For 40 years, the National Technical Institute for the Deaf has literally set the stage for thousands of students to participate in theater arts. Dance productions, original plays, poetry, musicals and Shakespeare are all performed in front of appreciative and entertained audiences. The words on stage are spoken in sign language at the same time another actor – often in the background – voices what is being signed, so hearing audience members as well as those knowing sign language can follow along.

Performing arts at NTID provide extraordinary experiences for students and audiences.

This production of Arthur Miller’s ‘The Crucible’ was staged in February 2006.
“NTID is one of a handful of places in the entire world that produce this form of theater,” says Jim Orr, the theater's community relations and production manager and an integral member of NTID's Theater Department since 1984. “I think we're one of the best kept secrets around, but we do want everyone to know about us.”

NTID offers students a comprehensive choice of theater courses, design, history, dance and movement. A shop behind the Robert F. Panara Theatre is where you’ll find students busy cutting, sawing, nailing and painting wood as they earn college credits while building sets for the productions.

“On an annual basis, we serve an average of more than 500 NTID students who take a class or are involved in a show either on stage or backstage,” Orr says. “These are credit-bearing classes.”

Some of the students take the courses to complete a certificate program. Others take them as electives, and some students transfer their credits to the School of Film and Animation in RIT’s College of Imaging Arts and Sciences.

The theater is open to the entire RIT family – whether deaf or hearing – as well as the greater Rochester community and interns from colleges across the country. But there is a strong following for the shows at NTID among deaf audience members because sign language is used.

“We level a lot of playing fields,” Orr says. “Having a show where they plunk an interpreter on the side of the stage or a show where they have a little captioning box makes it accessible, but it’s not direct accessibility. It’s not a deaf person’s language or experience. Doing what we do, with signing actors, expert translation with simultaneous voicing by other actors in the background is a huge door opener. To me, theater is a deep-seated universal experience. The first people on earth were communicating through storytelling. To have this as a human experience, this deep connection, we can open up that door for our deaf students. It’s a tremendous experience.”

Most stage productions rely on backstage crew members to communicate through headsets. At NTID, cueing systems are done on video. The crew on each side of the stage, in the production booth and the stage manager – who is responsible to give cues for lights, sound, set and costume changes and actor entrances – can all be deaf and communicate with each other.

The theater also allows deaf audiences to share experiences from popular culture, such as jokes about current events.

“This way, everyone is on par with modern culture,” Orr says. “But beyond that, it’s the whole sense of, ‘I can do this. Not only can I do this, I can excel at this.‘ Many of our students have always wanted to be an actor or dancer but have never had either the encouragement or the confidence to give it a shot. Once they’re here and find out they can do something beautifully and people applaud, that’s an enormous impact for their self-esteem.”

The Early Years

NTID Theater's origins go back to 1967, a year before the first NTID students set foot on campus. That is when NTID Founding Director D. Robert Frisina asked for funding to build the Lyndon Baines Johnson Building for NTID, including plans for a full theater as opposed to an auditorium. Frisina wanted the theater designed to bring deaf and hearing people together with productions intended to enhance literature classes while providing self-confidence to students.

The first person Frisina hired for NTID's faculty was Robert F. Panara, an educator who had helped start the National Theatre of the Deaf. At NTID, Panara established the NTID English Department and organized the NTID Drama Club. NTID's Performing Arts program began as an extracurricular activity, but evolved into an academic program of merit, according to From Dream to Reality, a history of NTID written by NTID Professor Harry Lang.

Panara, who turns 90 in July, recalls about 200 students participating in the earliest years of NTID Theater. It began after a nationally known deaf actor, Bernard Bragg, paid a visit to campus.

“The opportunity to ‘break a leg’ happened in the fall of 1969 when we invited my old friend, Bernard Bragg, of the National Theatre of the Deaf to do a presentation for our students,” Panara says. “Naturally I grabbed the chance to also have Bragg lead a workshop on dramatics and on the side, do an interview with me in RIT’s newly established TV studio. The workshop proved so popular that we decided to have some students take part in Bragg’s performance the next evening in Ingle Auditorium. Bragg used up the first half to show his artistry in mime and dramatic monologues and our students went on stage the second half to rise and shine with improvised skits and pantomimes.”

