

Foreword

Aaron Kelstone

AS HUMANS, WE HAVE a need for a good story, and most everyone has at least one good story to tell. Yet, relatively few of us make the effort to be published. Even fewer become playwrights. After all, it is difficult enough to be published in this day and age without choosing an apparently esoteric art form. Yet, it seems to me that a playwright does more than just write plays. What is it about a play that compels us to leave our warm, comfortable houses, often in the evening hours after a long day of work? Why are we willing to spend our time and transportation resources sitting in a large dark room for two hours to see imaginary life happen on stage? In most cases, we go see a play once and are done with it. But there are certain plays that we are willing to watch over and over until we know them by heart. How is it that some playwrights are able to persuade an audience to return?

Some suggest the answer lies in the reputation or prolific output of certain playwrights. Others suggest it is based on how often a specific play is produced by different theaters. Still others propose that successful plays contain great dialogue, are entertaining, contain universal themes, have something to teach, or simply touch on the collective experience and memory of an audience. Time after time, the play evokes something that enables us as human beings to cope, endure, appreciate, and get on with life.

Maybe all of these responses define what produces successful playwrights within each generation, but perhaps they do not effectively explain how some playwrights cross over successive generations. Think of Shakespeare, O'Neill, or any other well-known playwright and I would suggest that they found a way to cross the divide we unconsciously build within ourselves and our society. We have built this divide to keep us safe from our most painful and difficult experiences. It is like a castle surrounded by a moat,

yet these playwrights have the ability to breach that moat, throw down the gate, and expose us to our collective experiences. These experiences are often tightly intertwined with a constant tension between what was, what is, and what will eventually come to be in our lives.

Creating life on stage that challenges an audience requires playwrights to have the courage to grasp our raw nerve. Holding on for dear life, they reveal the tension that exists within those poignant moments surrounding our first mistake, our first bad choice, our first lost love, our first realization that life has an ending. These enduring playwrights yank us back from the yearning to look homeward and reveal to us, in living color, our flaws and errors; then, from that chaos and pain, they enable us to change, to let go, and to step toward the unknown that we fear daily in our busy lives. How does this kind of playwright emerge within a culture? Is it any different for deaf playwrights? We may find part of the answer in Tennessee Williams' reflections on writing *Battle of Angels*.

I took to theatre with the impetus of compulsion. Writing since I was a child, I had begun to feel a frustrating lack of vitality in words alone. I wanted a plastic medium. I conceived things visually, in sound and color and movement. The writing of prose was just their description, not their essential being; or so I felt it to be. I was impatient of sentences. . . . However with a play, a play on a stage—let any fool come to it! It is there, it is really and truly there—whether the audience understands it or not! This may be a childish distinction: however, I felt it that way. . . . It seemed to me that all good writing is not just writing but is something organic. (275–76).¹

What Williams describes about “conceiving things visually” fits aptly the aspiration of deaf playwrights. In 1910, George Veditz asserted that deaf people are “people of the eye;”² to deaf playwrights,

1. Tennessee Williams, “The History of a Play (With Parentheses),” in *Tennessee Williams Plays 1936–1955*, vol. 1, ed. Mel Gussow and Kenneth Holdich (New York: Library of America, 2000), 275–286.

2. George Veditz, “Preservation of the Sign Language,” in *Proceedings of the Ninth Convention of the National Association of the Deaf and the Third World's Congress of the Deaf, 1910, Ninth Convention of the National Association of the Deaf and the Third World's Congress of the Deaf* (Philadelphia: Philocophus Press, 1912), 30.

the stage is a natural extension of that visual world. It connects to a long history of storytelling supported by literary societies that can be traced back to the early part of the nineteenth century and the residential schools for the deaf. These literary societies, whose precise origin and development need to be more thoroughly researched, provided a place where deaf performers could hone their performance skills and develop translation skills by transforming English-based texts into sign language. As deaf students enrolled at Gallaudet College, they brought with them the best of their local performance materials and shared them with other students in the Ballard Literary Society. These stories were further strengthened from this cross-pollination [exposure.] Over time the most popular materials were transported back to local deaf communities, creating a body of traditional performance work.

One positive aspect of these literary societies, and the drama clubs that followed, was the development of a skilled group of deaf performers who would be ready and prepared to adapt traditional theater into two formats. Nancy Tadie has done extensive research on the early years of the Gallaudet College drama clubs, and she found that the productions followed a Deaf theater format. They were private affairs, performed without vocal support, and they were accessible only to those fluent in sign language. The drama clubs survived in this format for nearly eighty years; after 1930 voicing sporadically occurred in some of the productions. Faculty members supported these voiced performances not for accessibility purposes but for the amusement of the hearing members of the college community who occasionally enjoyed viewing performances in both sign and voice. After 1940, faculty members became more involved with the drama clubs, and their participation diminished the influence of these clubs. The faculty replaced the clubs with formal, traditional theater that increasingly relied on a sign language theater approach using voice and sign simultaneously.³ Carol Padden has suggested that:

