Performing arts

Deaf theater is an expression of Deaf culture and finds a natural audience in the members of the DEAF-WORLD. However, Deaf theater may be the best opportunity that hearing people have of glimpsing the richness of visual life that is the gift of the Deaf experience. Chapter 4 presented some research evidence that speakers of signed languages are particularly adroit at processing visual arrays, recognizing faces, and integrating rapidly presented visual information. We hypothesize that Deaf theater engages those capacities at the same time as it engages the viewer’s understanding of the signed message. Thus a dramatic story line proceeds simultaneously with choreography and mime, the artistic use of language, and the recognizable conventions of Deaf culture and of the theater. For the viewer who is able to process so many levels of meaning concurrently, Deaf theater is a dazzling display indeed.

Recent decades have seen Deaf performing artists win Tonys, Emmys, and Oscars in the United States, and comparable awards for outstanding television, theater, and movie performances in numerous nations. The first Tony awarded to Deaf performers was garnered in 1977 by the National Theatre of the Deaf. That institution, which we describe below, helped to lay the groundwork for the most recent Tony Award in the DEAF-WORLD, won by *Children of a Lesser God*, a play that has probably done more to raise hearing consciousness of the DEAF-WORLD in the U.S. (and some European countries) than any other single event in this century (with the possible exception of the Gallaudet Revolution). Deaf actress Phyllis Frelich starred in this winner of three Tony awards, about love between a speech therapist and a Deaf woman proud of her Deaf culture. Deaf actresses Elizabeth Quinn and Emmanuelle Laborit won best actress of the year awards in Britain and France, respectively, for their performances in this play. When the U.S. touring company of *Children of a Lesser God* was formed, Deaf actress Linda Bove, best known from her appearances on *Sesame Street* and an extensive television career, played the leading role throughout the U.S. and Canada. Finally, the play was brought to the screen by Deaf actress Marlee Matlin in an Oscar-winning performance, and millions more Americans learned about Deaf culture and Deaf pride. The award-winning film for television, *Love Is Never*
Silent, co-produced by Deaf actress and director Juliana Fjeld, and starring Frellich and Deaf actor Ed Waterstreet, taught Americans more about Deaf oppression in a tale concerning Deaf parents’ struggles to raise their hearing children, an adaptation of Joanne Greenberg’s book, In this Sign.

The earliest plays by Deaf actors on DEAF-WORLD themes in the U.S. probably originated in the mid-nineteenth century in the residential schools, where plays develop around Deaf school life, Deaf history, and Deaf family situations. In such plays, students are not limited by their abilities in English and can give free rein to their talents in acting and in the expressive use of ASL. In this century, serious drama has flourished at such schools as the California School for the Deaf in Berkeley, the New York School for the Deaf in White Plains, and the American School in Hartford. In the 1890s, St. Ann’s Church for the Deaf, founded by Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet’s oldest son, also named Thomas, presented plays for Deaf audiences in New York City. The first formal theater production was staged at Gallaudet University in 1884; a male theater group was organized seven years later, and four years after that the female students organized their own drama club. Deaf theater was also to be found in the Deaf clubs (especially informal skits and mime shows), at Deaf literary societies, and at Deaf theater groups. New York City, for example, counted three such groups in the 1950s: the Metropolitan Theatre Guild, the New York Hebrew Association of the Deaf, and the New York Theatre Guild of the Deaf.

Gallaudet University started formal drama classes in 1940. In recent years, its drama department has presented powerful plays about the Deaf experience, some written by its first chairman, Gilbert Eastman. His Sign Me Alice (an ASL satire on the use of invented sign systems, based on Shaw’s Pygmalion) and Laurent Clerc: A Profile, have received wide acclaim. Starting in 1985, Eastman co-hosted the Deaf television magazine Deaf Mosaic. Produced at Gallaudet University but seen nationwide on cable television, the program won the Emmy Award ten times by addressing such themes in the DEAF-WORLD as Deaf history, cochlear implants for Deaf children, World Games for the Deaf, and ASL poetry; it was discontinued for lack of funds in 1995. The National Technical Institute for the Deaf, in Rochester, New York, also sponsors student productions on Deaf cultural themes and has counted distinguished Deaf
actors on its faculty. These include Robert Panara, who founded the experimental theater department in 1973, and National Theatre of the Deaf veteran Patrick Graybill, now an educational filmmaker. As at Gallaudet, most of the productions at NTID are signed language adaptations of plays written for hearing audiences.