The popularity of those shows led to a discussion about forming a drama club the next quarter.

“That was realized one windy, freezing night in January 1969, when we trudged through the snow to meet in Webb Auditorium,” Panara says. “After three hours of debate, a vote was held to establish the NTID Drama Club. Membership was open to all, the dues being $5 per year.” The Drama Club, called the Masquers, is still a popular activity today.

Students Guy Wonder, Charles Baird, Fred Gravatt and Kevin Nolan were among the Drama Club’s first officers. To help commemorate the 40th anniversary of NTID Theater, Nolan ‘71 (business administration) returned to campus last fall with a supporting role in Equus.

“I’m thrilled to be coming back for the play,” Nolan said. “It’s special to me because it’s the 40th anniversary. It’s nice to be back one more time. And I’m so happy to see that NTID Theater is going well and it has a strong program. It makes me feel good.”
Immediate Ovations

Within months of its creation, half of the NTID students had joined the Drama Club, Panara says. The club continued to present a complete show each quarter in the school year.

“This activity not only provided students with opportunities to express themselves and be creative, but also to develop confidence, self-pride and a better understanding and appreciation of literary works including plays, stories and poems,” Panara says.

Then called the Experimental Educational Theater, the NTID theater program was one of the first programs to use television to tape auditions and productions.

In the fall of 1974, the LBJ Building opened, along with its new theater, later named to honor Panara.

“The ‘home of our own’ became official when the curtains opened to show the first scene of Shakespeare’s The Taming of the Shrew and the beginning of a new era of big stage productions,” Panara says.

Bonnie Meath-Lang, NTID’s artistic director, says those early days were groundbreaking in deaf theater. And NTID Performing Arts became a hub of deaf literature and poetry.

“Basically it was a place where a new art form was being introduced to the greater community,” she says. “It was before a lot of the research on American Sign Language was published. People were becoming aware of the creative possibilities for both ASL and visual theater.”

Patrick Graybill, who has acted professionally, taught for several years at NTID and still translates some productions. He says watching his students gain confidence and blossom into leaders is what foremost comes to mind when he thinks of NTID Theater.

Graybill says there is a common misconception about theater classes: that students spend the time playing around instead of working. “In fact, theater is an excellent discipline to train students to improve their command of English and American Sign Language, to learn to set up their daily schedule of responsibilities, to become leaders and to learn how to do research work. Many of our graduates eventually became not only actors or directors, but leaders in their area of expertise. They are role models for our future deaf and hard-of-hearing children.”

Since the Robert F. Panara Theatre opened, the 466-seat venue remains the focal point for NTID theater programs. More than 200 performances have been produced there. Notable deaf performers including Bernard Bragg, Howie Seago, Phyllis Frelich, Linda Bove, Camille Jeter and Michael Thomas have graced the Panara stage.

But the productions weren’t limited to the Panara Theatre. In past years, students performed off Broadway in New York City. A touring theatrical group called Sunshine Too! – with deaf and hearing students – took the NTID Theater on the road for 20 years as they performed at schools throughout the U.S. and other countries. Dancers from NTID have also performed at out-of-town festivals and the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.

Beth Ann Bull Crouch was a member of Sunshine Too! for two years. She first got the acting bug when she came to NTID in 1985 and joined the theater. Soon after, she was cast in a national McDonald’s commercial featuring only sign language.

“My main reason to join the theater was to gain experiences and to improve my ASL,” she says. “… And to have fun! After one production, I wanted to do more.”

Her tours with Sunshine Too! created lasting memories. “I remember how much the students and even adults always had big smiles on their faces while watching us perform,” she says.

Selling the Shows

Years ago, it was common to sell out Panara Theatre. Decades ago, entertainment options such as captioned movies – either at home or at a theater – weren’t as common for deaf audiences. Live performances in sign language were a unique entertainment option.

“The deaf community is somewhat different today,” Orr says. “Now with the Internet and videogames and captioned movies and access to so many more popular culture avenues, deaf people have a lot more choices.”

