

## Reviews

hearing loss herself, tried the glasses nonetheless and discovered they enabled her to keep track of the characters and who was speaking.

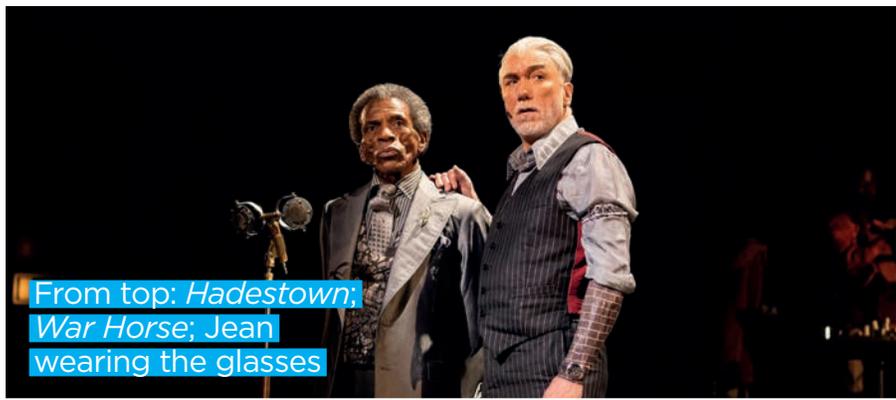
“It’s the viewing of the future,” she declared.

*Hadestown* showed me that each experience of wearing the glasses will differ based on the nature of the production. This American folk musical is a modern version of the Greek myth of Orpheus and Euridice. The set was busy, with a revolving stage in the middle, actors dancing and jumping in and out of it, moving clockwise or counter clockwise, often simultaneously. Narrators were on and off a podium, actors were high up on a platform or talking from the wings. Somehow, the glasses helped me keep up with all this (similar, I imagine, to a theatre-goer without the glasses).

I couldn’t stop pondering how this was such a seemingly simple solution and yet it dealt with a complex problem. George Marcotte, Managing Director of Accenture Digital, explained that it started with numbers.

When he learned how many people in the UK experience hearing loss (11 million), his numbers background kicked in. He understood the challenge would be “to get the full value out of the glasses so that people could experience them in different ways”.

Consequently, Accenture has prioritised giving viewers a choice of colours, sizes of captions and placement on the lens. They’ve even factored in the possibility that a set director might, for example, create a white background, so viewers with captions are able to select a contrasting colour.



From top: *Hadestown*; *War Horse*; Jean wearing the glasses



### The freedom of choice

But how, I asked him, did the solution of wearable glasses in this format emerge? The secret, it seems, is who you hire: “Many people in virtual augmented reality practice come from designing video games,” he says.

And what about the public reaction? Reuben Lane, one of the National Theatre’s specially-trained ‘Access’ ushers, told me: “Anything new is a bit scary at first – especially when technology is involved. The glasses can feel a bit cumbersome when you first put them on. And, truthfully, not everyone will take to them. Some people who’ve been coming to

our captioned performances for years still prefer that option.

“But others love the freedom of being able to choose *exactly* where they want to look on stage and see the captions without having to turn their head to look over at the side of the stage.”

He adds: “We had a group of deaf teenagers in to see *War Horse*. They were way more tech savvy than me and had their glasses all set up and ready to go in a matter of seconds. Except for one boy, who couldn’t get the glasses to fit over his own spectacles. I could really relate to his frustration.

“Eventually, with lots of wiggling of the sides, he got them to fit comfortably. At the interval, his excitement as he signed with his friends about the show was a pure delight to behold.”

I understand the National Theatre is currently in discussions about other partnerships, and publicity for these glasses has been global. Here’s looking to a future when we see these glasses in other theatres, or adapted for use in lecture halls.

**Jean would like to thank Emma Hardy at the National Theatre for generously providing tickets, and Reuben Lane and George Marcotte for their enthusiasm and their time.**