something like that happening so fast and in a concise way?" So, it's something that I'm super passionate about. I think it's great and a really cool element and my film that Michele gave me the grant to have the audio description, it's now, it's done a festival run. It went to South by Southwest and unfortunately we didn't get to screen there but it was supposed to, the audio description was supposed to be an element that was gonna play at that festival. But now, it's at Slamdance and it's gonna get to utilize the audio description as well as Cinema Touching Disability Superfest. It's been able, some of these festivals are starting to include options where you can view it with the audio description and captions open or without. So it's a nice way... As a filmmaker, sometimes you're like, "There's not supposed to be someone describing what is happening here." You want the audience to just kind of learn slowly. So, I think it's good to have those options for different types of audiences and different ways to view it. So, I'm excited that festivals are finally hopping on this bandwagon to make this available for different audiences.

>> Michele Spitz: It's wonderful and Ashley, the other thing that we talked about was the idea of creating the assets and the, making a line in your budget to create the audio description, the captioning in advance and when it goes on its festival run, then perhaps festivals consider screening it with the assets. And for example, with Alex, Alex would only be able to see certain films that are given to festivals with audio description if they can accommodate it and certain films come in with audio description and some don't. So, in the perfect world it would be great if the assets were already there. That's not the perfect world. It's not always gonna be that case. Some people will wait for distribution and either way, ultimately there are people voting for films at festivals and if there are audience members that are low vision or blind, they wouldn't be able to vote. So, we wanna consider that also and we have a ways to go, but we're making progress. And I remember a day when there was very little festival world other than the Disability Film Festivals that even utilized audio description, or for that matter have funded it and created on their end because it meant that much to them. The only other thing I want to address with you and I think is really important and we talked about this also, is that not only has Ashley been a advocate for this and I'm incredibly indebted to her for that, but also we talked about labeling the media, promoting it. In other words, how does someone like Alex find out that it exists if it isn't labeled when it goes into any other platform, whether it's Blu-ray DVD or what have you, or online? Is it noted on iTunes? It has audio description. Is it noted on Amazon Prime? Whatever it is, is it noted number one? Number two, are we promoting it on social media, whatever social media you're using, or your film website? The idea of continuously talking about this is, really gives us access to more people and not only for the consumer, but other filmmakers so they understand what it is. So, you have been really wonderful at that and I really thank you for that. So, I also want to now move this over to Justin. Justin is with IFC I'm gonna let Justin tell you the journey that Justin and myself have taken from when we first met each other and I'm not even gonna comment on that. I'm gonna let Justin do it, but I must tell you that Justin is another person that has taken (sighs) the value and the advocacy and the intent of audio description to a whole 'nother level and I am in awe of what Justin has arrived at. So, Justin, I'm gonna let you take it from here.

>> Justin Smith: Thank you very much, Michele. And Alex, thank you also for the kind words on "No Man's Land." It means a lot. Hi, everybody. To quickly audio describe myself, I am a Caucasian male. I have brown hair. I have brown eyes. I wear glasses and I'm wearing a black jacket sitting in front of a very boring white background. (Michele laughs) So, I am the Manager of Post Production at IFC Films. We are a film distribution company based out of New York City. We have a library of over 1,000 titles to date and we've been in operation for over 20 years now. Our audio description journey began back in 2017 when we acquired a film called "Dealt." "Dealt" is a great documentary about an individual named Richard Turner who is a card magician, though he doesn't like that term. He likes the term mechanic (Michele laughs) because he fixes card games. But what makes Richard Turner so remarkable is not just the fact that he's an amazing magician but also the fact that he's completely blind. So, it's a great film that kind of focuses on not only the cards, but also his life and his journey and his struggles. So, for us from the post production point of view at IFC Films, when we acquire the video and the audio assets for any film, but particularly "Dealt," it was the first time that we were ever sent audio description that was prerecorded from the filmmakers, and much like Ashley, at that time in 2017 we had absolutely no idea what this thing was. (Michele laughs) We got it, we listened to it, we were immediately intrigued by it. We were very open to the idea of accepting it but we knew that we had, well, we knew that we didn't know what the capabilities of it were. We didn't understand how to use it. We didn't understand who could use it. We didn't understand what we would need to do to make it usable. Luckily, we were contacted by one, Michele Spitz, who actually narrated the audio description for "Dealt," and Michele was kind enough one day to come into our office and to explain to us what audio description was, a bit about its history, a bit about the technical workflows behind it. She brought in her associate that really helped us learn about the mixing and the post production workflows that were involved. So it really, it spoke to us on a lot of levels and what it really did more than anything else was pique our curiosity, which is what I think Michele, and what I hope that a lot of you kind of get out of this panel as well. So for us, we knew that after meeting Michele that we needed to learn more. So, the next kind of step in our journey was coming in contact with an individual who, as Michele alluded to before actually owned a technologies company. It wasn't necessarily an audio description specific company but it was a technologies company that owned an application for your phone. The application was able to store and to display audio description, closed captioning, subtitles, amongst other forms of accessibility. It was great. And like Michele said, I think that we're probably going to see more of that going forward. But working with this individual and with this company kind of allowed IFC Films to test the waters a bit because we learned from him that it was very much a win-win situation. We were able to begin to get certain titles of ours audio described. He was kind enough to work with us and to show us how it would be possible for them to describe some of our content, while at the same time providing his application with more content that his subscriber base could access. So, it really worked for both of us and it was the first step in myself understanding the technical post production side of this and recognizing whether or not it would actually be feasible for us as a company to move forward with audio describing more titles. So, I will say eventually our relationship with him had to come to an end because his focus shifted a bit both personally and professionally. And also we reached a point after a number, after probably close to a year working with that individual where we wanted to increase the volume of audio description titles. And it just wasn't able to be accommodated on his side which is perfectly fine. It's one of the struggles that we've, one of the challenges that we've had to face throughout our entire journey here. So I'd say for about a year and a half we experimented with different vendors. It was about contacting different individuals, speaking through what our hopes were, what our challenges were, what they could offer, and I have to say first and foremost that the people that I have talked to over the past number of years in the audio description field have been some of the brightest, kindest, and most importantly most passionate people I have ever spoken to. And I'm not saying that just to say it. I think at the end of the day for everyone involved, it's a business, sure. For us it's a business, sure, but it means so much more than that to so many people. Honestly, myself included. It's meant more to me than anything I've done in my career up to this point. So, through speaking with all these people, through experimenting with different vendors, we finally landed on somebody and on a company that through Michele's help actually, we were able to form a really solid foundation with, a really great relationship with. And I'm very proud to say that while working with this company, we were able to for the first time in our 20 year history, to audio describe every single premier title in 2020 and IFC plans on doing so indefinitely. So, for us it was the right time to take action and to increase the amount of accessibility that all audiences have to the consumption of our films. Because like Michele mentioned, this is a group of consumers that have for far too long been underrepresented. There's been no reason why this couldn't have happened earlier, why this movement shouldn't have started earlier, why we couldn't have found out about this earlier. And so, we are proud to be at the forefront of it and at this point it's full steam ahead and we haven't looked back. And so, meeting everybody in this group and especially someone like Alex, it means a lot because this is what it's all about for us.