3. Nancy Tadie, "A History of Drama at Gallaudet College: 1864 to 1969," (PhD diss., New York University, 1979).

The transition in how voice came to be used in theater, first to “read” the lines, then to “interpret” and now, as “dual performance,” where sign language and spoken language are presented simultaneously on the same stage, mirrors the transition from private to public forms of expression. But the change was not without consequence; as Deaf actors blended voice with sign language, then style of performing changed. Finding themselves no longer on stage alone, but working with speaking actors, Deaf actors changed how they performed, and they changed their choice of material to perform. (101–102).⁴

Consequently Deaf people and their use of theater moved from a private space to a public space. Deaf theater became accessible to audiences not fluent in sign language and increasingly only interested in the art form of signing rather than the message sign language conveyed in the productions. This concept of sign language serving as an artistic element instead of a communication tool would be more fully developed after the establishment of the National Theatre of the Deaf in 1967. This first American professional Deaf theater company founded by David Hays, who served as its first artistic director, made voice an integral part of sign language performances and increasingly emphasized the artistic aspects of sign language onstage. Much of the current performance work achieved by Deaf artists in the theater today follows this format.

It was this evolution toward traditional theater that encouraged some Deaf writers to begin writing plays. They could see that their stories had the potential to effectively bypass heavy reliance on written and spoken dialogue and effectively enable them to return their work to a traditional face-to-face format anchored in the visual vernacular of sign language, gesture, and body language. In essence, they found a literary form that allowed them to use the stage to reveal their cultural experiences of being Deaf.

The process of writing may seem individualistic for a Deaf playwright, but it truly belongs to a strong collective experience rooted

4. Carol Padden and Tom Humphries, “Technology of Voice,” in *Inside Deaf Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 100–122.

in Deaf culture. Yet, Deaf playwrights have and continue to face a unique challenge—the inability to be recognized for their work because it requires overcoming a strong cultural myth; that is, there are not many Deaf playwrights. One of the early assumptions was that the English language was the primary barrier that prevented Deaf writers from becoming effective playwrights. What more likely served as a barrier was the transition of Deaf theater to sign language theater. As this change occurred, it supported the traditional working structure of sign language theater: hearing actors worked directly with the English script and deaf actors did the heavy lifting of translating these English texts into sign language.

Hearing actors often did not have a high degree of fluency in sign language, which blocked any opportunity for a deaf playwright to work with a Deaf sign language theater. It also blocked strong sign language translation choices because the Deaf actors had to adapt to the needs of the spoken word on stage. This emphasis on spoken English arose from the realization that box office revenue depended heavily on hearing patrons. Thus, the very medium that looked promising to the deaf writer became inaccessible. But even with the possibility of being recognized and produced becoming remote, Deaf writers did not stop creating scripts. Based on my conversations with various deaf artists and playwrights, we have a situation where many of these scripts are locked away in filing cabinets, attics, and basements across America waiting for their eventual discovery.

The fact that these plays currently are inaccessible to both Deaf and hearing audiences reinforces a general belief that plays about the Deaf experience are rare enough to be counted on just one hand. The truth of the matter is there are nearly forty known American Deaf playwrights who have created over one hundred plays. This concept may be shocking, and, as such, is carefully being understated. Research in this burgeoning area is ongoing, and when more thoroughly completed, it may reveal more playwrights than we have ever suspected.

While the evidence seems to point to a large body of work, sadly these pieces by Deaf playwrights have yielded few well-known

plays within the Deaf community. To exacerbate the problem, Deaf playwrights have historically been unable to reach an immediate audience. Instead their work awaits some form of salvation from an unknown audience existing in some future point in time. Imagine this purgatory where Deaf playwrights struggle to convert ASL into English text with the hope that directors and actors at some distant point in the future will successfully find the key to transform the English text back into the combination of visual vernacular and fluid ASL that she or he intended. Is it any wonder that many of these works are currently out of sight and out of mind?

Despite the current inaccessibility to these plays, researchers have begun to locate and analyze some of these plays. From what has been found thus far I can note that many of these lesser known plays are based on adaptations of English literature, popular film, and television programs. Others hinge on narratives anchored in personal experiences or life histories preserved through generations of face-to-face interaction between storyteller and audience. The tone of a good number of these plays is angry. The plays are often reflective and even reactionary in describing the experiences of Deaf people throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These plays report, react, preach, or establish a historic reference. Yet, not many of these plays cross over the proverbial moat to joust with the raw nerve of our collective experience. Few of these plays have shaken us or challenged our thinking to make us look inward. Only a few Deaf playwrights have pushed us, their audience, toward understanding ourselves, our culture, and our Deaf experience.

This anthology introduces us to the work of Willy Conley, who is becoming one of our most important Deaf playwrights. I have had the privilege of reading and seeing performances of many of his early works. Much of it showed great promise, yet stopped short of crashing down the barricades surrounding our collective memory. This does not imply that his writing lacked sufficient courage to startle us awake. Rather all writers need time and per-

sistence, along with talent, for their vision to come to the surface. Fortunately for all of us, the fruits of Conley's continued growth are present in this anthology, reflecting the growing maturity and importance of his work.

