

# What Is a Deaf Performing Arts Experience?

DON BANGS

According to Patrick Graybill (1985), the 1970s ushered in a "Golden Age" of sign language performing arts. Over the past fifteen years, American critics of the performing arts have awarded their highest honors to theater, television, and film programs in sign language. In 1977, the National Theatre of the Deaf received a Special Tony Award. *Children of a Lesser God* won three 1980 Tony Awards: Best Non-Musical Play, Best Actor, and Best Actress. (The Best Actress award went to Phyllis Frelich, the first Deaf person to receive this award.) In 1986, *Love Is Never Silent*, a Hallmark Hall of Fame special developed by Deaf coexecutive producer Julianna Fjeld, received a national Emmy Award. (More than twenty regional Emmys have been awarded for sign language productions over the past fifteen years (Bangs, 1986).) Marlee Matlin became the first Deaf person to win an Academy Award, receiving a 1987 Oscar for her starring role in the film version of *Children of a Lesser God*. She was the third person to win such an award for a role using sign language.

The 1970s also introduced the "Age of Access" for disabled people, as they persuaded Congress to enact such landmark legislation as Section 504, which mandates that all programs receiving funding from the federal government must be accessible to disabled people. Deaf people have become much more assertive about their rights in recent years, thanks to the 1988 Deaf President Now movement at Gallaudet University.

The Golden Age and the Age of Access have created dilemmas for many theater, film, and television production companies. How can Deaf culture and sign language be incorporated into the theatrical event to meet the needs of Deaf spectators? And what about hearing spectators? How can the promise of performing arts in sign language theater be realized for people who are unfamiliar with Deaf culture? And, finally, can both audiences be satisfied with the same performance? To discuss these dilemmas, I will focus primarily on theater productions, although my points about theater can also be applied to television and film.

Many theater companies have attempted to meet the needs of Deaf patrons by providing sign language interpreters, usually at one side of the proscenium, during special performances. But is this really a theater experience for Deaf audiences? Can Deaf spectators who try to follow the signs of an interpreter in one location while viewing a theatrical production somewhere else really receive a theatrical experience comparable to that of their hearing counterparts?

Over the past 100 years, a number of special theaters in America have presented theater works in sign language supplemented by voice narration. These theaters have included the Gallaudet University Theater, the National Theatre of the Deaf, the National

Technical Institute for the Deaf, the Fairmount Theatre of the Deaf, Chalb Productions, and many other regional theater programs. Despite their efforts, these theaters have had to struggle to engage the Deaf audiences in the performance onstage.

When Deaf audiences do not respond well to a particular sign language theater production, it is tempting to excuse the situation by saying that the Deaf audience was not sophisticated enough to understand the performance. However, Greek tragedies were staged before audiences with little education, and Shakespeare wrote his plays for people with less than a third grade reading level. These works endure today as classics of the theater. Before we write off Deaf viewers as unsophisticated, we should take a closer look at what happens when a Deaf person views a sign language production.

Complicating our efforts to understand the experience of Deaf audience members is the fact that we may find a hearing viewer with a completely different perspective on sign language and deafness seated in the same theater. Unsophisticated hearing audience members may see sign language as mime, gesture, or some other nonverbal medium. They may be amazed that people with hearing losses can perform “in spite of their handicap.” In contrast, Deaf audience members may be very proud of their language and of their fellow Deaf people performing on stage. The reactions of Deaf and hearing spectators to sign language performances by Deaf actors will obviously be different.

### Defining the Theater Experience

After more than 100 years of theater activity involving Deaf people and sign language, there is still very little information about the audience’s perspective of the theater experience. In 1973, Dorothy Miles and Lou Fant wrote a monograph in which they describe two forms of theater. One, “sign language theater,” appeals primarily to Deaf audiences; the other, Deaf theater, to a mixture of hearing and Deaf theater patrons. In sign language theater:

[t]he production is based on the text of a play by a hearing author, translated into sign language. It is performed by two casts, a signing cast in prominent position and a less-noticeable voicing cast. The work does not deal with deafness or situations involving deaf characters.