Eastman, Frelich, and Bove were among the seventeen founding members of the National Theatre of the Deaf, organized in 1967. NTD has sought primarily to bring hearing theater to hearing and Deaf audiences using Deaf actors, and thus to show to the world their extraordinary talents. Through its plays, workshops, and frequent appearances on television (many Americans have seen the NTD presentation of *A Child's Christmas in Wales*, for example), NTD has not only contributed immeasurably to the development of Deaf theater, Deaf performers and Deaf playwrights, it also has made a growing hearing audience aware of the Deaf–World and the power and beauty of signed language.

The public acceptance of the Deaf–World and ASL is so much greater today that it may be difficult to comprehend what a remarkable departure NTD represented when it was founded. In an era when oral education of the Deaf was dominant and ASL denigrated, NTD performances presented to a large public a language of startling beauty and evident effectiveness, in addition to a cast of witty, smart and attractive Deaf people. The promotion of Deaf culture to the American public has long had ardent opponents, however, as we shall see in detail when we examine the hearing and Deaf agendas for Deaf people, toward the end of our journey into the Deaf–World. An example of that opposition, which might have torpedoed the launching of NTD, should be noted here. The year it was founded, NTD presented the first nationally broadcast television program featuring Deaf performers, NBC's one-hour *Experiment in Television*. When the newspapers announced an upcoming special using signed language, the Alexander Graham Bell Association protested vigorously in a telegram sent to NBC and the members of Congress:

> We are opposed to any programming which indicates that the language of signs is inevitable for deaf children or is anything more than an artificial language, and a foreign one at that, for the deaf of this country.
Today NTD can look back on thirty years of accomplishment with pride. It has to its credit more than fifty touring seasons and twenty-eight foreign tours, more than 6,000 performances of some fifty productions and numerous awards for its work. All these have contributed to the momentum for the recognition and acceptance of signed language here and abroad.29

Fig. 5-3. A scene in My Third Eye

The NTD troupe has presented the Deaf experience in several of their works, for example in its original company piece, My Third Eye, a play in five parts about ASL and Deaf people. One of those segments, co-directed by the late beloved British Deaf actress and poet Dorothy Miles, features a ringmaster who displays two caged hearing people and explains their bizarre ways to the audience ("They see with their ears and sign with their mouths!"). Turning the tables on hearing people in this way is very gratifying to Deaf audiences, who commonly receive My Third Eye with a standing ovation. In founding NTD, director David Hays collaborated closely with the great Deaf mime, actor and director, Bernard Bragg, who recruited most of the initial troupe, none of them professional actors at the start. Bragg has had a long and distinguished career that includes many performances for NTD. He has also performed as an artist-in-residence at the Moscow Theater of Sign Language and Mime, and as artist-in-resi-
dence at Gallaudet University. Over the years, NTD has launched ten different ancillary programs, such as the Little Theatre of the Deaf and the Deaf Playwrights’ Conference. More than eighty plays have been written by members of NTD or participants in the Playwrights’ Conference.

NTD has played an influential role in establishing Deaf theater in numerous other countries. Three troupe members, for example, went to Paris to establish the International Visual Theatre (IVT), which proved influential in the renaissance of French Deaf culture, as we will see in the next chapter. NTD tours abroad created the right climate in several countries for the formation of national Deaf theater. Additionally, members of foreign troupes attend NTD professional theater school during the summer. Professional Deaf theater has flourished in recent decades in numerous countries around the world, including Australia, Britain, Canada, Denmark, France, Japan, Poland, Russia, and Sweden. The International Pantomime Festival of the Deaf was organized in 1970 and the first World Deaf Theatre Festival in 1981.

Regional Deaf theater in the U.S. has also had wide influence. A California group, D.E.A.F. Media (including Deaf actors Howie Seago, Freda Norman and Ella Mae Lentz, better known for her ASL poetry30), began a televised ASL talk show in 1974 called Silent Perspectives. It was the first television program produced in ASL “of, by and for the Deaf.” It ran for five years and won an Emmy. That led, in turn, to a program called Rainbow’s End, the first and, to date, the only nationally broadcast program in ASL for Deaf children.