>> Michele Spitz: Wonderful. And Justin, really quite extraordinary. And Justin, your own investment and your passion has also grown so much from the first time we met and I remember being with these gentlemen talking to them, I thought, I don't know if this is something they're gonna wanna do but maybe if I'm lucky one day they will (laughs). And so, I'm happy to say that you have and it's so wonderful and you have a platform that we have access to which makes it a lot easier as far as the audio description. And I, for one, thank you so much. I'm so glad to know you and I'm really proud to say that you and your company are where you are and particularly you taking on this role. So, I wanna thank you for that and I'd like to,

>> Justin Smith: Of course.

>> Michele Spitz: ‘Cause I know we have limited time here. I don't know if we're gonna have time for Q&A today because we still have a number of things to talk about, but regardless, let's move on to Liz. Liz is extraordinaire. Liz is extraordinaire in writing audio description, also voicing, also casting and deeply, deeply invested in everything she does. There is not anything that Liz touches that her heart is not present in. And I know this because Liz has also written some of my audio description scripts, which mean a lot to me and it can be very complicated by the way. And I always know who I can go to who's gonna take on that journey and just turn out the most extraordinary description. So, I am honored to be able to voice the things that she writes. I'm only as good as my writers are. And frankly, that means the world to me also and I know as a voice artist and we'll talk to Allyson, I'm sure she's gonna agree with me on some of this as far as how we interpret what you have written and what your company is doing now. And oh, just basically Liz is a jewel. That's what I wanna say. So Liz, I'm gonna let you take it from here how you got into this and how you feel about all of this.

>> Liz Gutman: I am humbled by that. To, oh. So, I'm a white woman in my thirties. I have kind of a pale skin, kind of a square face, dark brown hair, short with bangs and glasses. I'm wearing a black sweater with a light colored shirt with polka dots underneath. And my background is kind of a white wall with, you can see a corner of a shelf and a mirror. So, yeah. I got into audio description. I heard about it on a podcast (laughs) a few years back and they interviewed a woman named Colleen Connor who is a delight. And I trained with her. She is an AD expert. She's an AD professional. She is a blind woman. She has a background in performing arts and she is another phenom. So, I did some training with her and her partner, Jan Vulgaropulos who is another career describer, did some training with Dr. Joel Snyder and did some freelance work for awhile and for the past two plus years, I've been working at IDC, International Digital Center here in New York City. And Alex, I was delighted to hear you call out "Queens Gambit" because we worked on that title.

>> Michele Spitz: Ah ha (laughs)!

>> Liz Gutman: I have to agree with you. I was blown away. I did not write it, but our writer did an unbelievable job. And in that type of, that level of attention really speaks to, I mean, I'm so proud of our writers' room, but we all really care a lot. It's not just me (laughs). Everyone really cares a lot about getting it right, making sure that it's vivid, making sure that it's correct and painting a picture and sometimes we get to add a little, there's a little something extra in there but it really speaks to the level of care and attention that that particular writer Steven and all of our writers put into every project. Yeah. I mean, that's how I got into it (laughs).

>> Michele Spitz: And Liz, can you speak on casting? How the approach to casting and the approach to script writing, how it might be different for episodic versus a full length film? Much of what I work on our full length and that's quite an, it's much to endure sometimes as far as continuity. It's a different animal, but as we know audio description is on theater, it's on stage, it's dance, it's everywhere. We have audio description all over the world of culture more and more every day but every platform that implements audio description in the arts at large, including museums, it's all a different animal of its own. So, can you speak on perhaps the difference in terms of episodic versus a full length film and then a little bit of casting and then I'm gonna give Allyson an opportunity to speak because she also has done work with Liz.

>> Liz Gutman: Sure. Yeah. Yeah. So for episodics, in a perfect world we'd be able to watch everything beginning to end and know how the story arc goes so we can make sure we're picking up on the right things. That's pretty much never an option. We usually, it depends. For a feature sometimes we're able to watch the whole thing ahead of time. And it depends on the project as well. Sometimes, I mean, it's a skill that you build, right? So, as writers become more familiar with the particular type of material, with the writing process itself, they'll be able to pick up more easily on what details might become pertinent later on, or kind of notice things that, so you can kind of mentally say, "Oo, I bet that's gonna come back later. I'm just gonna make sure to describe that now or put a pin in it." Regardless, we'll usually have to go back and kind of do a another pass and just make sure everything fits together. Yeah. For a feature, it's really making sure that you do enough setting of the whole stage while making sure the plot is pushed along. With episodics it can be tricky. I mean, it's really a mixed bag (laughs) because a comedy is gonna be different from a drama, it's gonna be different from a supernatural horror, thriller something, and it depends on are there crazy monsters that are attacking? What's the best way to describe something that doesn't exist in real life? What's the best way to describe, on the other end of that spectrum for maybe a more cerebral drama where there's a lot of (laughs), a lot of gazing and looking and glancing and how do you best convey the meaningful parts of each particular scene while making sure not to step on dialogue, not to step on important sound effects? That's huge. So much of the story is told through the amazing sound design of each project and it's our job to make sure to respect that as much as possible to let that help tell the story too, and respect these amazing soundscapes and music in some cases as well. If there are plot pertinent lyrics, we wanna let at least some of that come through if possible.

