

THEATER, COMMUNITY

Community theater of deaf people in the United States may have its origin in the literary society that was until recent times a prevalent and important activity in residential schools and communities of deaf people. Established to encourage expressive and forceful use of sign language, the societies offered their members a means for public speaking or performance, the only opportunity for most of them. Presentations included poetry recitals, songs in sign, monologues, readings, storytelling, skits, charades, and pantomime, as well as debates and discussions. The Clerc Literary Association of Philadelphia dates back to 1865, while the Ballard Literary Society was founded at Gallaudet College in 1874, in honor of the college's first graduate, Melville Ballard. See GALLAUDET COLLEGE.

NINETEENTH CENTURY

In New York City during the 1890s, St. Ann's Church for the Deaf, a mission founded by the eldest son of Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, sponsored an active dramatics group. Regular entertainment was also offered in the city by the Protean Society and the New York Institute for the Deaf and dumb. Meanwhile, in Chicago the Pas-a-Pas Club offered "varied dramatic entertainments" and boasted a large, well-lighted stage, a drop curtain, and a full set of scenery. The All Souls Working Club of the Deaf in Philadelphia presented *The Merchant of Venice* in sign language in 1894. See GALLAUDET, THOMAS HOPKINS.

1900–1945

Like their hearing counterparts across rural America, deaf audiences had shown a preference for the vaudeville type of entertainment over the more intellectual classic plays. By the 1920s, vaudeville was regular entertainment at National Association of the Deaf conventions, at National Fraternal Society of the Deaf banquets, and at deaf clubs. A common practice was to call upon the best signers in each community to give lectures or to tell stories and jokes at public gatherings. See NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF THE DEAF; NATIONAL FRATERNAL SOCIETY OF THE DEAF.

As the twentieth century progressed, American theater became more diversified and sophisticated, increasing in verbalism and decreasing in visual expression, even in musical comedies. These changes did not appeal to deaf audiences, and theater fell further away from their scope of experience and interest.

In the mid-1930s, a deaf actor in silent films, Emerson Romero, saw his film career cut short when Hollywood switched to talkies. A multitalented individual, he established the New York Theatre Guild

of the Deaf and wrote, directed, and acted in playlets and skits with a minimum of dialogue and a maximum of acting and pantomime. In addition to performing with the group in and out of New York, he gave many one-man shows. See TELEVISION AND MOTION PICTURES: Silent Films.

Wolf Bragg, a member of the Romero group, started to direct his own productions, adapting short plays and stories for sign language presentation. Under the sponsorship of the New York Hebrew Association of the Deaf, his troupe performed in Newark, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Hartford, and Boston. It disbanded in 1948.

The Chicago Silent Dramatics Club came into being after local people were asked to put on skits for the reception and banquet entertainment during the National Association of the Deaf convention held in Chicago in 1937. Under the leadership of a talented young woman, Virginia Dries, the club boasted a membership of nearly a hundred.

A dramatics class was set up at Gallaudet College in 1940 by Frederick Hughes, who noticed a large number of postlingually deaf undergraduates on the campus. Skilled in both English and sign language, many of the students joined the Dramatics Club, allowing Hughes to carry out his concept of a sign language adaptation of the spoken theater. Over the years, the club gave a number of outstanding productions, and its members not only influenced their prelingually deaf contemporaries to attempt complete adaptations of classic plays but also carried Hughes's concept to schools for deaf students all over the country. Emil Ladner and Leo Jacobs promoted serious drama at the California School for the Deaf in Berkeley, Joseph Hines and Robert Panara at the Fanwood School in New York, Loy Golladay at the American School, Race Drake in Arkansas, Ralph White in Georgia and Texas, and James Orman and David Mudgett in Illinois. See AMERICAN SCHOOL FOR THE DEAF.

Frank Sullivan, Len Warshawsky, and Celia (Burg) Warshawsky joined the Chicago Silent Dramatics Club. Florian Caligiuri worked in Florida and Los Angeles while Eric Malzkuhn gravitated to San Francisco. The Philadelphia Theatre Guild of the Deaf was founded in 1947 by Michael Iannace, who possessed the gift for scenic design and spectacular stage effects. More than a few community theaters, however, failed to thrive when two camps, one of college graduates and the other of noncollege individuals, could not agree on the question of entertainment and production.

