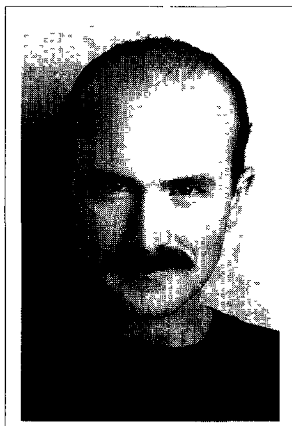
from Lip-Reading Ants to

With a global sense of movement and a natural ability to fill space, deaf artists strive to become more visible

By Willy Conley

I hated theatre when I was growing up. One of my earliest memories is seeing an outdoor production of *The Lost Colony* in North Carolina. I was deaf (still am) and couldn't hear the dialogue. To make matters worse, my parents and I were seated so many rows back in the amphitheatre that the actors were practically the size of ants on stage. Try lip-reading an ant. I vaguely recall a lot of little figures in colorful historical costumes standing around in front of a stockaded background with some cannons going off. The booming cannons and smoke held my attention. We left in the middle of the show, not because I couldn't understand a damn thing on stage but because some lady sitting behind us threw up on my mother's back.



Willy Conley

Years later in college at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) in Rochester, N.Y., I finally understood my first play—a sign language production of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* with all deaf actors. I was struck by the poignancy of life in an insane asylum, with the subtext of how the deaf were once thought of as being dumb or crazy. The passionate expressions of deaf actors using American Sign Language (ASL) moved me. As I attended more and more sign language plays, my appreciation grew for my deaf culture and the theatre. I fell in love with the theatre, and have been in love ever since.

Upon graduation, I worked in various places around the country during the 1980s and '90s, hardly finding any sign language plays or deaf actors wherever I went. If I was lucky I could catch a deaf theatre company on tour or a community production in sign language once or twice a year. Usually I would have to drive over a hundred miles or fly somewhere. If nothing was happening, I went to see hearing plays, which were everywhere. Very few were sign-interpreted; most turned out to be static, with talking heads against pretty backdrops. I kept thinking how theatrical deaf actors were, naturally filling the stage space with ASL along with their inherent physical and emotional qualities—and how invisible they were as a culture and as theatre artists. What would it take for them to be more visible and invincible in American theatre?

As a deaf theatre artist who now works in both professional and university theatre, I believe that the potential for growth, recognition and employment is vast for deaf theatre and its artists. Watching African-American, Hispanic-American and Asian-American theatre artists come of age in the entertainment industry, I sense that our time will come, too. However, that will not happen unless deaf theatre artists regroup and make a concerted, driven effort to achieve a standard of excellence that equals or goes beyond the level of professional hearing theatre.

Considerable progress has been made toward that standard, beginning with the mother of all deaf theatres, the Tony-winning National Theatre of the Deaf, a touring company established in Connecticut in 1967. There are other full-time professional and semi-professional theatre companies: the Fairmount Theatre of the Deaf (now called Cleveland Signstage Theatre), the first resident deaf company in the country, Sunshine Too National Touring Company, an educational outreach troupe of NTID; and the award-winning Deaf West Theatre, a regional company in Los Angeles that is the youngest and fastest-growing sibling.

Before we look at what standard of excellence needs to be established or what efforts need to be made to create more visibility, we should examine our natural resources. One is deaf children, who express the experience of their world through gestures, mimicry and movement based on innate rhythms, drawings and paintings. In their essay "International Visual Theatre Research Community," Jean Grémion and Maurice McClelland noticed that "deaf children can do more precise imitations of people they meet briefly than most trained mimes. It is in fact through this kind of imitation that they 'describe' who a person is to each other."