>> Michele Spitz: And Liz, also, will you talk about, excuse me for interrupting you. I just wanted to, let me just in here.

>> Liz Gutman: Not at all.

>> Michele Spitz: We briefly talked about in the case where, for example if I were to bring a film to you that I will often request for my filmmakers because I get to work with them one-on-one, if they would provide a transcript which in some cases will help you with some of what you're writing because some of that is laid out for you. That isn't always the case that everybody gets this when they're doing audio description but in some cases it can be helpful, right?

>> Liz Gutman: Yes. Yeah. And it depends on the project, it depends on the client. And I've done a couple projects for you as well in the past. I always subscribe to usually more is better. The more pieces of the puzzle that went into creating the final product that we can have access to, the better informed our decisions can be. So, whether that's a transcript, occasionally it'll be like a shooting script or there will be some kind of glossary set up. I mean, we build our own versions of that for each project just to make sure that we're all on the same page as far as terminology for, "Oh, this is the shorthand for this spooky place by the big old tree is the foggy glenn," or whatever just to make sure that everyone's using the same terminology so that it's clear within the project.

>> Michele Spitz: So, I'm gonna also turn this over to Allyson shortly 'cause we have a limited time here. I'm looking at the clock. Can you speak briefly on casting choices? And Allyson is now doing some projects of which we can only speak in generalities about everything right now, but can we just reference and tie this together as far as casting and bring Allyson into that?

>> Liz Gutman: Sure. Yeah. Yeah. Every project is different. So, sometimes we will cast to contrast with the main cast. If it's a largely female cast, sometimes we'll be like, "Okay, we wanna cast a male for this," and vice versa. Sometimes that doesn't make sense. Depending on the subject matter, sometimes a male voice narrating would just be weird or insensitive in some cases or just doesn't mesh with the whole project itself. But we always cast the best person for the job. That's the bottom line and yeah, we've been lucky enough to work with Allyson as well.

>> Michele Spitz: Okay, so I'm gonna turn this over to Allyson and I wanna make a comment here, a general comment because if we don't have time for Q&A I would imagine this is gonna be a question that's gonna come in and I will welcome questions at a later time. If we don't get to them today, you're all welcome to email me personally and Lauren can provide that to you and I'm happy to either answer those myself or direct them to the appropriate people to answer them, but in Allyson's case, and I wanna talk about this just sort of in the bigger picture here, when I taught the audio description lab for RespectAbility, that is a number of individuals, Ashley included, Alex included, who are in their mid career track perhaps with various disabilities. So, we talk about opportunities in this field for everybody and particularly if you're interested in audio description. So, that conversation of course has a much different trajectory and branches that go everywhere, which covers diversity, it covers casting, it covers many different parts of this sort of conversation around audio description which is by the way, growing and expanding every day. We're all talking about it in newer ways, we're thinking about it newer ways and I think what I would like to comment on is that everybody who would like to have an opportunity like with anything in life should have the opportunity to do this work, whether it's voicing, whether it's engineering, whether it's writing, whatever you may or may not like to do or resonate with, diversity of employment should be considered. And then beyond that, people sometimes are matching voice with content, voice with character in the content. There's many things that are coming into play here. So, the bottom line is everyone should have an opportunity and if you're a voice actor and you fit that part or you wanna be part of that part, you wanna match that part in authentic casting, that should be considered as well. If we are managing that project and it works well for everybody, then we are able to accommodate that also. So this is a conversation that's growing and we're welcoming a lot more input every day. So I wanna put that out there because I have a feeling somewhere around here, but probably question's gonna come in. I'm not gonna get to it today. So Allyson, I met Allyson through a colleague at BAFTA and Allyson was very curious about audio description and she said, "May I have your time?" Well, that took hours of time because we are now friends and we're close friends and I'm delighted to know Allyson and Allyson is now not only a well-renowned audio book narrator but has moved into the realm of audio description and is doing extraordinary work. I've also hired her to narrate some of my films. So Allyson, I'm gonna let you take it from here.