What, you may ask, is found in this work that allows a reader to effectively access the Deaf experience? Part of the answer lies in the fact that Conley's plays do not come from a reactive mindset, nor do they come from anger, resentment, or blame. Rather they emerge from a serious effort to use an intimate level of introspection that calls us to attend to the very things we wish to put aside. His work incorporates parts of the Deaf experience that appeal to the deaf members of the audience while integrating universal themes with which all audience members can identify. He relies a great deal on a wry sense of humor, which is an essential ingredient for a culture that has struggled to survive intact in American society over the past 130 years.

For example, Conley anchors the play *Broken Spokes*, around four sign-mime pieces. Each actor creates and recreates these sign mimes, providing a rich visual vernacular element to the storyline. These strong visual pieces are entertaining and effectively propel us into the inner lives of the characters. They lead us toward a painful comprehension of the costs of being unable to let go of a past tied to events that exact a huge emotional toll. This sense of being mired in the past is something that can be readily understood by both hearing and deaf members of an audience without the need to become didactic. At the same time, all members of the audience can be exposed to a potentially dying traditional art form. Sign mime relies on a unique feature of American Sign Language—the use of classifiers.⁵ These signs push storytelling to an elevated visual plane of reference, and the successful use of imagery provides powerful moments within the play.

In *Falling on Hearing Eyes*, Conley uses humor to turn the accepted worldview upside down. Instead of the old idiom “falling

5. Classifiers are handshapes that convey specific meaning about the size, shape, location, and movement of an object.

on deaf ears," we have a world in which hearing people have failed to comprehend the Deaf experience, hence the title of the play. Setting the play in a museum supposedly established to educate the hearing audience to this experience, Conley engineers a clever use of humor to expose a long list of oppressive experiences normally relegated to angrier stage portrayals. Here humor is used effectively because it resonates from a style that has a long history in literature, used most effectively by writers such as Mark Twain and Jonathan Swift. Using humor in this way allows the play to sharply focus on important issues without losing the audience to their ingrained defensiveness.

One final example of Conley's ability to appeal to deaf and hearing audiences can be found in *Vignettes of the Deaf Character*. Its episodic format is used to interject quick "believe it or not" factoids about deaf history that then tie into short scenes that are interspersed throughout the play. Conley employs silent moments onstage to force the eye to follow the units of action without dialogue and to introduce audiences to the life experiences of deaf people, especially their isolation and intense connection to the eye. Mixing text, sign language, silence, and words across a succession of episodes jars the audience into realizing how much multi-tasking occurs in the process of communication. It also highlights the amount of work required of those who have lived the Deaf experience.

This anthology arrives at an important junction in the history of American Deaf theater. The strong influence of sign language theater, epitomized by the National Theatre of the Deaf since 1967, has diminished the key visual elements integral to Deaf theater. The right to communication access has been a huge benefit to Deaf people but not for American Deaf theater because it diverted the focus away from the eye. This has caused a generation of Deaf people to lose interest in the face-to-face tradition of Deaf performances. The arrival of the Internet, broadband access, video phones, and Web sites such as YouTube has captured the interest of this generation and has provided them with an improvisational

space, access to an immediate audience, and the ability to make ASL the primary focus.

While this shift to electronic avenues of communication has occurred, another movement toward performance that is not language based and focuses instead on the physical work by actors has emerged. Much of this work can be traced back to the pioneering acting techniques of Bertolt Brecht, Peter Brooks, and Jerzy Grotowski. Their focus on the actor and the physical aspects of a performance has a natural appeal for Deaf artists and is best exemplified by Questfest, a biennial visual theater festival sponsored by Tim McCarty's company Quest: Arts for Everyone, in Lanham, Maryland.

Conley has begun to explore this new area of performing arts in one of his recent and exciting plays, *Goya: En la Quinta del Sordo (In the House of the Deaf Man)*, cowritten with Iosif Schneiderman. The play has no spoken or signed dialogue; instead all the dialogue is conveyed in gestures! In *Goya* the eye commands center stage. Communication accessibility and the focus on voice no longer dominate. In their place is a play totally reliant on the eye. This approach supports a process that no longer distinguishes who is in the audience; instead it recaptures the audience as an essential member of the performance experience, in the combined spirit of Brecht, Brooks, Grotowski, and the traditional Deaf performance style.

The transitory spirit of *Goya* and the other imaginative works found in this anthology point to a potentially new direction that may begin to pull Deaf audiences back to the traditional face-to-face experiences that theater has to offer. It gives Deaf theater an opportunity for regeneration and renewed discovery that may potentially excite both hearing and deaf audiences. With these thoughts in mind, we can explore how Willy Conley's work provides us with a high degree of promise for leading the way toward the rediscovery of this tradition.

Aaron Kelstone is Visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of Cultural and Creative Studies at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf in Rochester, New York.