In 1980 D.E.A.F. Media began a biennial program to promote Deaf culture called Celebration: Deaf Artists and Performers. It features leading Deaf performers, poets and artists. The event combines academic seminars on Deaf culture during the day and cultural presentations in the evening. There are opportunities for artists to discuss their work in progress with their colleagues; for example, one of us (Ben) first presented his ASL story Bird of a Different Feather there. Celebration has had an enduring impact on the work of many Deaf artists, poets and performers. “This was an attempt to keep the spirit of the Spectrum experience alive,” writes D.E.A.F. Media director, anthropologist Susan Rutherford, referring to the Deaf arts movement in Texas that we described earlier. “But it also had a political purpose—to provide a prestigious venue for the pro-
duction and recognition of Deaf arts. Indeed, it awakened many hearing people to Deaf culture and nourished Deaf pride in the DEAF–WORLD.

The Northwest Theatre of the Deaf was established by members of the Deaf community in Portland and nearby Vancouver, Washington, in 1974, with the goal of providing better access to theater and cultural events for speakers of ASL. The theater also seeks to educate the general public about signed language and Deaf culture, to provide theater workshops for children and adults, and to give an outlet for the talents of Deaf playwrights and actors.

The Fairmount Theatre of the Deaf, founded in Cleveland, Ohio in 1975, was the first resident professional signed language theater. Recently renamed the Cleveland Signstage Theatre, it has made a mission of informing hearing people about the DEAF–WORLD. Half the works they present are original, most concerning Deaf themes. The theater, directed by Deaf actor and playwright Shanny Mow (whose plays were extensively performed by NTD in the 1980s), also presents bilingual versions (ASL and English) of a wide variety of hearing playwrights, from Molière to Tennessee Williams.

The New York Deaf Theatre was established in 1979 by a group of Deaf actors and theater artists who wanted to create opportunities for signed language theater. Some of their plays are hearing classics adapted for ASL performance, such as The Gin Game, directed by Frelich. Others are indigenous Deaf art forms, such as Lovelost by the late Deaf playwright Bruce Hlibok. The New York Deaf Theatre sponsors an annual Deaf playwright competition to encourage Deaf writers to tell about the DEAF–WORLD.

The Onyx Theater was founded in 1989 to give greater visibility to minority Deaf performers and themes of minority cultures, especially Black culture, within the DEAF–WORLD. A related undertaking for the film medium, Deafvision Filmworks, was founded in 1991. The same year, Deaf West Theatre Company was established in Los Angeles; NTD alumnus and former director Ed Waterstreet became its artistic director, where he was joined by NTD actors Bove, Norman, Frelich and Graybill, among others. Each season Deaf West presents several original productions in ASL, as well as adaptations of plays written in English, with on-stage actors providing interpretation into English. Thus audiences, like the staff, performers, and the plays themselves, come from both the DEAF–WORLD.
and the hearing community. Deaf West innovated in some performances with hearing actors speaking off-stage, their voices broadcast to those in the audience who wished to hear them wearing receiver-headsets.

There are also several small theater groups and one-man shows focused exclusively on the Deaf–World. An example: CHALB Productions, launched in 1980 by Deaf actors/producers Alan Barwiolek and Charles McKinney. It performs primarily at Deaf clubs, conventions, schools and colleges. SignRise Cultural Arts (Oakland, California) was founded in 1991 and has developed several new plays on the Deaf experience; this is also the purpose of the Rochester, New York, group LIGHTS ON!

Deaf production groups have been established from time to time to make television and film documentaries concerning the Deaf–World. Two that flourished, and made an important contribution, were the Silent Network and Beyond Sound. Both were established in the early 1980s. The Silent Network became the leading producer of Deaf programs for television and won eight Emmys. It evolved into Kaleidoscope Television. Beyond Sound produced a weekly news program and important documentaries, such as a history of the Los Angeles Club of the Deaf.

The various theatrical performances in the Deaf–World can be helpfully gathered under four headings. There are adaptations of hearing theater presented in ASL (such as the NTD’s performance of the Babylonian myth Gilgamesh, or its adaptation of Dylan Thomas’ Under Milkwood); these have been called “sign-language theater.” There is Deaf–World theater, which presents in signed language stories situated in Deaf culture. Examples include Bernard Bragg and Eugene Bergman’s Tales from a Clubroom, set in a fictitious Deaf club, CHALB’s Deaf Pa What, and Willy Conley’s The Hearing Test. According to leading Deaf theater critic, playwright and director Donald Bangs, the most common themes in original plays in Deaf–World theater are the problem of communication between Deaf and hearing people; the central role of schools in Deaf acculturation and the oppressive attitudes of the hearing authorities in those schools; Deaf dignity; and the beauty and artistry of ASL.