Grémion and McClelland also observed that deaf people's intense reliance on visual perception is a "moment-to-moment reality." Because subtle facial expressions and body

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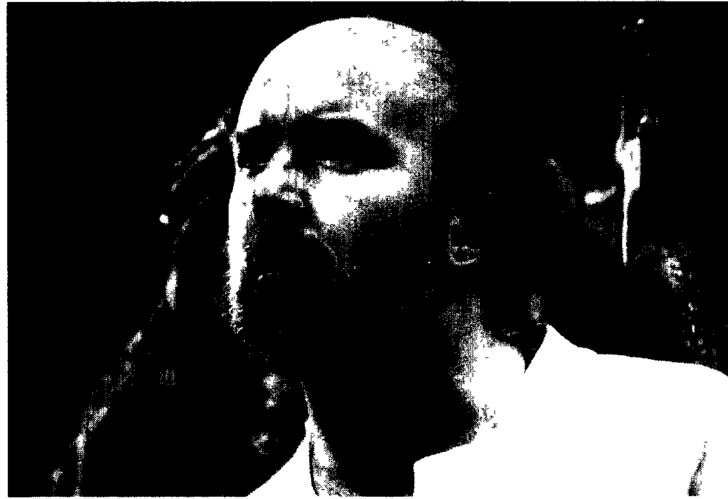
Flying Over Cuckoo Nests



Willy Conley in ***Pullman Car Hiawatha and Other Short Plays by Thornton Wilder*** **at Baltimore's Center Stage, directed by Tim Vasen**

movements are the foundations of sign language, the deaf often have a heightened ability to "read" human relationships, particularly in watching what hearing people's faces and bodies reveal during social encounters.

The deaf also have an increased sense of spatial awareness, the writers observed. Therefore, it almost goes without saying that a deaf actor naturally creates a visual theatre environment with the use of the entire body as means of communication, especially when communicating in ASL. Imagine the theatre space around a deaf actor being filled by arm, hand, body and face movements. Imagine further exploring this space by exaggerating and heightening ASL the way hearing playwrights would do with the English language; then add stage business or movement in conjunction with ASL. Already, a large amount of that empty stage space gets utilized or covered by movement.

I teach at Gallaudet University, the world's only four-year liberal arts college for the deaf. Large numbers of our students have good physical, gestural and movement skills and the potential to capitalize on them. Many have a natural command of their facial expressions, their bodies and their language—ASL. Most are quite creative in this respect. But when encouraged to consider a theatre career or take more theatre courses beyond the customary Introduction to Theatre, most will decline. They say that either Vocational Rehabilitation or their parents will not support such a decision. The parents or VR counselors must assume that there's no market for deaf theatre artists: If theatre is extremely competitive for hearing people, then the competition has to quadruple for deaf people. Some of our graduates will go on to find nine-to-five jobs, performing skits or one-person shows at deaf community events during their spare time. Others will just let their natural theatre skills fall by the wayside.

RICHARD ANDERSON

As sad as it is to see all this wasted talent, it is even more discouraging in light of the amazing number of hearing actors who are weak in the use of their faces and bodies, but have nevertheless carved out a substantial career in the theatre. What they get by on is standing in costume looking interesting and having that almost holy ability to speak the English language to those who adore hearing it, never mind how limited or awkward the movements on stage.

David Hays, the hearing founder of the National Theatre of the Deaf, remarked: "To me, there is something inexpressive, stilted and almost boring about the hearing actor opening and closing a little hole in the lower middle of his face. Wonderful, meaningful noise emerges, but if only he could do that with his arms, his knees, his shoulders, his fingers—and have his full face not just 'in support' but as something read. And with signing, every part of the body works to inflect color, to tilt the word toward full emotional meaning."

It is strange that most professional theatres shy away from the visual potential of incorporating ASL and deaf actors on the stage. Is it because of the predominantly hearing audience? Fear of the unknown, of people who are different? In her book *Theatre Games for the Classroom*, Viola Spolin has an audience-involvement exercise called "Deaf Audience." Its focus is physically "communicating a scene to a deaf audience." It might be good for the hearing audience as well. The idea is not to dumb down the material, of course, but to find creative ways to make it visually accessible to all audiences regardless of language backgrounds. And in the process, why not employ some deaf actors who can do this well? Spolin's "Deaf Audience" ought to be called "Playing to a Global Audience." There must be something inherently intriguing about watching a performance without spoken language.