>> Allyson Johnson: Well, thank you, Michele. And I think that what we've learned about from this panel is that all things audio description ultimately lead back to you, Michele, because you are such (Michele laughs) an advocate and because you know everyone everywhere. So, we are all very, very fortunate to have in various ways have made your acquaintance. I am Allyson, A-L-L-Y-S-O-N Johnson. I am a cafe au lait covered, colored, (chuckles) covered? Wow, I'm covered in coffee. Woman with long curly dark blonde hair and oval glasses. I am wearing a heavily patterned sleeveless mock turtleneck and sitting in front of an upright piano in front of a dark orange wall with an oil painting on it. Yeah, it's interesting talking about casting, Michele, because I'm sort of the last piece of the audio description puzzle before it goes onto distribution and so I'm not casting myself. I am approached by whomever to do a project whether that's a feature film, whether that's an episodic, whether, I do actually do a lot of corporate audio description because there are a lot of companies that have internal videos that need to be described and that's also a different animal and sometimes it gets into inter description or pre-description. But I think that what you were sort of starting to allude to is, I've been a voice actor now for well over two decades and when I started my career, one of the things that they always said was you don't want your picture anywhere because you want the person who is listening to be able to create their own picture of who you are and what the story is and you want them to paint the picture in their mind and you don't want them distracted by who you are and what you look like. So, if I'm recording an audio book that has a 60-year-old man who is a general of an army, I don't want you looking at me with my blonde curly hair. I want you to thinking about that man. Well, times have changed and so much because of social media because there are so many platforms that are streaming, people are constantly asking for images. I want your picture. Just even for this panel, you want a headshot. And so, it's hard to get away from that and I think when it comes down to actual casting, you want to be mindful of the content that you're describing and in some cases it's going to come down to as Liz was saying, sort of who's appropriate in what areas. So, I am very light-skinned, but I'm a black woman. So, as a black woman, there are probably projects that I would be appropriate to audio describe simply because of what the subject matter is. We want to be, my job is to be of service to the creative content provider. It's to provide the voice that can lift the film or the show or the copy off the page with, but get out of the way. I am not meant to be a character in it. I'm just meant to be of service and to be neutral, but not flat. So there are a lot of pieces that are going on and they're, it's a fine line of sort of determining who is the best fit for that and I have to be honest and tell you, I'm really grateful that I am not the one deciding to pick me because ultimately that is somebody else's responsibility but it is my job once I get the project to make sure that I do the best job that I can with what I've been given 'cause I'm a storyteller. So I can only be, as Liz was saying, I can only be as good as the project and the writers. I am so in awe of audio description writers. It is a very, very specific type of writing. I love words. I have been saying words out loud since as long as I can remember. I started on a children's television show when I was 12 years old. I like talking out loud. I'm also, and I think Alex sort of talked about this, I'm a very auditory learner and always have been. So when we talk about audio description and who it's serving and who is the consumer, I would say that I am a consumer of audio description. I didn't know that until I found out what audio description was a little over four years ago, but once I found out what it was which was when I got hired to do my first project, I walked out of that studio going, "I understand what an ah ha moment is." I had an ah ha moment where all of the things and all of the skills and all of what I had trained to do in my life came together in that moment, in that project and I thought, "This is what I'm supposed to be doing. How can I do more of it?"

>> Michele Spitz: Allyson, I wanna speak to you because we are speaking the same language as far as a narrator and where do we find our place in this? Where do we find our place vocally? Where do we find our place in the tone of it? And I've always said, I have my own unique signature tone and it's not like some other people. It's also suited very well for certain content, not well-suited for others. I might shy away from some content saying, "I'm not your girl. I'm really not." And I know that in my opinion about it, that we are really here to compliment the content. We're not here to compete with it. We're not here to necessarily overarch or over animate but there is some content that warrants that, for example children's programming, animated content, right? Or action. Like Alex loves action and horror and all those wonderful things you don't want me narrating. Maybe Allyson wants to do it (laughs).

>> Allyson Johnson: I love action. Children's I'm not so good at but (laughs)-

>> Michele Spitz: I'm Miss Mellifluous. (Allyson laughs) So, that is not the right tone. But that being said, yes, there's gonna be places where more characterization comes into it, but ultimately we are here to sort of be the backdrop of everything else. We are here to really, I've always said, it's almost as if we are delivering information. That's what we do. And it's different than acting. Some people, we call ourselves voice actors but at some level sometimes I don't think we're really acting it as much as we are information providers. So, we're finding our place there and there's a ground that we sort of, an even ground where we don't go too monotone but we're also not taking over. That's a very fine line for a lot of people. And I do think it's a skillset. On top of the writing that Liz is so involved in and so many of the companies are doing such great jobs and they're getting better all the time, really, truly we have to honor some of that in terms of where the vocal skill set comes in and what is the right match for that? But beyond that, Allyson, I wanna say that you moved into this area, your area, your specialty, and what you're so involved in are audio books. But now this part of this world became very endearing to you and I think that our friendship and our relationship as colleagues and we talked about this at length, that you've come to a place also that you've arrived at where you have an understanding of something and you're now invested in something, I don't think you're gonna ever back away from.

>> Allyson Johnson: Absolutely not. It's interesting you should say that because I feel that I've always loved words and I've always loved the power of words and what they can do and how they can lift. I find now, having been introduced to audio description that I, even in just my daily life, I live in New York in Harlem. I walk down the streets. I hear audio description in my head all the time. If I see someone cross the street, I will say, "Oh, she just sauntered across the street," because if you're a really good audio description writer like Liz you're never gonna say, well, you might never. Sometimes you might say walked but you're probably gonna say sauntered or skipped or galloped or whatever and when I'm reading description copy and a writer uses a really good word I just think, "That was a really good word." Okay, go on with what you're doing. It has informed the way I think about what I am seeing. There have been times, and I listen to audio description of things all the time just because I wanna hear the description because it's good research for me. I wanna hear different people and their tones, how they choose to handle. As Alex was saying, it's gonna be different when you're describing a fight scene versus describing an action scene versus describing something like a chess tournament where you're just telling that there are pieces that are moving over here and I wanna hear what that sounds like but there have been times I have been listening to the audio description and I will, I'm looking at it because I'm fully sighted, and I hear something in the audio description and I think, "Really?" And I have to pause and go back and look at it because the describer has pointed out something in such detail, like Alex said about the baseball, the picture of the person with the baseball bat that I didn't even see. It's happened to me numerous times. And so I feel like, if you're a filmmaker or a television show creator, having access to the kinds of writers who are gonna point out the things that you have thought so, you've probably been so meticulous about putting in your picture, don't you want the most people possible to be able to see all of those little details and nuances? And a description writer is going to be able to point them out.

>> Michele Spitz: And Allyson, I have also had the reverse experience of that because I have the luxury of watching every movie and choosing which films I'm gonna work on or I give grants to or what have you. This is not in the case of Liz of course, 'cause she's exceptional but I have come across some scripts that left things out that I saw and when I'm watching the movie I thought, I get up close and personal with every film I'm involved and every client. This is what I do. And I'm thinking, "Hm, I think we need to describe that. We need to find a way to time code that or cut something else shorter or bring this in because I feel this is relevant." So, I think it goes

>> Allyson Johnson: Right.

>> Michele Spitz: both ways, right? I think they're very,

>> Allyson Johnson: Yes.

