

Deaf Audiences: Performing Arts in the Future

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How to Develop Deaf Audiences

Starting at a Young Age

The key to developing strong Deaf audiences is to encourage young people to appreciate the performing arts while they are in their Deaf schools. Most Deaf schools in America, at present, do not provide a performing arts curriculum for pre-school through high school (except for drama clubs which often do not offer enough training to develop skills and do not emphasize the study and understanding of plays). What I suggest is that a stronger drama curriculum be developed in Deaf schools for students in the early learning stages of life. The tendency is for parents to become involved in what their children are doing, therefore, drama in the schools would lead to a greater Deaf adult participation in the theater world.

What Is an Audience? (*Responses from participants*)

Webster's Dictionary defines an audience as a group of listeners or spectators gathered to hear and see something. What is something that an audience hears and sees? Give me a list of something, of any kind, where an audience is involved (football, movies, theater, opera, TV, etc.). What makes the audience really interested in these things? Why are they really interested? Where does the interest come from (school, family, friends, peers, etc.)?

For performing theater, there is a very low percentage of Deaf audience members who are interested in seeing a show. Why? Is it because they are just not interested in seeing a live show? Is it that they do not understand what the story is about? Is it because they do have their preferences of which type of a show to see? Or is it that they do not know there is a show being presented by a deaf theater in their area? Where are the Deaf audiences that we could encourage and inspire to see a performance of any kind? Are they really interested in seeing the performance? Do they only come to socialize with their deaf friends? Do they really understand sign language as well as the play itself? What is the difference in the understanding between sign language and the story? Do they catch what the message is from the play? Maybe, for a Deaf audience, the NTD or Deaf Theater performances may be the first time they see real literature. The level of understanding of what they have seen is comparable to the level of understanding they would get if they were to read the written text. The first time can be overwhelming, as it is unfamiliar

territory. Most Deaf audiences have never seen the work of a Deaf theater. Why? Is it because it is a new experience that they are quite afraid of trying?

How can we increase the awareness of the Deaf and Deaf culture and overcome communication and cross-cultural barriers? Most of us do not realize that Deaf awareness comes through the work of Deaf theaters. It is advantageous for the public to see the Deaf as intelligent, skilled, and talented individuals who are capable of communicating ideas so well that an audience is often moved to laughter and to tears.

What should be done to improve the recognition of Deaf theater? Will the big, attractive advertisements in the general and Deaf community newspapers work for the Deaf audience, or do they prefer to look at the sports section? Why? Would it be more beneficial if we sent a flyer or a newsletter directly to Deaf individuals to advertise the presence of the Deaf theater in their area? Or would word of mouth (hands) work best for Deaf communities? Are they not exposed enough to be inspired to see the Deaf performance? All these questions exist because deaf students were not offered a drama/arts curriculum in Deaf schools to begin with. In their Deaf culture, they are used to doing a lot of skits related to Deaf humor, Deaf jokes, and Deaf stories. Most of them have not experienced a performance done by professional Deaf actors.

Generally, in our Deaf theater world, there are three kinds of theater that relate to Deafness. Based on Julianna Fjeld's experience from the collection by the general Deaf theater communities, they are: Deaf theater, sign language theater, and performing arts theater. The link between Deaf theater and sign language theater is that both show aspects of Deaf culture, even though each is different. Deaf theater presents 100% of the Deaf experience. Sign language theater brings out some Deaf experiences through sign language, even though the plays are hearing-oriented. Performing arts theater is universal because of its unique creativity. For example, the National Theatre of the Deaf (NTD) falls in the performing arts bracket, but the art medium is sign language. The NTD high-jumps many traditional social misconceptions. People do not have to fit into pre-ordained roles. Women can be center-stage Shakespearean heroines. Deaf people can be musicians, actors, and dancers. Both Deaf and hearing audiences can understand and enjoy equally. "Children of a Lesser God" is Deaf theater, and it is also political theater; it portrays the Deaf experience. Deaf West Theater's "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" is a hearing-oriented play, but it was presented through Deaf theater because it was revised to meet Deaf people's needs on stage (e.g., telephone and door light signals and closed captioned decoders).

There is another kind of theater for deaf audiences—ASL-interpreted performances of hearing-oriented plays that bring Deaf theatregoers into the hearing world to understand the hearing culture. Also, there are Deaf actors performing in hearing-oriented plays. The play is not involved with the Deaf experience, but it is still interesting to see how the Deaf actors interpret the hearing-oriented plays through their Deaf cultural views.