POSTWAR PERIOD

Increased mobility and improved communication, such as the revival of the publication *Silent Worker* following World War II, served to encourage cultural exchange between deaf communities. In 1950

the Chicago Silent Dramatics Club performed the play *Alibi Bill* in New York and Indianapolis. Chicago was visited in the same year by a group of Canadians, the Toronto Troupe, led by David Peikoff. A man of great vision and energies, Peikoff envisioned a home office for the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) and, as an endeavor to raise funds for this purpose, he instituted the idea of an "NAD Rally." The idea was an instant success and became an effective outlet for deaf dramatic talent across the country.

The advent of television encouraged rather than decreased theater activities among deaf persons. Its fare of variety shows and panel games proved to be a popular source of material for the NAD Rallies and local gatherings.

New York has always been the theater center of America, be it for the hearing or the deaf communities. The Metropolitan Theatre Guild of the Deaf was founded in 1957 by Richard Meyer and Joseph Hines to continue the tradition of short comedies and variety acts that had always been popular with deaf audiences. This mandate was passed on to the New York Deaf Theatre in 1979.

Founded in 1959, the Dramatics Guild of the District of Columbia Club of the Deaf proved immensely popular with area adults, and its 1962 production of *Lithuania*, directed by Betty Miller, won the Honorable Mention in a one-act play tournament sponsored by the D.C. Recreation Department. Miller's father, Ralph, received the Best Actor award. The Guild was eventually succeeded by the Frederick Hughes Memorial Theatre, which produced *Flower Drum Song* in 1961, the first full-length modern musical attempted by a deaf community theater. The Hughes Theatre also performed *Tales from a Clubroom* to standing ovations at the National Association of the Deaf Centennial Convention in Cincinnati in 1980.

Gilbert Eastman used G. B. Shaw's *Pygmalion* as an inspiration to write *Sign Me Alice*, which premiered at Gallaudet in April 1973. A month later, a new group called the Hartford Thespians presented Dorothy Miles's *A Play of Our Own*. The two productions were the first known examples of deaf theater or work created by deaf persons based on their own deaf experience. Except for the National Theatre of the Deaf's *My Third Eye* in 1971, the deaf community had witnessed only sign language theater, which is essentially "hearing theater" performed in sign language.

While its productions have not always been wholly embraced by the deaf community, the National Theatre of the Deaf has nevertheless shown that, given the right training and opportunity, a deaf person can enjoy the theater experience that has always been available to hearing audiences. Its Professional School, established in 1967, has trained

hundreds of deaf individuals in theatrical arts and offers a playwright program for the aspiring writer. With this acquired knowledge and affirmation, the students return home to help set up, or to become more involved in, community theaters. See NATIONAL THEATERS OF THE DEAF: United States.

A theater can exist only as long as the community supports it. Because of its relatively small number of members, a deaf community's demographic makeup is often drastically adjusted with the addition or loss of a few individuals. The loss of but one key individual may cause a community theater to close.

To keep track of all community theaters of deaf people in the United States is difficult. The theaters go as quickly as they come. It is not uncommon for an old theater to reorganize under a new name. Some are identified as theaters of the deaf, yet carry as many or even more hearing members than deaf members. Others specialize in sign-song presentations with music arranged by hearing members, of which many are interpreters for deaf people. Several theaters started with the purpose of arranging interpreted performances of hearing productions for the deaf people in the audience. Theaters have been sponsored by deaf clubs, colleges, community agencies, hearing theaters, and government grants. Most metropolitan areas can claim at one time or another to have had a community theater of deaf people. Groups that have been in existence for a number of years and have staged noteworthy productions include Callier Theatre of the Deaf (Dallas), Stage Hands (Atlanta), Deaf Drama Project (Seattle), Chicago Theatre of the Deaf, Spectrum (Austin), Boston Theatre of the Deaf (formerly Urban Arts Project in Deafness), Pittsburgh Theatre of the Deaf, and Theatre of Silence (Bozeman, Montana).

Bibliography

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Shanny Mow

THEATER, PROFESSIONAL

If job opportunities promising security and contentment have for centuries been limited for deaf individuals, the chances of breaking into the highly competitive field of entertainment have been almost nil. For anyone desiring to entertain outside the deaf community, pantomime was the only means for theatrical expression. Sign language carried a stigma. Frenchman Henri Gaillard, for example, failed in 1892 to secure official backing for a "theatre of deaf-mute pantomimists." Skeptics argued that deaf persons could not follow music,