>> Michele Spitz: it's again, this is all a learning curve. We're all learning every day, we're all getting better every day and the goal is to be the best that we can be on all levels of this. So, I think-

>> Allyson Johnson: I agree.

>> Michele Spitz: Really important. I would like to bring this over to Alice 'cause Alice has been incredibly patient and I adore Alice, also. Who don't I love in this virtual room right now? Alice is an extraordinary human being also. And I'm gonna let Alice talk at great length about her background as a filmmaker and an educator at NYU Tisch and how we have come together in terms of wanting to promote audio description media accessibility. How do we do this in the education realm? Because there is definitely a void in this world and the void is, and I will speak for myself and I'm sure perhaps others could sort of resemble some of this in their own life, but I am often out in the public and people will ask me, "You use your voice, right? That's your career?" And of course I will say, "Yes, it is." And of course, I know the next question is what do you do? And I thought I should write a card and just hand it over like an index card 'cause it's gonna take awhile. And so (laughs) I will explain to people what I do and everybody, the majority of people I speak to, "I didn't know that. Why don't I know this?" And I always say, "It's not people's fault what they don't know because how would they know if no one ever told them?" And once they know about it, then they can consider this, they can embrace it, they can converse about it and share it with other people. Everybody knows somebody like Alex or somebody's mother or someone's grandmother or what have you that would benefit from this. And I've thought about this for a very long time and I concluded in the last year, I've been doing this work for over seven years now and I realized that where the calling was and my calling right now and where I see expansion and growth and where we need to go is to education in some arena like where Alice is whether it's on a college level, whether it's in a media program, a broadcast program, wherever we are in education, for that matter the performing arts. Some of them exist in the performing arts, classes about audio description but... And then in Europe, they're far more advanced than we are in many ways. They're doing studies, they're doing papers, they're talking about a much more expansive ways than we are theory and what have you, and if everybody who was studying media, whatever layer of media you chose to study and if you were in school, this was part of your curriculum and it was mandatory, then at which point, when this conversation came up and I'm with somebody who might be in media and didn't know about it, then they might know about it. And for those that don't, that are everyday people that aren't in the media world, it's not just a post production media conversation, it's newsworthy of everyone knowing about it like they know captions. So, how do we get there? So Alice, we've talked about this, we've talked about courses to put together. We've talked at great length about how this could be facilitated. I will be a guest lecture in her class in the fall about audio description. That's how I decided that I could make myself available. We don't have a course that's available to do right now and that takes politics and all kinds of things. But at least as a guest lecture, just showing up this is a way to enlighten people and educate them. So, Alice, I can't wait to hear your input here but Alice is a big fan and a big advocate of audio description and disability rights at large. So, I'm gonna let Alice take it from here.

>> Alice Elliott: Well, thanks Michele, and I'm so happy to be here with everybody and actually be getting this out in the public. I'm a white woman over 50. I have shoulder length, gray and brown hair. I have bright red glasses and I am sitting in front of a bookshelf, very appropriate for someone in academia, but I'm also a filmmaker and many of my films have dealt with disability justice and for people with disabilities. I am also the head of the documentary area at NYU Tisch School of the Arts. And just as a fact, a fun fact that over 40% of the films at Sundance this year have some connection to the NYU Film School. So, it really makes it clear how important that we engage people in education, especially film school education about the way to make media accessible. I was so happy to hear Ashley talk about the fact that she's a become a real advocate because it's not only educating people at festivals but it's curators, it's panelists, it's other filmmakers, it's distributors, and I had the situation of having sent a very short film with audio description to a festival and they were dear friends and they came back and they said, "Alice, what is this? We don't get it." And (laughs) I realized that not enough information had gone to them. And so, it was quite important and sort of disappointing to me. So, I've kind of worked this out to think about three things that directors, filmmakers should think about and one is the amount of description that they might want. And one is the type and the third one would be who does it. And so, and I think it's important to note because some of our audience may not be aware of this that unlike an audio book, usually the audio description for a film is one voice. It's not gonna change around into different characters. So, it has a different feeling than an audio book because people have said to me, "Oh, it's like an audio book." No, not really (chuckles). So, when you talk about the amount of description, there are many ways to approach it and I think it's really important that the filmmaker get involved, that you can have what is called oral spaciousness so that you can, if it's a certain type of film and you want that kind of thought about it, or is it more like voiceover narration? Or are you thinking about perhaps including cinematic technique? Are you thinking about slow motion for example? Or what does that add to the scene? Or do you ever say you zoom in on a closeup and do you use cinematic language? And I think also in that area, then you think about, well, what is the image doing? Is the image doing something significant? What is the work that that image is doing and how will I describe that? And so, when I'm at Tisch, I really try to get my students to think about how it's going to enhance their films. And this is also a struggle with captioning that I've had students say to me, "Oh, can we turn off the captioning?" And I'll say, "No, I prefer to leave it on," because they need to get used to the idea of leaving space for these accessible necessities. And they need to see it as a way of enhancing what they've already done. And so this has been for me, the big challenge not only with students, but with other faculty members who don't see it that way or haven't had a chance to see it that way yet. So, I think those are the main things that I'm thinking about. Yeah. Those are the main things that I'm thinking about.

