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When the lights go down in Atlanta's 'Dialog in the Dark,' empathy for visually impaired people goes up

By JOHN BORDSEN

ATLANTA - Finding your way around the Atlantic Station shopping/dining/entertainment/residential complex can be a nightmare. The dense city-within-a-city is just northwest of Midtown at the I-75/I-85 interchange, and the bright lights and traffic are disorienting. The 138-acre development sits above an enormous underground parking garage where getting your bearings is difficult. And the fact that the Premier Exhibition Center is on a second floor doesn't help.

"Just park at escalator 5," the center's attendant said. "Ride it to street level, then take the escalator next to it that goes up one more floor."

I marvel that Peter Cossaboon gets here on a daily basis. He is one of the staff guides for the center's "Dialog in the Dark."

And he is legally blind.

The exhibition center, unobtrusively upstairs from the Tin Drum Asian Cafe and across from Publix, is a showroom for Atlanta-based Premier Exhibitions, which operates touring shows staged at museums around the world. While "Dialog" lacks the pizzazz of the company's various "Titanic" and "Star Trek" extravaganzas, this physically modest and compact offering is in many ways an eye-opener.

It's a 45- to 60-minute interactive trip into the lightless world of the visually impaired. And every group - usually seven or so people, at 12-minute intervals - is led by a guide who literally can't see.

"Dialog" was developed in Frankfurt, Germany, in the late 1980s by a journalist working for the Foundation for the Blind. Andreas Heinecke wanted to show the sighted what life can be like without vision, and to demonstrate how living with four out of five senses is a disability that can be dealt with.

Heinecke's amazingly insightful show has been continually playing in Hamburg, Germany, since 2000. It is currently challenging assumptions at Atlantic Station and at Union Station, in Kansas City, Mo.

The exhibition itself is simplicity with a twist. You take a sternum-high cane from a rack in the lobby. Put your forearm through the loop, then grab the cane handle. You step into a low-lit waiting room where a voice-over describes humans' reliance on sight. Then the lights dim to total blackness.

Your guide's voice appears out of somewhere. Asking you to use your ears to follow his or her voice, and the cane to fathom what's immediately around you, you move through a series of chambers created to emulate a park, a store, a busy street corner, a dock and so on. You use your senses of hearing, smell, taste and touch to identify and explore your surroundings.

This is disorienting at first. While your guide knows the exhibition layout and is accustomed to getting around in the pitch blackness, you only gradually get your ever-changing bearings.

The guide is where his/her voice is. (There are infra-red lights and cameras throughout. This is a safety precaution in the event someone has an accident or panics.)

Because entry is timed, you and your guide make your way through most of the maze without encountering strangers.

Along the way, the guide will verbally prompt you to use your senses to determine where you are, what you're touching - and to generally explore your surroundings. Remember that you shouldn't bend at the waist - instead, stoop and then reach, to avoid banging your head - and to keep the tip of your cane a foot or so out from your body and not far from the ground.

With Cossaboon usually 2 to 5 feet away, I gradually made my way: find the bench in the park; identify by touch the produce in the grocery; identify the woodland by the smell of pine, the sound of birds, and squat down to feel the dirt; keep my balance on the tide-swaying "boat." I used the cane to avoid tripping on the street curb and banging into the U.S. Mail box on the nearby sidewalk.

The street scene was most difficult - frightening at moments. There are sounds of speeding cars and the voices of pedestrians, all wired to be approaching/departing with spot-on Doppler sound effects.

This was clearly more Peter Cossaboon's world than mine. Throughout, he encouraged me to figure things out on my own. From the angle of his voice, I figured he was on the tall side. He sounded like a relaxed 40-something announcer on a public-radio FM station. ("People have asked me that.")

We eventually reached the Dialog Cafe - somewhere in the blacked-out maze - where a live voice named Jason welcomed us and asked if we wanted to buy a soft drink and grab a booth.

I eventually found my way to the booth and sat across from Peter. The Cafe is where the "dialog" aspect kicks in: Having gotten a feel for what life is like without sight, what questions do I have? Go ahead. Ask anything. And I did.

Cossaboon's story: "I was born in Philadelphia and grew up in New Jersey. When I was growing up, my mom was very sheltering; my dad wasn't very active with me.

"I moved to Atlanta in 1998 because I thought there would be far more resources for me. I did volunteer work at the Office of Disability Services at Georgia State for almost two years. I was a student there during a portion of the time.

"One of the conditions I have is macular degeneration. It's something that just doesn't go away, unfortunately. I lost my vision in my right eye about 3 years ago. I had been losing it since I was young. I have some vision in my left eye - about 25 to 30 percent of normal vision."

How independently do you live? "I live in the Virginia Highlands area and I live on my own. My girlfriend stays with me from time to time. But traveling, shopping, cooking, cleaning ... I do that all on my own. No luck trying to get my cat to clean her own litter box, though."

When you are talking with other blind people, can you tell by what they say if they had vision and then lost it? "It depends on the conversation. You have to listen closely. Sometimes you have to ask if they had vision or not. And some people just aren't comfortable talking about their situation."

Do you have a seeing-eye dog? "Not at the moment. I have a small apartment and a jealous cat. Inevitably, I will be getting a dog, and the cat will just have to put up with it."

How do you get to work? "The normal bus, then the train, then the Atlantic Station shuttle. I just do it in reverse on the way home."

How do you get your news? "By computer. I just bought a television, so now I can watch Headline News.

"Notice I said, 'watch.' There's no way you can get around using that terminology. Even if someone was born totally blind, 'watch' is always a word you would use in a normal context."

We eventually head toward the exit - around a corner to where a dim corridor ends at a closed door that leaks light. Out of his world and into another.

The guide whom I've never seen emerges a minute later. He is tall, thin and in his mid 30s. With his very long, jet-black hair and wraparound sunglasses, he looks like a well-dressed pop star about to catch a lift to a photo session.

So much for assumptions.

IF YOU GO:

"Dialog in the Dark" continues through February at the Premier Exhibition Center, Atlantic Station, Atlanta. Hours: 9 a.m.-8 p.m. daily; timed admission (you're encouraged to arrive 30 minutes prior to ticket time). Admission: \$24; \$20 for 65 and older and for military; \$16 for 12 and younger. Details: dialogtickets.com