Deciding what shows to produce each year is a thought-out process. Students and audiences are surveyed and directors spend a lot of time reading scripts they’d like to produce. The educational goals, number of people in the cast, gender breakdown, nontraditional castings and the cost to produce the play are all factored. And the shows must offer a balance. You can’t always have shows that are heavy dramas, silly comedies or that appeal to children.

“We want to have a variety,” Orr says.
Our students a wide variety of experience. "Orr says. "We want to give and different years on campus. Act with other students from different majors, experience gives students the opportunity to interact with people from the community and out of state. There are more and more hearing people who enjoy this form of theater." Six productions are now scheduled each year. Course work, not only in performing arts, but in other classes at NTID/RIT, is often connected to specific productions.

While the Panara Theatre seats 466 people, a classroom lab, Room 1510 in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Building, is where other plays are offered, with up to 75 audience members.

"The lab is a more intimate, black box theater where productions are held by students who have directed their own shows or are written by the students," Orr said. Those shows are almost always sold out.

There are students from every major at RIT involved in NTID Theater. The experience gives students the opportunity to interact with other students from different majors, and different years on campus.

"Everything we do is about the education of our students," Orr says. "We want to give our students a wide variety of experience and exposure. Sometimes theater is done on a large scale, sometimes it is done on a small scale. But the quality is always on a high level. Because we are one of the only theaters in the world doing this type of thing, the quality of our productions is much higher than many college programs that have majors in theater. I think we blow people away. We're on a level similar to regional theaters. We have a real commitment to quality. The abilities that our students have, the commitment our students make to us and the craft are an unexpected gift. If you've grown up your entire life communicating visually – and theater is all about visual communication – the people who come and are involved in the theater have a commitment that is very professional. These are people who are very serious about what they want to do."

Nearly 100 NTID students have gone on to work professionally in theater or film after graduation.

"One of the things I'm most proud of – even though we have no theater major, when you look at people who are deaf who have worked professionally, the overwhelming majority are our students," Orr says.

Theater experiences touch everyone differently.

"I love the possibilities of igniting the creative spark in students, to help them find a 'family' here at RIT," says Luane Haggerty Davis, an instructor in NTID's Theater Department. "Our students have a natural hunger to do theater, poetry and storytelling. Once we engage them, great things happen. I truly believe we have some of the most talented students in the world right here and that our productions rival any other college theater department."

She says she's seen positive changes that a theater experience can have on parents, as well.

"I was standing beside a parent backstage during a production of West Side Story. She turned to me and said, 'You know, when my daughter was little I had a hard time really believing that she could succeed in life, really grow up to be independent. I went ahead and acted as though I believed it but it wasn't until right now, watching her interact with everyone backstage, not needing any help, seeing her be so confident and mature. Right now is the first moment I truly believed."

Greg Livadas

For more information and upcoming shows, visit www.rit.edu/ntid/theatre

---

**NTID performing arts by the Numbers**

- **500+:** The number of students who participate in NTID Theater each year. This includes classes, workshops, tours and productions.
- **95:** Performing Arts students and interns who have gone on to work in professional theater and film, including Broadway, national touring companies, the National Theatre of the Deaf, Garth Fagan Dance, and Deaf West Theatre. Students have also appeared in television commercials and productions.
- **80:** The percentage of NTID Performing Arts students who are deaf or hard of hearing. Theater classes are open to hearing students who also participate as voice actors and stage crew. Many students learn sign language and forge friendships through NTID Theater.
- **1976:** The year Andrew Lloyd Weber and Tim Rice's popular musical Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat was performed on the NTID stage. It was the American premiere of the musical.
- **200+:** Plays and performances produced by NTID Performing Arts in its 40-year history. Several have won awards, such as the 2002 Off-Off-Broadway Review Award for Excellence for The Emperor Jones.
- **25:** Theater classes offered in acting, stagecraft, sign/mime, dance, theater history and translation.
- **4,000-7,500:** Annual audience members at NTID productions in the past 10 years, not counting touring productions.
- **9:** Number of students who received Performing Arts Scholarships for creativity last year.