>> Michele Spitz: So Alice, as we've spoken about before, do you feel that there is room for bringing in bigger conversations, more programming in the schools, more of the subject matter for the educational curve about media accessibility? It could be under the umbrella of localization and even includes dubbing. It includes many other things, but where would you see something like this fitting in so that students and our future media makers know what this is and also in addition to that, and we've all talked about this in different realms, but when a filmmaker like yourself or anyone is coming to the table and some people will say, "Well, could you consider audio description as you were making your movie? Are you leaving breathing room for audio description?" And I'm not sure everybody will be thinking like that. I'm not sure if everyone should be responsible to be thinking about that. It's a big ask. It would be lovely, but it isn't ideal for not every particular project but at certain times maybe films about disability, people are aware perhaps that are making films about disability about the larger picture. We're also wanting to be sure this reaches other disabilities such as Alex or anyone else. So, there was controversy over where do we consider that? Where do we leave the room? And how much can we ask of filmmakers to consider this? I personally, at minimum, I personally feel that everyone in the media industry no matter who you are whether it's distribution, production, directing, I don't care what part you played in a beautiful piece of work that came out into a film or a broadcast, what have you? I think everyone should know about it because every part of them that became part of that eventual project will reach further audiences should they keep this in mind and be able to tell other people they were part of that process. So, that's how I personally look at it and I like to advocate for that and I think if everybody knew about it, they'd be more aware and then maybe the schools would then consider this as part of their program somewhere in there other than just a guest lecture. But I'm curious what your thoughts are on that?

>> Alice Elliott: Well, I think it's very important that we don't think about, and I don't teach about media access as a green vegetable, that it's good for you. I think the way to teach it is that it's good for your film and it can make your film better. And we always just, I'm on the Inclusion Committee at Tisch and we were just talking about this and everyone agreed. And so I thought, "Oh my gosh, here are five people that are actually gonna go out into our department and talk about, to students how they can make their films better, and not just, it's a good thing to do." It's to make your film better and you'll get a bigger audience and you'll have better communication about it. I mean, Georgia Krantz started me, introduced me to audio description at the Guggenheim Museum and some of her programs do runs in New York. And I realized, and what she told me is that the most popular tour at the Modern Museum is the audio described tour. So, I thought that was very important because what that means is people who maybe have typical seeing, typical visual ability are getting more from hearing this description of artwork. And I believe that's what's going to happen in film as well.

>> Michele Spitz: I think so. The other thing, again, there's growth in this area and some people can speak to it in more detail than I can at this very moment. We have limited time, but also we wanna take into account that some audio description for people with various cognitive processing may find audio description overwhelming. It's too much information at the same time. So, there are ways to pause media, there is interstitial, there's all types of things to address with that as well. And upfronting audio description so on and so forth. So we have to think about various audiences, right? We have to take into account everybody out of respect for various people that are watching media and I know that for example with Superfest, they screen their films with open audio description, open captions, ASL CARTs and so forth. And it got to a point at some time where they decided that some people that were in the audience, regardless of any disability, some found it was overwhelming. So, they did some screenings without it. So, we just wanna take into account everybody, whether it's the filmmaker, whether it's the audience member and be sure that we're trying to listen to everybody's needs and address them as best as we can. As I said, there's no perfect world in this yet. Maybe there will never be a perfect world but we're gonna get better over time. So, I think this has been a really rich conversation and I think everyone's had an opportunity to participate in this and other people outside that have joined us have hopefully gained a larger perspective of what this is, why it matters to all of us. What are the nuts and bolts at least over the overview of what it is and I'd like to bring it back to Alex before we take some questions. And Alex, what would you like to say or what would you like to conclude hearing all of what you heard today and you know that we all care deeply to serve you and your community and we're doing our best, what would you like to say? Anything in particular, you'd like to comment on anything?

>> Alex Howard: Well, I think like I grew up, I had to patch when I was very little to strengthen my bad eye. So, I'd watch movies like "Lion King," like usually Disney animated movies to, while I patched so that, kind of work my eye. But then I think as I got older, I love movies and I love TV and I love the entertainment business but being low vision, I was sort of like how is this gonna work with my eyesight? And then finding audio description and discovering that like, this can work and I can enjoy movies or TV shows as much as everyone else was really, really eye-opening. So, I think the wider, the more films use it and the more TV shows use it would be great and like low vision and blind people like to go to the movies like everyone else. So, I think it'd be amazing to have more access to as much content as possible.

>> Michele Spitz: Wonderful, wonderful. And I think that really gives us a sort of a rounded conversation here. Lauren, I would like to open up to any Q&A and any questions that are being asked.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Great, thank you. We have six questions or seven questions, so we'll see how many we can get through and they're all really great questions. The first one, and this one might be best for you is, "Is there," this is from Kiana. "Is there a category for best audio description for award shows?"

>> Michele Spitz: (laughs) In my dreams. (sighs) I think there was something, I wanna say in Canada, there was somewhere, I think it was Canada. I don't know. Maybe Liz, maybe you might know. I saw something at one time kind of relevant but what I have seen is conversation around wanting something to be there. And the awards that have been given not specifically for that, the American Council of the Blind does have a conference every year, an annual conference, and they do award different advocates, producers, so and so forth. So there are awards within the context of the American Council for the Blind. So, I think in the bigger scale, in the bigger world, I hope one day there will be. It would be delightful because we work really hard. We work really, really hard.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Yep. Another question from Scott is, "Who is responsible for deciding what is most important for audio description to draw attention to and not? How do voice artists, directors, and writers collaborate?"

>> Michele Spitz: Hm. Okay, I'm gonna answer that briefly and then I'm gonna turn it over to Liz. When I work with a filmmaker, as I said they're coming with me for a journey and I actually include them in my process. I want them to read the scripts. I want them to make any corrections that need to be made or challenge me in things which may or may not be able to be resolved. We'll have to determine what works in terms of time code and what we can say and not say, but I will not allude to one particular film I'm working on right now but it's a terrific film, and Liz has written this film, the script. The subject of it would be very particular, is a dancer, so and so forth that would probably have some, and it has disability. It would be very important to reference to to see if he thought we described him accurately and he's a very, very complex character. So is his artistry. Well, after Liz was done I am proud to say that not only did the filmmakers look at the script and were incredibly thrilled, he was as well and he didn't have any corrections and he was delighted. So, I personally like to bring my filmmakers in to go through this with me and that way they understand it. Now, as far as Liz is concerned, Liz you're at a big company. I'm a one person company here and I have my people that work for me. But in your case, how would you like to address that?