In Deaf theater:

[t]he work is based on situations unique to Deaf people and is generally performed in a realistic or naturalistic style. Often, the performance is presented solely in sign language, without voice narration. The theme or motif of the work involves issues of concern to Deaf people or conflicts between Deaf and hearing people. (pp. 18–23)

With advances in theater productions, there have been several other forms of theater added to these two major categories. The first are cross-cultural plays, such as *Children of a Lesser God* and *The Signal Season of Dummy Hoy*. The second type are performances focusing on the creative nature of sign language, such as *Circus of Signs*, a work by the Fairmount Theater of the Deaf that uses a circus format to demonstrate the many artistic possibilities of sign language. The third group comprises hybrid works—hearing

plays adapted into works about Deaf culture—such as *The Touch* by Hughes Memorial Theater. There are also works in which one character signs and everyone else speaks, such as Peter Sellars' production of *Ajax*, featuring Deaf actor Howie Seago, and the Berkeley Repertory Theater's *Good Person of Szechuan*, with Freda Norman.

Miles and Fant, and several other sign language theater critics, have suggested that certain forms of theater work best with Deaf audiences:

[S]ign language productions have depended heavily on skits, songs mimicry and melodrama . . . broad farce or heavy suspense thrillers. . . . An audience which has been exposed mainly to unsophisticated material performed by untrained actors and relating almost exclusively to a "foreign" culture is unlikely to develop a taste for serious theater. (Miles and Fant, 1975, p. 26)

However, two plays that have been successful with Deaf audiences are *The Gin Game* (a Theatre in Sign production), in which two characters do nothing but chat and play cards, and *The Glass Menagerie* (a SignRise production), which is primarily a psychological play rather than one of physical action. So we must take a closer look at what happens when a Deaf or hearing person sits down in the theater to watch a play. There are many things to consider!

Bernard Beckerman (1970, p. 131) suggests, for example, that the experience of a theater-goer is influenced by both the on-stage event and the background circumstances of the audience. *The Diary of Anne Frank* tells the story of an ordinary Jewish family, but because we are aware that the Gestapo lie in wait outside the attic setting to drag the Frank family off to the gas chambers, we are touched and terrified by the experience.

The theater event and the backgrounds of the audience members can either harmonize or clash. For example, hearing theater patrons may see a National Theatre of the Deaf performance of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* and feel sympathy for the lonely and isolated Deaf protagonist, John Singer. They may believe that losing one's hearing is a tragic situation. A Deaf audience, in contrast, will respond to John Singer with exasperation, wondering why he doesn't move to a big city and develop his own social circle at the Deaf club instead of wasting his time visiting a Deaf mental patient with whom he has nothing in common, and trying to lipread the sorrowful tales of his hearing "friends," who don't even bother to learn how to communicate with him in sign language. Many Deaf theater works, especially those dealing with Deaf culture issues, produce different reactions in Deaf and hearing audiences because of the differing world views of these groups.

Another way that the audience and the performance connect is through the creation of an imaginary world within the minds of the audience members. In *The Theatrical Event*, David Cole states that the relationship between the actor and the audience is like that between a medicine man, or shaman, and his community. The shaman has the power to depart from the physical world, make contact with the spirit world, and bring this world back to the community. In the same way, the actor departs from a world of platforms, flats, and fake furniture to make contact with the imaginary world of the play and brings this imaginary world back to the audience. Cole suggests that the mystery, excitement, and tension felt by the shaman's community is much like that of the theater audience as they make contact with the imaginary world of the actors.

How is this related to sign language theater? To what imaginary world can a Deaf actor transport his audiences? If a script is based on Deaf culture and performed by Deaf actors before audiences of Deaf people, the actors, depending on their abilities, can

bring back an imaginary world that is familiar to the audience. However, if the imaginary world is based on hearing culture, or if the performer interacts with the imaginary world and the audience in ways conflicting with Deaf culture, then the task becomes more difficult, perhaps impossible. Hearing audiences present an even greater challenge, because the Deaf actor is not only from a different culture but uses a strange and unfamiliar medium of communication that is accessible to the audience only through the voicing actors. So, a sign language production has quite a challenge in arousing the imaginations of either Deaf or hearing audiences.