Understanding the sign language presented in a play is always an issue for Deaf communities. Based on our experience as actors from general Deaf theater, we learned that Deaf audiences often understood the sign language, depending on how well it was translated from the script, but still did not understand the story itself. That made us wonder. What is the difference between the understanding of sign language and the story? Is the understanding of sign language on stage important to the Deaf audience, no matter whether or not they follow the story? Also, it depends on the type of story Deaf audiences prefer. Most of them prefer comedy or performances with a lot of action.

What if Deaf audiences had previous knowledge of the variety of theater available, for example, Shakespeare, Chekhov, Voltaire, Homer, Moliere, or Dylan Thomas. If they had learned this in school, would they enjoy and understand the story better? Last fall, when we did an NTD Outreach lecture and demonstration at a Deaf club, we demonstrated a Shakespearean piece from the production, "Ophelia," by signing it in English after we explained what the language meant. The audience did not understand what we signed. Then, we did the ASL translation of that piece. They understood it clearly, but a Deaf man told me that he was disappointed that we lost the flavor of Shakespeare in the ASL translation. Should we keep the style of the Shakespearean language?

In general, our success depends on our audience, because they are the ones who decide whether or not our show is good. The NTD company depends on both deaf and hearing audiences to survive in our business. That is why the NTD company continues in its 27th year. Over the years, deaf patrons have averaged about 5% of the audience. Is that because we do not perform only for deaf audiences? Can we depend on the continued support of all Deaf audiences to continue our show business? When we were in Los Angeles, we went to see the Deaf West Theater, which is Deaf theater that brings out the Deaf experience and Deaf culture. We learned that there was still a large percentage of hearing members in the audience. Most of the audiences that see Deaf theater, sign language theater, and performing arts theater are hearing. They come from a variety of backgrounds: sign language students, interpreters, and Deaf theatregoers, along with the curious.

How It All Began

The concept of a professional company of deaf performers was formed in the 1950s by Dr. Edna Simon Levine, a psychologist working in the area of deafness. Arthur Penn and Anne Bancroft, the director and leading actress of Broadway's "The Miracle Worker," were approached with the idea and, in turn, brought the idea to David Hays, a Broadway set and lighting designer. With Ms. Bancroft, Hays travelled to Gallaudet College, where they saw a student production of "Our Town." Hays was immediately struck by the beauty and power of sign language on stage. A pilot program with Penn and Bancroft was never fully realized, and later, when funding became available,

they were unable to be involved due to other commitments. David Hays persisted in his vision of bringing this powerful form of expression to theater audiences.

Many theater professionals, educators, and government officials were involved in the development of the original concept of the company. Besides Dr. Levine, Arthur Penn, and Anne Bancroft, there were Mary Switzer, Bernard Bragg, James Moss, Boyce Williams, George Detmold, Robert Panara, Douglas Burke, Mervin Garretson, Taras Denis, Gilbert Eastman, Mac Norwood, Frank Sullivan, Robert Anderson, Elia Kazan, Joe Layton, and Sir Tyrone Guthrie. The company, from the beginning, was seen by both the NTD and the government as a purely artistic theatrical entity. It was understood that the enormous social and educational goals would best be achieved as side effects of a successful professional effort.

In 1965, a grant from HEW provided planning funds. During the summer of 1967, with additional funds from the Office of Education, the NTD's Professional Theater School was begun. The company's first national tour was in the fall of 1967. The first home of the National Theatre of the Deaf was at The O'Neill Theater Center in Waterford, Conn. In the spring of 1983, the company moved to its own home in Chester, Conn.

Sign Language On Stage

An arm rises. Fingers spread out. The hand revolves. Gently the arm sways. Suddenly it leans to one side, every muscle tensing, as if some force is pushing it down. A breeze turns into a tempest. The tree bends. Will it break? We see struggle and fear and, as the tree hangs on, relief and triumph, all on the face of the storyteller. Shapes. Emotions. Tales. The stage is an empty space in front of the storyteller. It is also a forum for his thoughts and ideas, a canvas for his artistry. A pageant of kinetic imagery. Sculpture in the air.

A language that is seen rather than heard. The language of the Deaf in America for over 170 years, American Sign Language. It traces its roots to France from where Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet brought a deaf teacher to help start the first school for the Deaf in West Hartford, Conn., a short drive from Chester, the present home of the National Theatre of the Deaf.