>> Liz Gutman: I mean, the short answer is the writer. The writer decides. That being said we have a fairly rigorous internal QC process. So, a bunch of different pairs of eyes are on the script throughout the process. So, whether it's script QC, sometimes if the VO talent is an expert in a particular thing, or particularly if we get like a UK show and we have to remember to use UK words for things, lift instead of elevator, lorry instead of truck,

>> Michele Spitz: Right.

>> Liz Gutman: we'll have a UK VO talent come in and they'll say, "Oh, you missed one. You said sidewalk instead of pavement." So, there'll be little bits and bobs that sort of get adjusted as we go but by and large, the writer of each project decides what needs to be described and what doesn't or we don't have time for.

>> Michele Spitz: Yeah.

>> Alice Elliott: Can I jump in and just ask, but if a director wants to be involved, isn't that possible as well?

>> Michele Spitz: I can answer in my case, absolutely, because I'm working with different people. So, but mine's a more intimate experience that I go through and I have a unique way in which I do what I do. But Liz, in your case, do you come across that?

>> Liz Gutman: It depends on the project and the client. That's not generally the, for most of the projects we get, the director and general creative team aren't usually involved. There are exceptions. There was one really sweeping kind of fantastical show that was in a completely made up world and they had a really extensive internal like glossary and pronunciation guide for all of these different terms. That was really, really helpful. And they were actually very high touch going back and forth 'cause I said, "I have about 27,000 questions for you (laughs). To whom may I address these?" So, in that case, they were very hands-on. Generally most of the projects we do, most of the clients we work with, it's just we get the locked cut or the final cut and as Michele mentioned sometimes a transcript or other other materials to sort of help.

>> Michele Spitz: The other thing-

>> Liz Gutman: That would be great. (Liz laughs)

>> Michele Spitz: The other thing I also wanna mention in that, and I think this is very important. By the time a film has made its way to IDC, any of these other large companies that are doing this work, really, we have to trust that they are the professionals in this area and once it's gone that route, it has its journey and there are other people overseeing it in the QC process that we're talking about, but we also have to enlist some trust with the professionals that do this and part of it's a learning curve for others in a different realm and how Alice is talking about it and then there's that world, where people wanna be involved. But I think we have to look at all sides of it and how involved you wanna be or not involved if you're working with a very large company, a large distributor. There's various things to consider but I think that's another conversation, another time we can go deeper into that. Lauren, what else can we help answer?

>> Lauren Appelbaum: I’m gonna combine two questions here. One from Anonymous which was specifically asking about Justin's clip saying, "Wondering how you handle making audio description with action films or moments with fast action where there might not be big moments of pause? How do you catch the viewers up in real time, punches thrown and yelling?" And then Courtney asks a similar question. "For a teen comedy, would it be appropriate or acceptable to write a slight comedic take into the audio descriptions?"

>> Michele Spitz: Hm. Justin? Interesting question for Justin as far as QC-ing, right? But actually that goes back to the script writing and then your approval of the script writing and Liz, that also addresses you. So, it's actually both. And why don't, Justin, do you wanna respond to that? Maybe Liz?

>> Justin Smith: Sure. I think that this is primarily a Liz question because I think it's focused on the writing but what I will say is after the creation of the script, when it does get to the distribution stage there are additional layers of QC after the fact. So, my team and I will also listen for content and for technical quality too, because at the end of the day we need to make sure that this is acceptable for platforms and all of the places we contribute. So, I think that content wise it's really a good question for Liz, but in terms of the actual control, the quality control of the content itself, that has multiple layers. So, at the end of the day a number of eyes get onto the audio description and I think that's a good thing but I'm curious to hear what Liz has to say too in terms of putting your own spin on different subject matters.

>> Liz Gutman: Yeah. So, just to speak to the sort of action related question first because I have, the short answer again is you just work your face off. I mean, I wrote a script for an action movie that I don't know, I bet the script was five pages long. There was very little dialogue. It was almost two hours long and there was a lot of action and it was big action. There were helicopters, explosions, fist fights, knife fights, people falling off of balconies, getting hit by trucks. And you just, it just takes a lot longer to write those because you can't, it's not possible to describe every punch. So, that's a really good example of when you have to, it takes some experience and skill and just good judgment to try and do the best job of that because you have to convey the general thrust of the scene, maybe a couple descriptions of how they're fighting. Are they grappling each other or are they keeping each other, swiping knives at each other? But also letting some of the sound effects come through. When you, you wanna hear the person get hit by the truck, you wanna hear that haymaker that knocks them out. So, it's just a really fine line that you have to walk that's, it's different for every project and it's different with every writer. And then going to the sort of like teen comedy voicing question to write a slight comedic take into the audio descriptions. Yes and no. We do encourage, I encourage, I feel very strongly about this, doing our best to match the tone and the vocabulary of each project to the tone and the vocabulary of the source material. So, obviously for a kids show you wouldn't use multi-syllabic words on the regular for various things. I do think for a comedy it's fun to switch it up and maybe take a bit of a lighter, I don't know, maybe instead of, "She nods her head to the beat," like, "She she bops around the kitchen," or that's just off the top of my head but just kind of keeping the feel in mind. So yes, to an extent. I don't know that we would cast a teenager to voice it necessarily but someone on the younger side certainly. But I mean, why not (laughs)? Yeah. That's a good question about in terms of matching the tone of the, and the sound of the AD to the project.

>> Michele Spitz: Is it-

>> Alex Howard: Can I say what I would like as a consumer for that question?

>> Liz Gutman: Oh my God, please, yes.

>> Alex Howard: Okay. So (laughs) I think for the action, I think the big moments, like I know with "No Man's Land" it was like the location of the gun or the location of the weapons and like, "He drops it or he picks it up," and then like for "Extraction" on Netflix, I watched that, that's a very much like just action through the whole movie. I think falling off the roof, the big changes in the fight. Like if he were to get hit really hard or the bigger moments is what you should describe. Even like "Avengers: Endgame," the final fight, like capture the shield, stuff like that. I think the smaller moments you can let go but the big moments is what you wanna describe and then also with comedy, I mean, I would love to see a comedic audio description script. I think if it fits the tone, that'd be great.