It also must arouse the audience's emotions. T. J. Scheff, in *Catharsis in Ritual, Healing and Drama*, has described how the emotional catharsis of the audience—their laughter and tears—comes from a release of emotions they have repressed in the past. But this emotional release cannot happen unless audience members identify with what is happening on stage. They must feel emotionally attached to the characters in a performance, and they must also have the appropriate emotional distance from the performance. If they are too close, the emotional response will be overwhelming, but if they are too distant the catharsis will not take place (1979). Obviously, in a sign language production, many things can interfere with this balance, such as bad acting, poor translation, unclear concepts, and other production flaws.

A theater director who wishes to involve the imaginations and emotions of Deaf and hearing audiences, despite their different backgrounds, faces quite a challenge. For hearing theater patrons, a theater production with strong Deaf cultural elements may be so different from their own experience that they "tune out." For Deaf audiences, on the other hand, a sign language production that is made more "hearing" may prevent the audience from becoming involved emotionally and imaginatively in the performance.

### A Study of Three Theaters

To understand better the relationship of Deaf and hearing audiences with the on-stage performance, I conducted a study of three theaters that have played a prominent role in the golden age of sign language theater: the National Theatre of the Deaf, founded in 1966, which has geared its productions primarily for hearing audiences; the Fairmount Theatre of the Deaf, founded in 1975, which has attempted to meet the needs of both Deaf and hearing audiences in the greater metropolitan Cleveland area; and the Department of Performing Arts at the National Technical Institute of the Deaf, founded in 1968, which has served primarily the needs of the Deaf student and local community populations of a major postsecondary education program in Rochester, New York.

My research involved a review of primary documents and videotapes, and interviews with leading Deaf artists from each theater: Linda Bove and Ed Waterstreet from NTD; Brian and Jackie Kilpatrick from the Fairmount Theatre of the Deaf; and Patrick Graybill from the NTID Department of Performing Arts.

I also analyzed how each theater dealt with four aspects of sign language theater that seem to influence the effectiveness of the audience-performance relationship: (1) themes used to develop original theater works, and the types or genres of hearing works adapted into sign language productions; (2) sign language styles displayed in performance; (3) elements of Deaf culture featured in various theater productions; and (4) use of the theater space and other production considerations.

## The Evolution of the Three Theaters

As pioneers in Deaf theater, the National Theatre of the Deaf, the Department of Performing Arts at NTID, and the Fairmount Theater of the Deaf had to do more than create outstanding productions; they also had to educate and sensitize their audiences. Their challenge was twofold: to expand and deepen perceptions of Deaf audiences about the nature of Deaf theater, and to expose hearing audiences to Deaf performing artists to show that sign language was a valid form of theatrical expression. In the beginning hearing audiences could not imagine such a possibility:

Question: —Theater of the Deaf? . . .

Answer: —No, no, Deaf, DEAF!

Silence. (Hays, 1969, p. 7.)

The founders of each of the three theater companies reflected the audience focus of that theater. The hearing founder of NTD, David Hays, tailored his productions primarily toward hearing audiences. The hearing and Deaf cofounders of the Fairmount Theatre of the Deaf, Charles St. Clair and Brian Kilpatrick, chose to focus on both Deaf and hearing audiences simultaneously. Deaf professor Robert Panara, who persuaded the students at the National Technical Institute of the Deaf to establish a drama club, had no doubt from the beginning that their audiences would be primarily deaf.

The success of these companies suggests that the founders combined a rare talent for the theater with an intimate knowledge of their audiences. Perhaps one requirement for an effective theater program is that the director be a member of the potential audience for that theater or, at least, be sensitive to and aware of the needs of that audience.

The premiere production of each theater company used the same format—a theatrical collage of adapted and improvised short works. The collage for NTD included Saroyan's light-hearted *The Man with his Heart in the Highlands*, the stylized Japanese tragedy *Tale of Kasane*, a collection of poems, *Tyger, Tyger!* and *Other Burnings*, and the Puccini opera *Gianni Schicchi*. The intent was to expose hearing and Deaf audiences to the art of sign language in a variety of theatrical forms.

Fairmount Theater of the Deaf's production of *My Eyes Are My Ears* presented vignettes from the lives of Deaf people to deepen understanding of Deaf issues for both hearing and Deaf audiences. The NTID Drama Club collage mixed short theater genres familiar to Deaf student audiences and introduced new forms, such as Haiku poetry.