In a *U.S. News & World Report* article, the director Peter Sellars made an apt remark: "There is an extra

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dimension in the work of deaf actors, who are aware of the miracle of getting an idea across." He would know. Sellars is one of those rare and daring directors who is not afraid to work with deaf theatre artists. Not only did he cast a deaf actor, Howie Seago, in *Ajax* and *The Persians* during the 1980s, he also collaborated with deaf playwright Shanny Mow in a 1981 NTD production of *The Ghost of Chastity Past, or The Incident at Sashimi Junction* Regarding this collaboration, Mow, who is of Chinese descent, commented that since Sellars grew up in Japan, he was the perfect collaborator for this play, with its Kabuki-Western motif.

Another bold director, Robert Wilson, has also worked with deaf actors. In 1988 at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, he cast Seago in *The Forest* (based on *The Epic of Gilgamesh*) in the role of Enkido, the story's hero. In one of Wilson's early theatre works, *The King of Spain*, he cast a young, deaf, African-American actor named Raymond Andrews, who later became the director's inspiration for the much-acclaimed *Deafman Glance*. About Andrews, Wilson remarked that people "thought the child was a freak or an idiot, [but] he's developed another sense of seeing-hearing that's very amazing." Wilson is particularly interested in developing theatre pieces with individuals who have been restricted in their use of verbal language and have "compensated for this by developing awarenesses and sensitivities to nonverbal channels of communication that go unnoticed by people who use verbal language regularly."

Mark Medoff is another venturesome hearing theatre artist who has collaborated with deaf actors. After he wrote the landmark play *Children of a Lesser God*, inspired by the life story of deaf actress Phyllis Frelich, Medoff created for her the substantial role of Marieta, a deaf playwright in *The Hands of Its Enemy*. Recently, Frelich and Medoff have collaborated on Medoff's new plays *Gila* and *A Christmas Carousel*, which include yet more characters for Frelich to perform.

Michael Kahn, artistic director of the Shakespeare Theatre in Washington, D.C., has cast several deaf actors in his productions over the past decade, including Warren Snipes in the role of Puck in a Shakespeare-in-the-Park production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; Mary Vreeland as Katrin in *Mother Courage and Her Children* (for which she won a Helen Hayes Award in 1992), and, most recently, for his September '99 production of *King Lear*, Monique Holt as Cordelia, along with another deaf actor, Stella Antonio-Conley, as her understudy.

Nick Olcott, a freelance theatre artist mostly associated with Round House Theatre in Maryland, directed a daring and ground-breaking deaf/hearing production of *The Miracle Worker* at Arena Stage in Washington, D.C., early last year. He dared to put signing deaf actors in a theatre in the round. (Imagine solving sight-line problems to ensure that an audience has an unobstructed view of actors using ASL!) Olcott broke ground, literally and figuratively, by digging out "foxholes" at the four corners of the stage and putting a signing actor in each one as a kind of witness to all that was spoken on stage. The most authentic aspect of the production was casting deaf actor Shira Grabelsky in the role of Helen Keller.

From left, Mike Lamitola, Shanny Mow and Charles Homet in National Theatre of the Deaf's 1985–1986 *Farewell, My Lovely!*

It is wonderful that these well-known artists, knowingly or not, contribute to upgrading the status of deaf theatre artists It is, however, worth noting that not one deaf director or playwright has yet been allowed the opportunity to make such contributions in commercial theatre.

Certainly a rich vein of deaf theatre and its artists is being quietly and hesitantly chipped into, but no one is rushing in to dig out the mother lode It's disheartening to see deaf theatre artists sometimes employed for one-time, pet projects of hearing theatre artists. A nagging thought persists regarding the use of deaf actors for one-shot deals: Are deaf actors being exploited for mere spectacle? Those mentioned above should be lauded for their ongoing commitment to employ deaf theatre artists.