>> Michele Spitz: Liz, that's your next QC person (laughs).

>> Liz Gutman: Noted. Noted.

>> Michele Spitz: Do we have any other questions?

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Yes. They keep coming in. We're gonna try and get through as many as possible.

>> Michele Spitz: Okay.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: A very similar question about, that there are different styles of AD, more basic cut and dry while others seem to be very artful and I've noticed it. It can be the writer, it can be the person voicing it, like how does one decide that? And that was from Ben Fox.

>> Michele Spitz: Okay. So Liz, it kinda goes back to us. It goes to Allyson. I'm gonna speak because I also produce and cast for my own projects and if I'm not the voicing, or I'm voicing part of it and I'm having other voices come in to do subtitles so it differentiates between what I'm narrating rather and they're narrating perhaps subtitles or what have you, which goes more into character by the way and I wanted to mention that when Alice was talking, we do have other voices that come in to sort of break that up and isolate one voice for visual content, one voice for subtitles, maybe one voice who's narrating the captions. For example, with Craig's piece, "Don't Shoot the Messenger," these are multiple deaf characters who are signing and so we have to go into some sort of character to define who they are. So, I think that it really varies and it depends on the project and it depends on the people making these decisions and Liz, what would you like to add to that?

>> Liz Gutman: It depends.

>> Michele Spitz: It's variable.

>> Liz Gutman: It is variable. That's the best answer I can give.

>> Michele Spitz: Yeah.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: So, we have one question which I know could be a whole panel in and of itself but, "How would you suggest that a filmmaker pitches to a potential investor the need to include a budget item for audio description?"

>> Michele Spitz: I’ll answer that (laughs). That's part of how I consider promoting. So, in terms of even with distributors or being sure that this asset goes through its journey through the duration of the shelf life of the film if we're fortunate enough to see that it's gonna get repurposed, it's gonna be, licensing will change and things like that, but in the initial stages of that conversation I think some of the best ways to talk about this and I'm reluctant to say certain things but I am gonna say this. Why would we segregate any audience from having this experience? Any audience? Whether it's Alex, whether it is someone who is deaf or hard of hearing, why would we do that? And what value do we add as an investor in a project by standing behind all accessibility to the media that they are funding and supporting because they're gonna get a larger audience share ultimately anyhow? So, really, and it's a win-win no matter how you look at it.

>> Justin Smith: Hey, Michele, really quickly if I may, I also think

>> Michele Spitz: Yes.

>> Justin Smith: many filmmakers are probably unaware of the amount of exposure that the AD will end up having at some point when it's created.

>> Michele Spitz: Yes.

>> Justin Smith: I can speak for our company. We were able to get this out onto VOD platforms, onto digital platforms, onto certain cable outlets, even onto, depending on the terms of access agreements, even onto airlines, cruise ships, into theaters,

>> Michele Spitz: That's right.

>> Justin Smith: into festivals.

>> Michele Spitz: Correct.

>> Justin Smith: So, I think many people would be surprised with how far reaching it can be already and how much we expect that that will only grow and expand going forward over the next few years. That's what we're hopeful for.

>> Michele Spitz: That's right and not only that in the times of this current pandemic, there has been more media consumption probably than ever in history because we are isolated in our homes. And again, I repeat the same thing. Why should people who in their homes during the pandemic not have access to all the same things everyone else is enjoying? It's equal audience share and equal access. And yes, you're absolutely correct. And by the way, a lot of people don't even talk about the fact that audio description is available on certain airlines and certain cruise ships. I remember when "Dealt," when Richard Turner said, "Oh, I know the audio description." He was saying to me that on the plane or somebody was on the plane and they cried. I said, "Oh, I'm so happy." So, it has a journey, an evolution, and there's no reason not to do it is really, I really think there is no reason not to do it and there is budgeting in place for people and if it doesn't end up there, it'll end up somewhere else in the distribution process and hopefully it'll be included.

>> Ashley Eakin: And I just wanna add something really quick that Michele always told me was like, talk about this right at the very beginning because if you do it in post they're gonna say, "We don't have enough money." So, if you bring it up at the very top, it's usually more successful.

>> Michele Spitz: Good point.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: We're not gonna be able to get through all the questions but I just wanted to bring one up because someone had a clarifying question. I believe it was when Liz was speaking. But the question is, "Did you say you have writers' rooms? Could you explain?"

>> Liz Gutman: Yes. We have, so at IDC we have a team of staff writers and we work with freelancers as well, but our core team are on staff and in the before times, it was a literal room that we all sat in and now it is a virtual room. And I think that's really one of our strengths is that we bounce ideas off of each other. We ask questions in real time. If one of us is stuck or needs another set of eyes on something, we can collaborate in that way and I think it makes everyone's work stronger.

>> Michele Spitz: Lauren, can I say a couple words to close us out?

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Yeah, I just, I wanna just very quickly before you close out the panel that, well, A, my thanks from RespectAbility to all of you for for your time on the panel and everyone who stuck with us throughout the past 90 minutes. If you asked a question and we didn't get to it, we will take a look at it and Michele or someone else will reach out to you with the answer. So, we will be looking through the questions we didn't get to. Michele?

>> Michele Spitz: I wanna thank everybody who attended and more importantly, all of those of you who decided to be on this panel and that I thank you for your continued efforts in this area, your passion towards this cause and that I know we have a lotta work still to do, but we've come a long way. And I am truly grateful for all of you and your love for what this means and for someone like Alex, I'm so grateful to you, Alex, for your voice and your voice is so important and we care very much about your community. I want you to know that and I want everyone to talk about this to their colleagues and their friends and their families as far as what this is and know about it. And the more we talk about, I always say this, the more we talk about it, the more we know about it, and the more the conversation gets larger. So, thank you all for being with us today and I hope you've walked away with something valuable and something to think about.