As these theater companies continued to produce sign language theater works, each developed a unique theatrical style that reflected the needs of its particular audience. Performances by the National Theatre of the Deaf combined signed renditions with beautifully choreographed movement and on-stage voice narration, elevating sign language theater to an art form. The Fairmount Theater of the Deaf concerned itself more with issues faced by Deaf people in their relationship with hearing people. This was an effective strategy for engaging both Deaf and hearing audiences. While FTD also used performance techniques to display the beauty and power of sign language, as in the musical *Alice in Deafinity*, it usually combined realistic situations with rhetorical speeches to illustrate life as a Deaf person in a hearing world. The theater program at NTID, more concerned with Deaf audiences, tended to stage productions that featured traditional Deaf cultural works or that imitated hearing theater with a unique Deaf twist.

The efforts of the three theater groups to engage their target audiences met with varying levels of success. The National Theatre of the Deaf was able to convince skeptical

hearing audiences that Deaf people could perform professional quality work, transforming near-empty houses at the beginning of their first tour into sold-out, enthusiastic houses by the end of the tour and for all tours thereafter. The reactions of Deaf audiences were much more mixed and, according to Deaf reviewers, Deaf audiences preferred works that were simple and understandable rather than highly sophisticated and abstract. They also preferred humorous rather than serious works, and full-length rather than piecemeal works. These were preferences NTD found difficult to satisfy.

Performances by the Fairmount Theatre of the Deaf also were greeted with positive reactions from hearing audiences and critics, although patronizing attitudes were more prevalent because many of their original works featured Deaf people as victims. FTD performances were also well received among Deaf audiences, who were drawn in by the strong plot lines and engaging Deaf and hearing characters.

Performances of the NTID Drama Club were well attended and enthusiastically applauded by Deaf audiences, who identified strongly with the on-stage action and cultural motifs of the performances. Hearing patrons, most of whom had some familiarity with sign language and Deaf culture, were also engaged by their performances.

Once the three theaters had established themselves with their respective audiences, each began to experiment and expand its own concept of sign language theater. The area of experimentation was different for each theater: NTD created new works developed from original material or adapted from various sources; FTD experimented with a variety of nonmusical plays written for the hearing theater; and the Theatre program at NTID developed original and conventional works following the patterns of both NTD and FTD.

### Considerations of Theme and Genre

Because of differences in audience focus, the repertoires of the National Theatre of the Deaf, the theater program at NTID, and the Fairmount Theatre of the Deaf have varied. However, Deaf and hearing audience responses to the works of these three theaters have shown some strong similarities.

According to David Hays, NTD has tended to choose plays that "we can make our own," rather than simple translations of hearing plays into sign language. Their thirty-four theater works from 1967–1987 included eleven adaptations of myths, legends, and fairy tales. Two forms predominated: the "hero" tale and the spoof. They also produced seven works of poetry or lyric prose; seven works of a stylized nature, such as farce, opera, or Japanese theater; seven contemporary plays; and two original works about deafness.

At NTID the emphasis has been on exposing Deaf student audiences to a variety of theatrical genres, including Deaf cultural forms. Thus, early NTID Drama Club productions included a mix of skits, songs interpreted into sign language, poetry renditions, and one-act plays. The forty-three productions staged later by the Educational and Experimental Theatre and the Department of Performing Arts have included thirteen musical plays, ten contemporary works, nine works by Shakespeare and other classic dramatists, nine works with an epic structure or based on fairy tales or works of popular literature, and two original works about deafness.

Because of their deaf-hearing, cross-cultural focus and their mission to educate the hearing public about the world of Deaf people, the Fairmount Theatre of the Deaf has created many more original works. Twelve, or almost half of the total repertoire of twenty-seven works, have been original. Among these originals, five deal with Deaf

issues, and two demonstrate the artistry of sign language or mime. The remaining five are more conventional hearing plays that closely resemble the fifteen translated plays produced by FTD. Among the twenty original and translated works based on hearing culture, there are six farces or melodramas, five contemporary plays, four works based on epics or fairy tales, three musical or verse plays, and two theater classics.