A third genre of theatrical performances, one that is cross-cultural, is exemplified by Children of a Lesser God, which combines elements of sign-language theater on the one hand and of Deaf–World theater on the
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other. Finally, there are hearing plays adapted into Deaf culture, like Eastman’s *Sign Me Alice*, adapted from *Pygmalion* and *My Fair Lady*.

Deaf theater, like all minority theater, must grapple with a common financial and moral dilemma. Its sense of mission and natural proclivity is to address a Deaf audience with Deaf themes. Its financial needs, however, and its desire to inform the larger society, make it aspire to be understood and enjoyed by a wider audience. One solution, adopted by the Paris-based Deaf troupe International Visual Theatre, is either to rely on avant-garde visual imagery, or to produce plays in LSF without voice interpretation (as, for example, operas are usually produced in the original language without simultaneous interpretation), thus obliging their audience to enter into the visual world of the Deaf. Other groups incorporate voicing actors or narrators into the signed language performance, sometimes in highly creative ways. One production of an absurdist Ionesco play had voicing actors in the roles of pieces of furniture on the set! For the National Theatre of the Deaf, the eminent American interpreter Lou Fant was one of the hearing actors over the years who provided English translations addressed to the ninety percent of the audience that was hearing and knew no ASL. And then there is the hearing-oriented solution of, notably, *Children of a Lesser God*, which seemed to forget its Deaf audience by creating whole scenes in which hearing characters spoke and there was no ASL interpretation! This Deaf morality play (“our story,” as Phyllis Frelich called it) was inaccessible to Deaf audiences on both stage and screen, except when Deaf characters were speaking ASL.36

The choice of target audience is not the only financial peril that confronts Deaf theater. Because of the visual nature of its productions, Deaf theater cannot use a large theater house; yet it cannot use a small house and charge high admission, because the target audience often has a limited budget for entertainment. To aggravate the problem, Deaf theater productions can be especially costly because of their need to make the play accessible to both English and ASL speakers.

In the era of silent films, Deaf audiences could also see Deaf culture performances on film as well as on the stage. Moreover, Deaf actors could perform in films alongside hearing ones, and Deaf audiences could attend the theater on a par with hearing audiences.37 There were several outstanding Deaf filmmakers in that era who chronicled the lives of the members.
of the Deaf-World. Possibly the earliest films about the Deaf-World in the U.S. were made by the National Association of the Deaf between 1910 and 1920, at a time when it feared for the extinction of ASL in the era following the Milan Congress. More than a dozen films were produced that recorded poems, lectures, and reminiscences by Deaf leaders. One of those films has NAD President George Veditz (1904-1910) speaking grandiloquently in ASL about the importance of preserving the language.

We mentioned earlier the Deaf-World filmmaker Charles Krauel, who filmed Deaf life, especially in the Midwest, during the period 1925 to 1940. Krauel sought to preserve for posterity the social life of Deaf people and made careful film records of the conventions of the National Fraternal Society of the Deaf. The ensuing decades saw the work of several Deaf filmmakers, among them Deaf actor Ernest Marshall, who produced nine feature films between 1937 and 1963 with an all-Deaf company. Some were based on original scripts by Deaf writers. Various Deaf clubs made films in the same era, a priceless record of Deaf people's lives and culture. In more recent decades, however, Deaf-culture films have been blocked in the U.S. by the lack of training of Deaf producers and directors, who have been effectively barred from the motion picture industry. Finally, Peter Wolf, Deaf producer, director, cinematographer and NTD alumnus, received training at Cinematlabs, a professional program in San Francisco. He directed the first two feature-length films on Deaf topics, Deafula and Think Me Nothing.

Because film is an expression of the cultural values of a society, films for the general public have usually portrayed Deaf people as self-absorbed, sad, and solitary; The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter is an example. As is commonly the case in their written literatures, the films of hearing societies, when they introduce Deaf characters at all, do so to advance the plot, and not because the Deaf-World is thought to be of interest to large audiences. In the Hollywood stereotype, Deaf people are individuals who can read lips and speak intelligibly; they live precarious lives and they long for a cure. Such films contain not a hint that there is a Deaf culture, with its own language, art forms, and traditions. Ironically, that culture is particularly strong and manifest in film haven Southern California, where Deaf clubs and other organizations are among the oldest and the most progressive in the nation.