For deaf theatre artists to take advantage of their potential, they must address these and other issues and explore possibilities for improvement. Critical and more appropriate standards of evaluation must be applied to their work, particularly when virtually no evaluators or reviewers have any background in sign language or deaf culture.

DAVID HAYS

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From left, Samarra Mbenga, Shira Grabelsky, Fred Grandy and Kelly C McAndrew in Arena Stage's recent production of *The Miracle Worker*, directed by Nick Olcott.

Sometimes deaf playwrights wonder what hearing theatres and solicitors of play scripts think when they receive a script that calls for deaf characters. Are they thinking, "Well, not a bad script, but we have no deaf actors or directors in our theatre who can workshop this. None of the actors on file or in our company know signs." How many scripts by deaf playwrights have been turned down with this reasoning? Shouldn't these decision-makers be up on the Non-Traditional Casting Project in New York City, which has huge on-line files on artists of color and those who are differently abled? And what about Ken Elks's Deaf Entertainment Guild in Beverly Hills? He has a website listing deaf and hard-of-hearing theatre artists. Word needs to get out about these avenues of access and availability.

How can theatre critics in the media accurately review a sign language production if they don't know ASL? Many try to hide their ignorance with timeworn clichés like, "The sign language was absolutely beautiful—silent poetry in the air." For all they know, a deaf actor may have flubbed lines, or could be merely moving his or her hands around in a manual gibberish to make it look like something significant was being signed. I know—as an actor I've done this, and have seen others do it, too.

While deaf theatre artists are thus denied access to knowledgeable and professional adjudication, they face a subtler barrier to evaluation when they become intoxicated by the applause of their peers. When a sign language show does come to town, deaf people drink it all in with little complaint about quality or flavor. But now seems to be the time for deaf theatre and its artists to rise above the level of mediocrity and stop being too pleased with what they've been doing.

First, we should look at where we've been. Deaf theatre artists seldom get the opportunity to be exposed to works outside their own small circle. This isn't entirely their fault, of course, because as an audience member it is difficult to watch hearing plays—most are completely inaccessible. Hearing theatre artists get to see lots of theatre *any time, anywhere. They don't even have* to read a script before seeing a play!

Certainly some hearing theatre performances are visually rich or nonverbal enough to be worth the time and ticket price for a deaf audience. In these cases, however, the problem lies with the deaf community having no way of knowing when and where such shows exist. Many of the deaf have been "burned" from attending highly verbal and visually static performances time and again, and have simply stopped following production notices. To address this problem, I propose that theatre marketing departments latch onto a theatre savvy deaf community liaison, and use this person to tap into the deaf network. Theatres can give the liaison a complimentary ticket or entry to a rehearsal for upcoming shows, which that person can then review for the deaf community.

Sign interpretation of spoken plays has been the most widely known technique for making performances accessible to the deaf in the U.S.—yet contrary to popular belief, simply providing sign language interpreting does not create equal access for deaf audiences. Interpreters are usually placed off to the side of the stage, where they sit or stand immobile in a small spotlight and translate the spoken text to the deaf audience during performances created chiefly for the hearing audience—that is to say, with a focus on speech rather than movement. For deaf audiences, watching a sign-interpreted show is much like reading a script—with their eyes darting back and forth between the interpreter and the actors. The rich language of the playwright gets watered down and the subtleties in acting, directing and design become lost.

It must be said in favor of sign-interpreted theatre that it works very well when a play is light in verbosity, has strong visual elements, and the interpreters are in good position in correlation to the stage and the deaf audience—and when they are well-coached by a sign master, a deaf consultant knowledgeable in theatre and sign translation.

An important, positive side effect of sign-interpreted performances is that it gives the hearing audience exposure to ASL, which spills over to create some appreciation of the deaf and their culture. The downside is that the interpreters sometimes get all of the credit for creating this beautiful "language in the air," because they are the ones in that little spotlight off to the side of the stage.