While it incorporates elements of mime, sign language is anything but mime. Like any legitimate spoken language, it has its own grammar, syntax, and vocabulary. The movements of each sign are arbitrary; yet, as with English words, they may be modified. Change the hand shape of the aforementioned tree sign, its condition and species change: a single crooked index finger produces a barren tree. Let all fingers hang down limply and you have Ophelia's (weeping) willow which "grows aslant the brook..." Move the sign across the other forearm, you get a forest. As you sway, bend, or shake the sign, you add action; in effect, you are now signing both a noun and a verb at the same time.

And the ferocity of the tempest is demonstrated by how you bend the tree. A lot? A little? Repeatedly? The quality of an emotion is controlled by

the intensity of movement. A rapid and forceful *anger*. A hurried *love* sign betrays an insincere or lukewarm feeling; a hugging *love* with eyes closed denotes passion. It is a medium that begs for runaway creativity, a fact deaf practitioners have always known. But not until 26 years ago was there any successful effort to explore it as an art form on the professional level. It took Broadway set designer, David Hays, to transform this dream into a reality. The National Theatre of the Deaf was created as a place where gifted artists could share this extraordinary language with the world.

The NTD actors use scripts in English to translate their own lines into sign language. It is their never-ending artistic challenge, in rehearsals and during performances, to come up with not only correct signs and syntax, but also the execution that would do justice to the spirit of the playwright's language. A sign does not exist for every English word. Or it may not be appropriate for the demands of the stage.

Each new NTD production calls for new signs. In "Ophelia," a sign for the weeping brook is created by several actors using variations of the signs for *cry* and *stream* together. To sign *weeping brook* with the visual impact comparable to the verbal impact of Shakespeare's language, the layered meanings of the line need to be understood to animate the image. The brook weeping because it is the place where Ophelia drowns. The movement of the brook is like the flow of tears over rocks. Sadness is established by the sunk willow tree and the slow rhythm of the water. When the willow branch that Ophelia is on breaks, she tumbles down into the brook, with the water splashing up, like tears streaming down her face, and then flowing on.

Audiences will also see regular, everyday signs, such as *play* and *love* used throughout "Ophelia." Watch them carefully the first few times, and they will soon appear as natural as your neighborhood traffic cop's hand-signs. A watch the actors' faces. Facial expressions are an integral part of sign language grammar, and they also complete the precise meaning of the signs. On stage, all signs are done larger-than-life. Like the voice, signs must be theatrical and reach the back rows. For this reason, fingerspelling is kept to a minimum. It is used only when a character's name is introduced for the first time and is immediately accompanied and thereafter replaced by an identifying sign, called a name sign.

Signs use space, so they impel stage movement, giving the signer a sense of physical freedom not known to a speaking actor. He may find himself moving in the direction to which his arms, signing *go*, point. If you watch how the actors direct signs, you will know where to focus your eyes on stage.

Theatregoers will also find delight in the language's eccentricities. You will see words frozen in the air; multiple images given simultaneously by one or several actors; two actors creating a single sign: *Yes* and *No* at the same time (separate hands). Sign by sign = Poetry.

Yet the voice is never neglected; it is very much part of the NTD style. Words and signs are synchronized. The hearing actors in the cast are not interpreters but "voicing" actors, full members of the cast with their own line

The artistic style of this company is visual theater. All techniques are employed: acrobatics, dance, mime, and gymnastics. But foremost, the NTD is visual language theater. Still, one does not have to be familiar with sign language to enjoy an NTD performance. What you see will enhance what you hear and vice versa. Enjoy the National Theatre of the Deaf as a total experience of the senses.

Shanny Mow

(Over the years, Shanny Mow, has been associated with the NTD as actor, director of the Deaf Playwrights' Conference, and member of the faculty of the Professional Theater School. He was appointed artistic director of Fairmount Theater of the Deaf in 1990 and currently lives in Santa Fe, N.M.)

Having a drama curriculum added into the general school curriculum will not only develop acting skills, but will focus on the development of the entire individual: discipline, empathy, creative thought, leadership, self-esteem, and confidence. It will also develop knowledge about, and attitudes toward, attending theater. It will assist deaf students in creating productions and will familiarize them with sign language as an art form. Such a curriculum addition and the discipline involved will give focus to employment opportunities in the entertainment industry and develop skills necessary to produce professional-quality work in the students' own communities. Drama in the schools also provides a creative and educational force in Deaf communities across the country. I suggest that such a curriculum feature classes in the following subjects: creative dramatic techniques, theater-in-sign, visual arts workshops, sign language on stage, playwriting, ensemble work, acting, improvisation, directing, and technical theater.

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Deaf West Theater
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American Dance Theater
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New York Deaf Theater, Ltd.
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Alaska Center for the
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Riverside Deaf Players
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Gallaudet University Theatre
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