

Theater of the Deaf in Australia

CAROL-LEE AQUILINE

The Deaf Way is an exciting opportunity for Deaf theater in Australia to come up from "down under" and share with a large number of Deaf colleagues from around the world what is happening with us. I am sure that only a very small number of people realize that this year—1989—the professional Theatre of the Deaf in Australia celebrates its tenth anniversary. We have been very much the hidden company of the Deaf theater world—mainly because of the distance and expense for anyone from Australia to contact the "outside world." The Deaf Way has provided that first all-out contact. Although the main focus of my paper will be the Australian Theatre of the Deaf, I would also like to take the opportunity to throw in a few snippets here and there about the amateur companies across Australia.

I think it is important to give a little background on the development of Deaf theater in Australia. I have seen old photographs and films of what were called concerts. Unlike concerts in America, a concert in Australia is not necessarily musical, but can be comprised of skits, poetry, dance and music—what in America is usually called a variety show. These records of Deaf concerts from the 1930s and 1940s show pretty young ladies in filmy white dresses mostly performing dance, with some poetry and songs. Many of the songs had a religious theme. Although I am sure that their work and that of performers in the 1950s and 1960s was quite lovely to watch, it was not until the early 1970s that serious thought was given to the formation of a Deaf theater group.

Australia's one professional Deaf theater company had its beginnings under the guidance of what was then called the Adult Deaf Society of New South Wales. This group provided an opportunity for local members of the Deaf community to perform in and view theatrical productions. Similar groups were started in the cities of Adelaide, Melbourne, and Brisbane, and, although the Melbourne group has now folded, the other two amateur companies remain active.

Following a tour of Australia by the National Theatre of the Deaf in 1974, the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust began a long-term commitment to develop a professional theater of the Deaf in Australia and hired a hearing director to work with the New South Wales (NSW) group. The early years were spent taking classes in mime, acting, dance, and mask, followed by performances in major Sydney theaters of *King Lear*, *Of Rogues and Clowns*, and *Five Flights to Freedom*. In 1979, with backing from the Australia Council's Theatre Board and the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust, the Australian Theatre of the Deaf was launched as a fully professional theater company.

By 1986, the company had developed sixteen original productions for school children, with performances in Tasmania, Melbourne, South Australia, the Australian Capital Territory, plus regional centers and towns throughout NSW. Recently, the company expanded this touring record to include Victoria and Queensland, with the goal of eventually touring all the Australian states. The company has also appeared on local

and national television and before His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales. Founding member Nola Colefax has been awarded the Order of Australia medal. More recent productions of the company include *The Winter's Tale*, *The Threepenny Opera*, *Man Equals Man*, *Waiting for Godot*, *Sganarelle*, and *The Lady of Larkspur Lotion*.

Since 1979, the company has undergone many changes. I am the fifth artistic director, and of course, with each new artistic director come new ideas and vision for the company. It is interesting to note that we seem to have come full circle, in the sense that the first artistic director aimed for as visual a style as possible, with minimal reliance on the spoken word. This philosophy evolved under the second and third artistic directors to mean more sign language, backed up by spoken dialogue. The company's current aim is to find as visual a style as possible that can be understood by everyone in the audience with minimal aid from either sign language or voice.

There are many companies and individual performers in Australia today who claim to present visual theater. For some, this means mime, as it often did for our company in its early stages of development. For some, it is abstract images presented with concrete sounds or words to provide meaning. For others, visual theater means puppetry, dance, acrobatics, or any combination of these things. This variety of meaning has presented the problem for our company to more clearly define just what this much-used term means to us and why our brand of visual theater is unique. We are no longer able to sit back and just present ourselves in Australian Sign Language with spoken English dialogue back-up, trusting that people will accept that as visual enough. Not only is the competition too intense nowadays, but it seems that our audience is no longer satisfied with simple sign language theater. And, actually, neither is the company.