Instead of expecting theatre to provide interpreted shows, it would be great to use this money instead for rehearsal *interpreters, in order to put deaf actors on the stage.* This would guarantee a steady subscription from a deaf audience, rather than the sporadic attendance we have now. Oftentimes I've been begged to come to a performance because no deaf people were expected to show up for a scheduled interpreted show.

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O Pioneers!

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non-traditional casting movement in encouraging American theatre producers and directors to think outside the box. In addition, the two women know that a new generation of disabled playwrights is waiting for them—writers like John Belluso, a fast-rising newcomer who has stated that in his plays "disability is not just a medical condition that needs to be imitated on stage. This is an experience which has a history, which has distinct social character." Belluso, who holds an MFA in playwriting from NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, is often pressured by directors and casting people to use "a really great nondisabled actor that they say can tap into some universal element of what it means to be disabled." But he feels compelled to use disabled actors to play disabled characters. "I try to explain that disability is an experience that goes deeper than perhaps they understand," he says.

Diana Jordan and Ann Stocking will graduate this spring. They leave behind a legacy that will be hard to match. Howard Burman evaluates Diana Jordan's three-year tenure by saying, "No question that she has made a contribution to our theatre program here. She's greatly admired and respected. To some students she is a great role model and mentor—and not just to those with disabilities. If I had the opportunity to take her again, I would do it in a heartbeat. I can't say that about everybody!"

Reflecting on his journey with Ann Stocking, Mel Shapiro says, "When I look at it three years later, it was a great learning experience for me. It was a very funny, glorious experience." After a thoughtful pause he adds, "We're afraid to deal with things like disabled people, we're afraid to talk about death, we're afraid to talk about the serious things in our lives. The whole thing was very important to me and to the school." **AT**

Victoria Ann Lewis is the founder and co-director of the Other Voices program at the Mark Taper Forum.

From Lip-Reading Ants to Flying Over Cuckoo Nests

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It's humiliating, not to mention a sheer waste of time and money for interpreters and sign masters who've already translated and rehearsed the script. Shanny Mow told me once that ADA should not be about trying to give the deaf access to hearing theatre—it should be the other way around: giving the hearing access to *us* Change their attitude, not ours—we're fine.

An obviously important aspect of a deaf theatre artist's growth is education and training Theatre conservatories and university programs have to be more open to the idea of allowing enrollment of deaf theatre students. How else would these aspiring theatre artists improve their craft other than going out on their own and learning on the job?

An example of failure to level the playing field between deaf and hearing theatre artists happened in 1989 when I applied for the MFA playwriting program at the Yale School of Drama David Hays, the former Broadway lighting and set designer, and Dennis Scott, the late chair of Yale's graduate directing program (who had traveled to New York City to see a play of mine Off-Off Broadway), wrote glowing letters of recommendation to go with my application. I was invited for an interview with Milan Stitt, the playwriting chair. For political reasons, I decided not to bring an interpreter along—it might make me look too dependent and needy. Despite some illegal, personal questions (such as "How did you become deaf?"), Stitt and I seemed to really hit it off. A few weeks later I received a personal letter from Stitt, the principal tenet of which was the unfortunate comment that "we do not feel you have quite found your 'voice.'"

Thanks to Hays's guidance, within a year I was accepted into Derek Walcott's graduate playwriting program at Boston University. Walcott shared his phenomenal sense of poetry, playwriting and humor with me in class and over occasional dinners. Toward the completion of my degree, he produced a one-act play of mine at his Boston Playwrights Theatre. I left the program with a Master of Arts degree, feeling proud and respected.

It's easy to imagine the struggles that other aspiring deaf theatre artists face when they want to enroll in a theatre degree program. For those interested, the following universities have been known to accept deaf students into their drama programs: American University, Arizona State University, Boston University, California State University at Northridge, Catholic University, Connecticut College, New York University, SUNY Purchase, Towson University, University of Maryland, University of Texas at Austin and Wesleyan University (Connecticut), as well, of course, as Gallaudet University.

