

Deaf Theatre Wins Resounding Approval

Audience gives a thumbs-up to evening of one-acts by 'nonhearing' playwrights

By **ROBERT DOMINGUEZ**
Daily News Staff Writer

TAKING THEIR FINAL BOWS before a full house at the Judith Anderson Theater, the actors onstage are beaming despite receiving only a smattering of applause.

But since most of the audience is enthusiastically wiggling its fingers in the air — the universal sign of appreciation from a deaf audience — the six-member cast of "The Hearing Test" is thrilled. Combined with the clapping of hands from the "hearing" crowd, it adds up to a thunderous ovation.

It's the same reaction the actors in

'Deaf kids need to know there are opportunities out there,' says the artistic director.



SIGNS OF SUCCESS: Actors Alan Barwiolek (left) and Jeff Bravin in a scene from Aaron B. Weir's "25 Cents."

JAMES BUNCOMBE

"25 Cents" will receive at the end of the evening. Both "The Hearing Test," by Willy Conley, and "25 Cents," by Aaron B. Weir, are original works by deaf playwrights, with deaf and hearing actors filling the roles. The unique double-bill, produced by the New York Deaf Theatre, wraps up its run with performances today through Sunday.

Besides the obvious goal of providing theatrical productions to deaf and hard-of-hearing audiences — and giving deaf actors, writers and stage technicians a rare showcase for their talents — the NYDT is also looking to "enlighten and educate hearing audiences about our culture," says "25 Cents" actor and director Alan R. Barwiolek through an American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter.

The not-for-profit company does that by simultaneously performing in both ASL and spoken English, with onstage actors serving as the "voices" of deaf actors who perform in sign language. The part of the troubled Rafael in "The Hearing Test," for instance, is represented by three people: a 13-year-old deaf boy as Rafael, an actor theatrically signing the character's inner monologues, and yet another actor who does the speaking.

While it's a complicated staging technique, NYDT artistic director Jackie Roth sees it as a challenging alternative to simply having an ASL interpreter sitting off to the side of the stage.

"Deaf people derive information from the visual. And since theater is a visual medium, it's a nice method,"

says Roth, who directed "The Hearing Test."

Now in its 14th year, NYDT was formed by a group of deaf actors who were "fed up with going to plays about deaf people produced by hearing theater companies," says Barwiolek, one of the founders.

In addition to original plays, NYDT stages revivals, conducts workshops and sponsors New York performances by deaf companies from around the country. "Our mission is to give a deaf perspective to our work at the same time we're bringing our culture to audiences," adds Roth, signing as she speaks.

Besides the typical tribulations of most theater groups — a perennial shortage of funds and lack of a permanent theater space — Roth says

NYDT's biggest problem has been reaching out to potential young writers.

"We need to find these people and get information out to them. Deaf kids need to know there are opportunities out there. If we can get them to start writing younger, we can nurture them along so they can compete on equal ground with other artists," she says. "And hopefully, a production by one of our writers will some day go to Broadway."

Where the "finger wiggle" applause would no doubt be deafening.

"The Hearing Test" and "25 Cents" is at the Judith Anderson Theater, 412 W. 42d St. Today through Saturday at 8 p.m., Sunday at 2 p.m. Tickets are \$8 today and tomorrow, \$12 Friday through Sunday. Call the NYDT at (212) 924-9491. TTY: (212) 924-9435.