We do not want to be a mime company, nor do we want to become a puppetry, dance, movement, or acrobatics company like any other. We want a unique style of performance based on the expressive skills of our Deaf artists. In 1989, the company continues a process of exploration begun in 1988—a process we envision eventually leading us to defining our style more clearly. The exploration process includes work that stems from sign language—i.e., visual vernacular and sign mime—and work that will explore and develop the company's skills in movement and physical expression, as well as in visual clarity. We aim to create a theater style and practice built on and developed from the particular ability and vision of the Deaf actor, which has its roots in Deaf experience and the perception of the world through the eyes of Deaf people.

This does not necessarily mean we must do plays about deafness, but we do aim to develop the "Deaf sensibility" in terms of the writing, acting, devising, and directing of the company's work. This Deaf sensibility is what we have that no other theater company in Australia has. As Deaf people, we have an advantage in that we know what it means to live in a completely visual world. Our challenge is to find a way to present this clearly and vividly and with meaning, to present theater of excellence that enlightens, empowers, and entertains its audience. Hearing audiences depend heavily on sound, but we aim to make the visual impact so strong that sound becomes unimportant or secondary.

A major step in this direction was taken in 1988, when a company of three Deaf actors and I developed a play called *Five Steps Beyond*. This play was aimed at a high school audience, and any sound in the play was used not to give meaning to what was happening visually, but rather to give hearing ears something to focus on.

The Deaf community responded overwhelmingly in support of the play, declaring it one of the best, if not *the* best production the company had done. The hearing community was not so enthusiastic. Although most of the hearing high schools responded favorably to having something so visual performed for the students, hearing profes-

sionals in the theater industry stated that, for them, the production lacked clarity. It was definitely a learning experience for all involved, one that helped the Theatre of the Deaf establish ground rules as to which direction the company needed to move in to produce a form of theater that could communicate to, as well as excite, both Deaf and hearing audiences.

It is also important to mention the sort of work other Deaf theater groups in Australia are doing. The most active of the amateur groups is the Queensland Theatre of the Deaf, based in Brisbane. In a sense, it may be more accurate to call this group semi-professional, as its members are paid for some of the work they do. For example, at the recent World Expo '88 in Brisbane, the group was commissioned to do short mime pieces at the Australian Pavilion. Most of the Queensland Theatre's productions are mime, and most of these are held at the Queensland Deaf Society for the Deaf community to enjoy. This company is run by Deaf people, although they sometimes bring in hearing theater professionals to teach classes, guest direct, or write.

In Adelaide there is an amateur company called the Gestures Theatre of the Deaf. Formed around 1985, it is run by hearing people who thought that the Deaf community in South Australia was missing something by not having their own theater company. As far as I know, they have done only one or two performances, and their style is to use sign language with voice back-up. Again, I believe that most of their performances are held at the Deaf society in Adelaide for the Deaf community there.

Another new company in NSW is called The Visionaries, and I am one of the three members of this troupe. The Visionaries began at a Deaf sports event in Australia in 1987, when the Theatre of the Deaf was invited to perform but could not because of other commitments. Since that performance, The Visionaries have been invited to perform at numerous other Deaf functions, filling a need in the Deaf community to have a quality company as an alternative to the Australian Theatre of the Deaf. The Visionaries are also more of a semiprofessional group, as the three actors, all of whom are deaf, are theater professionals who are paid for the work they do. The group performs a mixture of sign language theater, song-signing, and sign mime for a predominantly Deaf audience, although it hopes to do more general public work in the future.

Australia is a big country, yet there are only these three small companies, in addition to the professional company, to provide theater from a Deaf perspective. Part of the reason for this lack of Deaf theater groups is the general lack of awareness in hearing Australian society about deafness and Deaf people. When people hear the name "Theatre of the Deaf," they assume the performance will be in sign language, only for Deaf people, and not understandable to them. So they do not make an effort to come and see the performance.