The hearing patrons of NTD, NTID Theatre, and FTD have favored a narrow range of theatrical forms that includes renditions of musical plays; works of poetry or lyric prose; epic stories based on myth, legend, and folklore; reinterpretations and spoofs of fairy tales and popular literary forms; works with a high degree of stylization, such as farce and melodrama; and sign language versions of theater classics. It is not surprising that many of these theatrical genres can reduce the distance between hearing audiences unfamiliar with sign language and Deaf culture and the on-stage signed performances of Deaf actors. Poetry and music, for example, literally strike a chord with hearing spectators, making them more receptive to sign language imagery. Epics, myths, and fairy tales may be appropriate forms for the seemingly primitive and magical nature of signing, and the combination can entrance hearing audiences into an archetypal and child-like fantasy world. Similarly, the perceived "pictures in the air" can be effectively matched to stylized genres such as farce and melodrama. Finally, theater classics, and works of literature will be familiar to the audience but also fascinating when staged in a fresh and innovative form.

Unfortunately, this mix of the familiar and the fantastic does not always work with Deaf audiences. Musical plays, works of poetry, and lyric prose do not resonate well with Deaf spectators. Many Deaf people have an aversion to poetry caused by insufficient or culturally oppressive exposure to literature in schools for the deaf. Furthermore, because many of these sign language performances are artistic illustrations of English poetry and song rather than poetic renditions in their own right, Deaf audiences often find them difficult to follow. Epics, myths, and fairy tales, as well as farce and melodrama, can effectively engage Deaf audiences because of their emphasis on basic plots, physical action, and bold characterizations. However, the impact on Deaf audiences is different because, unlike their hearing counterparts, they perceive sign language as a uniquely visual medium of communication rather than magical pictures in the air. Finally, theater and literary classics may have a diminished effect on Deaf audiences because the works are less familiar to them. Most classics, however, are based on universal themes that resonate with all audiences regardless of their familiarity with the work. For example, two different sign language productions of *The Glass Menagerie* have been successful with both hearing audiences familiar with this classic and with Deaf people, who identify with the universal themes it presents.

One theater genre that has been effective in engaging Deaf audiences has been that of contemporary realism, especially as seen in well-translated plays performed by skilled actors. The realistic nuances of these performance seem more transparent to Deaf spectators and reflect their own day-to-day experiences. Even works such as *The Gin Game*, which has virtually no physical action, have earned standing ovations from Deaf spectators. By contrast, these same works have been less successful with hearing audiences because the realistic portrayal of a rather unfamiliar on-stage world creates for them a greater degree of distance from the performance.

Works based on the culture of Deaf people have also generated different responses from Deaf and hearing audiences, although the reactions have been positive for the most part. Several themes have predominated in these original works, most of which have been drawn from the personal lives of the Deaf performers: (1) the problem of communication between Deaf and hearing people; (2) the important role of schools for the

Deaf in teaching sign language and Deaf culture, and the oppressive attitudes toward Deaf people maintained in these same schools; (3) the need to treat Deaf people with dignity, and (4) the marvelous beauty and artistry of American Sign Language.

Obviously, the efforts of the Deaf minority to overcome the oppressive hearing majority and to create positive self-esteem is a struggle with which both Deaf and hearing audiences can identify, even if they do so from differing perspectives. At the same time, these works turn the tables on hearing audiences; now it is the hearing spectator who is unaware of cultural aspects of the play. This is one reason why Deaf audiences consistently give standing ovations for *My Third Eye*, while hearing audiences enjoy it more as an educational experience than an entertainment.

### The Sign Language Styles Displayed in Performance

To develop an effective translation, both the artistry of sign language and its communicative function must be considered. The former aspect carries more weight with hearing audiences, as they rely on the voiced narration while enjoying the visual imagery of artistic signs. By contrast, Deaf audiences are more concerned with the clarity of the sign language translation, because they cannot hear the voiced narration. These conflicting audience needs have challenged each theater to search for a sign language translation that works with both Deaf and hearing audiences.

NTD, with its hearing audience focus, has gone farthest in its development of the artistry of sign language. By modifying the handshape, location, movement, and orientation of signs, and by using special mimetic signs called classifiers, NTD performers have created a visually striking effect that engages hearing audiences—especially in the performance of poetry or lyric prose. At the same time, the NTD translations have attempted to keep signed and voiced narrations as close to each other in sequence as possible, so hearing audiences experience a coherent and highly saturated visual and auditory experience.

Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons, this artistic emphasis has not been effective with Deaf audiences. The grammatical structure of NTD's signed renditions is different from that of American Sign Language, and this poses comprehension problems for Deaf audiences. Also, the increased number of signs in NTD's special translations requires a faster pace of signing to keep up with the voice narration. Finally, the artistic signs themselves are sometimes confusing to Deaf audiences. Works that have been most effective, such as *On the Harmfulness of Tobacco* and *The Gin Game*, were developed with less emphasis on the artistry of sign language and more on its communicative function.

NTID, sensitive to the needs of its student audience, has been less inclined to exaggerate the artistic nature of sign language. It has also been blessed with two very skilled translators, Robert Panara and Patrick Graybill, who have wisely focused on the communicative aspects of translation. Through the work of Brian Kilpatrick and Andrew Diskant, and my own work, FTD has created a balanced form of theatrical sign language that is artistically pleasing for hearing audiences, yet comprehensible to Deaf theatergoers.

### Deaf Cultural Elements Within a Performance

As a reflection of their different audiences, the different theaters have varied in their Deaf cultural emphasis. NTD and FTD, which must consider hearing audience needs,

have muted this emphasis, while the NTID theatre, which caters to a Deaf student audience, has at times emphasized Deaf culture.

All three theaters, however, have followed certain rules based on Deaf cultural models. One of the more obvious rules is that actors must maintain eye contact when communicating with each other on stage. This cultural convention contrasts with the freedom of hearing actors to look anywhere while speaking to another character and can sometimes distance the hearing audience from the on-stage action. The energy communicated between Deaf actors, however, more than makes up for this problem. Interestingly, NTD breaks the "fourth wall" convention and allows signing actors to speak directly to the audience to reduce the psychological distance. Sometimes the eye-contact rule also may be broken. For example, at the trial of Mr. Zero in NTID's *The Adding Machine*, Zero addressed the audience with his back to the jury so that they could not see his signs; this was quite acceptable to NTID's audiences. In FTD's *Dracula*, as Jonathan wrote letters to his beloved, another actor signed his thoughts while standing behind him. This device was later used in NTD's *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*.

Another convention usually observed by the three companies is the avoidance of using Deaf actors to portray hearing characters or hearing actors to portray Deaf characters. For example, a cultural convention would be violated if a Deaf performer picked up a phone and signed the dialogue. NTD solved this problem in its production of *All the Way Home* by having the hearing character Rufus interpret a phone call to his Deaf parents. In both the FTD and the NTID versions of *The Odd Couple*, ringing doorbells and telephones were indicated by flashing lights, and phone conversations used special devices for the deaf. Any time a theater has deviated from this convention, there has been confusion for both Deaf and hearing audiences as, for example, in NTD's *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, in which Deaf actors portrayed both hearing and Deaf characters.

Despite the cultural questions that arose in the situations above, none of the theaters was willing to tamper with the basic script to clarify Deaf or hearing aspects of the characters and their situations. They chose instead to use unobtrusive staging techniques and sign language nuances to make the point that a character was either hearing or deaf.

Deaf culture sometimes affects the inner lives of some of the performers, even in plays without a Deaf cultural aspect. For example, when Patrick Graybill performed as the henpecked lecturer in *On the Harmfulness of Tobacco*, and as Weller Martin in *The Gin Game*, he based his characters on Deaf people from his past. Ed Waterstreet, on the other hand, has been less inclined to create a Deaf inner life if the role did not call for it; however, he interviewed several Deaf people to create the Deaf character of Abel in "Love is Never Silent."

All three theaters have strongly supported the efforts of Deaf professionals to portray Deaf character roles, and the many protests and letters to Hollywood have had a positive influence on employment opportunities for Deaf actors.

