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Blind Sighted

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By **Leonora Desar**

The visionary journey of Dialog in the Dark

You are blind. Around you is complete, unequivocal, pitch-black darkness—this is no romantic dimness, no dusky twilight. With your walking stick, that new, alien extension of your hand, you tap uncertainly to your left, then to your right. The voice, your guide tells you to step forward: “I am right here—just follow my voice.” With very small steps you shuffle toward this disembodied sound, the only thing anchoring you to the seemingly endless unknown space around you.

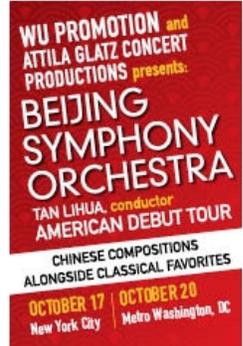
What would it be like to explore Central Park without sight? To navigate blindly through the crush of a supermarket? How would a blind person, joining the rush hour crowd, wind through the coiling underbelly of the subway and climb up and down a flight of stairs? What would it be like to have your sight replaced with the textures of smell and sound—the perfume of roses in Central Park, the wafting smell of hot dogs from a vendor on 42nd Street, the roar of a car as you brace yourself to cross an intersection?

Premier Exhibitions’ Dialog in the Dark, which made its New York debut this August at the South Street Seaport Exhibition Center, grapples with these questions by creating an immersive odyssey into the world of blindness. The concept is simple but powerful: You are guided through a series of carefully constructed corridors void of all light sources so that, for the duration of the exhibit, you are completely blind, unable even to make out your hand in front of you.

After being trained on how to use a cane (“Sweep in an arc from 11 o’clock to 1 o’clock in front of you, always touching the floor”), you carefully make your way in complete darkness with a group of about 10 others through reinterpretations of Central Park, Fairway Supermarket, the subway system and Times Square. This is a literal twilight zone of familiar landmarks experienced through tactile senses—the rich scent of coffee, the sculpted metal body of a car parked on the curb—rather than sight.

Who better to guide you through the darkness than those who, by necessity, have learned how to master it? In a reversal of power, blind and partially blind guides navigate you through the labyrinthine darkness of this strange new landscape. This is their world and they are familiar with every square inch of it. Through their ability to do the seemingly impossible—to make sense out of the darkness—they command your respect, suggesting a new model of what it means to be able and empowered.

The exhibit’s concept was originated by Andreas Heinecke, a German journalist and filmmaker, who had his first experience with a blind person when creating a training program for a blind colleague. Heinecke found that his initial pity was replaced by admiration for his colleague’s ability to manage his situation. Later, when working with the Foundation for the Blind in Frankfurt,



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Germany, Heinecke realized that the material issue was not a lack of training programs but rather the perception of disabled people as different or “other.”

Martin Buber’s work *The Principles of Dialogue*—principally the idea that “the only way to learn is through encounter”—is the underlying paradigm informing Heinecke’s concept. Since its inception in 1988, *Dialog in the Dark* has appeared in over 30 countries in over 110 cities throughout Europe, Asia, the Middle East, Africa and the Americas. Over 5,000 blind and visually impaired people have found employment through *Dialog*.

At the end of the tour, when the lights begin to slowly brighten, you find yourself sitting in a café booth with your group. Here you make out the faces of the voices that have traveled with you. Like you, they seem confused to have their sight back. You also see the face behind the voice, the one who has guided you back from darkness to light and has been your touchstone throughout your journey.

Keith LaPan, one of 16 guides at the South Street Seaport exhibit, a clean-shaven man with black-rimmed glasses, welcomes you to ask him questions. Is he blind? No, he answers, he is partially sighted but has a progressive hereditary condition called retinitis pigmentosa, as do his father and two of his siblings, making it possible for him to see only with tunnel vision. He has finally resigned himself, after a couple of bad incidents, to using a walking stick when navigating the streets. He tells you matter-of-factly that one day, like his father, he may be completely blind.

Dialog in the Dark may remind you at first of an amusement park ride. As with any good roller coaster there is fear and uncertainty, your disbelief suspended that this is only temporary, a constructed experience. But, unlike a roller coaster, your worldview does not shift merely for the duration of the exhibit, going out of focus only to be quickly realigned as soon as the twilight has lifted.

As you recover your sight, you notice the photo gallery of all the men and women who work as guides for the exhibit. Below each photo is a snapshot description of their story. You read the details of why they were drawn to work as a guide, what an ideal day is like for them, what they dreamed of being when they grew up. You wonder what it would be like to be your guide, to have the world of the exhibit as your reality, to never be able to completely leave the darkness. Your own world has been set right, but a new way of looking at it has been introduced, enriching it with dimension.

Blindness made visible cannot so easily be forgotten. You leave not just with sight restored; you leave with vision.

Dialog in the Dark is organized by Premier Exhibitions at the South Street Seaport Exhibition Center, 11 Fulton St. at Front Street in Lower Manhattan. The exhibit is ongoing, with no set closing date at this time.

Fade to Black: Participants wait in the immersion gallery with their walking canes before the lights dim completely and the tour of New York City, as experienced by the blind, begins. Photo courtesy of *Dialog in the Dark*/DKC News

Tags: **dialog in the dark, premier exhibitions, south street seaport**

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