Maybe it's time to pull out the affirmative action card—if it's done in the regular workplace, it ought to be done in the arts place. *The Gallaudet Encyclopedia of Deaf People and Deafness* contains this unfortunate fact: "No play with a deaf theme written by a deaf playwright has been produced by commercial theatre." That was published in 1987 and is still true today.

If there's a single area that needs a blow from the hammer of affirmative action to keep the competition fair and square, it is casting For any deaf role that needs to be filled in theatre, film or television, cast a deaf actor, not a hearing one. Hollywood has a horrendous reputation for casting hearing actors in deaf roles. The theatre is guilty of the same thing. David Hays put it succinctly "Casting performers who can hear in deaf roles is like putting a white actor in black-face to play Othello." Phyllis Frelich gave an impassioned presentation at the 1984 American Theatre Association convention about hearing actors still being cast to play deaf roles in various off-shoot productions of *Children of a Lesser God*, despite the playwright's insistence that "in *any* professional production of this play, the roles of Sarah, Orin and Lydia [all deaf] be performed by deaf or hearing-impaired actors." So why do hearing directors still cast hearing actors for deaf roles?

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Roles for deaf actors do not get publicized like those for the hearing in issues of *Daily Variety*, *Drama-logue* or *Backstage*, so deaf actors are not likely to regularly read the trades. Besides, casting agents generally don't want to bother with deaf theatre artists—it's the old saw, "They're not marketable."

My own experience suggests that the only way to break into the mainstream of professional theatre, gain artistic and management experience and raise standards for deaf theatre is through collaboration. There is a growing trend of deaf theatre artists being invited to become associate artists at regional theatres, but this comes after these artists were aggressive and aware enough to find ways to put their foot in the proverbial backstage door. My invitation to become an associate artist at Center Stage in Baltimore stemmed from a connection with Denise Gantt, a fellow MFA theatre student at Towson University. In a dramaturgy class Gantt and I were taking, she announced one day that Center Stage, where she worked as director of Theatre for a New Generation, was interested in reading new plays for a possible staged reading of graduate writings. I gave her my latest play, which ended up being selected. Irene Lewis, the artistic director, saw the staged reading and was impressed enough to invite me to join the ranks of Center Stage's associate artists. This was a turning point that led to my receiving, with Center Stage, a grant from the National Theatre Artist Residency Program, funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts and administered by TCG, providing the financial support to develop new plays in exchange for helping the theatre conceptualize new ways of including deaf theatre artists into their future productions.

Professional theatres should take the initiative to seek out long-term collaborations with deaf theatre artists. New artistic territories could be explored, particularly in visual and movement theatre. This would inevitably expand not only a theatre's subscription lists but also its artistic range.

To avoid ghettoization, even extinction, we should turn to our natural resources and devote more attention to nurturing the artistic growth of our deaf youth and students. We should do all we can to encourage high-profile hearing theatre artists to employ professional deaf theatre artists. If the media wants to review the work of deaf theatre artists, invite along a native informant, such as a theatre-savvy deaf community liaison. The same should go for adjudicators or script readers. Most states have a deaf association, a deaf school or a program with strong connections to the deaf community. As more people see the potential for visual theatre and the capabilities of professional deaf theatre artists, then the minds in control of various theatre training institutions will also open up.

Eventually a more sophisticated deaf and hearing audience will develop, which, in turn, will produce a stronger demand for quality signed or visual performances. Deaf theatre artists will need to assume more responsibility by aggressively seeking opportunities at their local professional theatres. These theatres should support deaf artists, knowing that it's beneficial for all in the long run. The Internet can help because it is without communication barriers.

If all of this could be made to happen, deaf theatre and its artists would surely emerge from their invisible state into one that is invincible. **AT**

This article is adapted by permission from an essay recently published in Deaf World: A Historical Reader and Primary Sourcebook *(NYU Press).*

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