Although our company has done a bit to change this view, we still have to fight the fact that Deaf people are still very much a silent and hidden minority in a larger society. It is only in the past few years that Deaf culture is emerging as a strong, valid, and important subdivision of the larger Australian culture. For example, the first Australian Sign Language (Auslan) dictionary just came out this past February (1989). For our company, this lack of awareness about deafness poses a special problem: Should we retain the name "Theatre of the Deaf"? Although we are very strong on Deaf pride, in the past couple of years we have begun to think that we need to find a new name for the company, and perhaps use "Theatre of the Deaf" only as a subtitle. A new name, linked to the style we are exploring, might bring more people to see the company's work. This, in turn, might help expand Deaf theater across Australia.

A second major problem restricting the expansion of Deaf theater is that of finding Deaf people interested in theater and acting, even as just a hobby. When I first arrived

in Australia, membership in the amateur companies was strong, and there were always people interested in working for the professional company. In the past few years, however, this interest has declined sharply. Most Deaf people in Australia today are more interested in sports. As I mentioned before, the amateur company in Melbourne closed down, as did an amateur company in NSW, owing to lack of interest.

Deaf people in Australia do not have the same exposure to theater as Deaf people in the United States, and for many the idea of actually getting paid for theater work is still incomprehensible. I have lost count of the number of times I have been asked what I do for a living and, after replying that I work with the Theatre of the Deaf, gotten the response, "Yes, I know, but what do you do for full-time work?" The situation is slowly improving, as we have more and more commercial plays interpreted into sign language and as the Theatre of the Deaf gains more and more recognition. But there is still the need to educate young Deaf people about theater as an entertainment medium and as a possible professional path.

To try to spread interest and skill, every year in January—our summer time—the Theatre of the Deaf has a two-week summer school that is open to Deaf and hearing people eighteen years of age and older. This past January it became more of a youth summer school, as most of the applicants were fourteen or fifteen years old.

Apart from performances and summer schools, we also hold regularly scheduled workshops in the schools, for other theater companies, and in community venues. These workshops primarily focus on encouraging people to communicate nonverbally, to use their faces, bodies, and hands more. For the company, these workshops are another good way to spread awareness about Deaf people and about our theater work.

Together with a Deaf man, I led a week-long drama workshop in a high school with Deaf students, attended by Deaf students from five other high schools as well. This workshop, held last December [1988], was the first time any sort of drama training had been made available to these Deaf children, and I am pleased to say it was a huge success. We hope it will be offered again this year and every year. A big dream of mine is for the company to establish some sort of Deaf drama outreach program, where we would do residencies in schools or other facilities to lead workshops and perform for Deaf children and adults. Through this sort of exposure and subtle education about theater, we hope, the number of Deaf people interested in theater will rise again.

Another plus for Deaf theater in Australia is that more and more commercial theater productions are being interpreted into Auslan. Interpreted theater began only in 1984, when *Children of a Lesser God* was interpreted into Auslan from ASL. Now both Sydney and Melbourne have at least five shows interpreted regularly each year. In Sydney these shows are a mixture of dramas, comedies, and musicals. In Melbourne, for some reason, they are all musicals!

These interpreted performances are a benefit to Deaf theater in two ways: Once again they bring an awareness to the general theater public about sign language, and often this leads people to discover the Theatre of the Deaf when they inquire about the interpreted performances; secondly, there is more opportunity for the Deaf community to see theater and enjoy it. Thus Deaf people are slowly becoming more interested in and appreciative of theater, and this fosters interest in seeing what the Theatre of the Deaf is doing. We hope this greater understanding of theater will lead to a resurgence of interest in bringing theater back to life.

Deaf theater in Australia, ten years old on a professional level and even older as an amateur venue, nevertheless remains young and experimental. We are finding there are no easy answers—we must educate our audience to enjoy a visual style, and we must explore and define what a visual style is for us as a company. In the past few years, a lot

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of exciting work has been happening, and more and more interest has been shown in the company. I recently discussed our company's explorations with a hearing director who said, "What your ideas and visions are about is not just the Theatre of the Deaf—in doing all of this and making it work, you are making a strong statement about good theater in general. For me, this exploration is thrilling; it is what theater is all about."