## Theater Space and Production Considerations

Theater productions in sign language have had to observe a few staging precautions unique to this medium. A primary requirement has been effective performance space. Because it is a touring theater, NTD has not had the luxury of performing in specially designed theaters. However, it has avoided arena and thrust stages and tailored its performances to proscenium theaters of varied sizes. NTID Theatre has been blessed with a medium-sized theater uniquely designed for Deaf patrons, with sharply raked audi-

ence seating, an extended apron, and various technological devices for Deaf performers and patrons. FTD has performed in two houses. One is a small, eight-seat theater with sharply raked seating and intimately placed performance space. The second is a larger theater with shallower rake but better sight lines and a raised stage. These spaces have proven quite accommodating for sign language performances.

Sets, props, and costumes have been designed both for their aesthetic effect and to facilitate the unique visual communication that takes place in this type of theater. Even though settings have varied, from the sparse designs of NTD's David Hays to the technologically complex arrangements at NTID, their design has also maintained a subdued effect so that signs may be read. Props have been simplified and kept to a minimum, especially at NTD, so they will not impede the signing. In designing costumes, care has also been taken to see that, at least for the upper body, the design does not distract from the signed renditions. In blocking the performers, communicative and aesthetic functions must be kept in balance by creating imaginative stage pictures without interfering with the comprehension of the sign language performances.

One of the most challenging aspects of staging is the integration of signing performers and voicing performers. Adopting a practice initiated by the National Theatre of the Deaf, all three theaters have incorporated the voicing actors into the performance, either by making them subsidiary characters—such as servants, window washers, catatonic patients in a mental hospital, or guests in a hotel lobby—or by creating stylized approaches, such as Bunraku narrators or neutrally dressed background performers. The theaters have taken precautions to ensure that the placement of the voice actors does not distract the audience, but Deaf theatergoers have not been particularly enthusiastic about the extra players on stage. By contrast, hearing audiences have enjoyed the integrated visual and auditory effects of these performances. At NTID and FTD, some productions have returned to the older idea of placing voice actors off-stage. Patrick Graybill has found this especially necessary in situations where an illusion of intimacy is required. He feels that audiences would not believe an intimate conversation between two people if it were voice narrated by, for example, a window-washer observing them from outside the window.

### **Conclusion: The Deaf Theater Experience**

At the outset, we noted that two different audiences, with contrasting word views, attend sign language theater productions. Many hearing patrons feel sympathy toward the Deaf characters, whom they hope will be able to overcome the suffering caused by the handicap of deafness. They also are impressed with sign language, which they view as a sort of picture language or mime. In contrast, Deaf audiences do not consider themselves handicapped, are not anxious to become hearing people, and are quite proud of their cultural heritage and of American Sign Language, which they view as a language like any other.

How, then, can sign language theaters develop works that will engage these two different audiences? Interestingly, some theaters for the Deaf in Europe, according to a recent article in *The Drama Review*, have solved the problem by eliminating voice narrators entirely and forcing hearing audiences to enter the world of Deaf people through the experience of silence (Cohen, 1989, pp. 68–78). Such an extreme solution does not seem feasible for sign language theaters in America, especially because financial and critical support often comes from hearing people. Perhaps what is needed, instead, is for a sign language theater to define its audience carefully and use a collaboration of Deaf

and hearing theater artists to develop productions to meet the needs of this particular audience.

There is one final word of caution about defining a theater's audience: As much as possible, we must make sure that theater performances can be enjoyed by Deaf audiences. They deserve access to the unique theatrical experience their culture and language have made possible.

## References

- Bangs, D. 1986. "Television and Motion Pictures and Deaf People." *Gallaudet Encyclopedia of Deaf People and Deafness*, ed. John V. Van Cleve. 2: 212-219. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Beckerman, Bernard. 1970. *Dynamics of Drama*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Cohen, Hilary. Spring, 1989. "Theatre by and for the Deaf." *The Drama Review*.
- Graybill, Patrick. May 23, 1985. "Keynote Speech at Deaf Awareness Month 'Celebration.'" University of California at Berkeley.
- Hays, David. January/February, 1969. "We've Come of Age." *Theatre Crafts*.
- Miles, Dorothy, and Louie J. Fant, Jr. ca. 1975. *Sign Language Theatre and Deaf Theatre: New Definitions and Directions*. Unpublished monograph.
- Scheff, T. J. 1979. *Catharsis in Healing, Ritual, and Drama*. Berkeley: University of California Press.