Sherin tested perhaps the very limits of this convention. More than ever before, they minimized literal translation and instead trusted authorial and directorial storytelling cohesiveness and Frelich’s genius to engage audiences powerfully and meaningfully on all levels.

There is plenty tantalizing, edifying, and satisfying, but little easy about Mark Medoff’s plays.

**Children of a Lesser God**

*Children of a Lesser God* dramatizes the fluctuating and evolving relationship between a hearing man and a deaf woman. Although the play stands now as an unrivaled landmark creation in its representation of deaf characters and some deaf culture issues (e.g., language controversies, stigmatization, contrasting attitudes about deaf culture involvement, family difficulties when parents are hearing and children are deaf, and more), it is by design a love story. Medoff chuckles when he describes the simplicity of the play’s genesis:

> I was simply at a point in my life where I knew I wanted to write a love story. It was going to be heterosexual, so I knew there was going to be a man and a woman, and it happened that at that time I met Phyllis Frelich . . . who was female and deaf and who couldn’t be un-female and un-deaf. So . . . [she] became the embodiment of one character.³⁰

Now twenty-four years after *Children of a Lesser God*’s Broadway premiere, Medoff still feels amazed and gratified — and perhaps even a little befuddled — by the play’s enduring impression on audiences worldwide: an event that “binds people together, makes them laugh and cry, alters their perspective, something finally that — in any language, anywhere on the planet — deeply affects people, if only for a little while.”³¹ He also relishes the reaffirmation of faith he experiences time and again as people of disparate cultures, languages, and points of view unite to produce the play and end up more richly humane and aware than when they
began. Apart from this, quite accidentally but in countless ways, the play continues to heighten hearing society's understanding of deafness and to stimulate forms of hearing world accessibility for hearing impaired people.

When he first drafted the play in 1978, Medoff knew nothing about deafness. He thus relied upon Frelich and Steinberg, then guest artists at New Mexico State University where Medoff served as Theatre Department chair, to recount life experiences that he, in turn, dramatically scripted. Steinberg recalls the process as something akin to self-analysis as he and his wife re-examined difficulties they encountered in early years of their marriage and improvised short scenarios Medoff suggested. For four months Medoff wrote as fast as he could, “based on the creative explosion in my head, based on my own creative juices, based on the fact that I was getting to know Frelich and Steinberg very well.” However, the play does not document Frelich and Steinberg's personalities or marital life. Some inevitable similarities exist, such as Frelich and Sarah's proud acceptance of deafness as a sufficiently rewarding otherness rather than a wasteland of deprivation, as many hearing people (and James) believe. Beyond this, Frelich does not possess Sarah's anger, stubbornness, aloofness, naivety, or occasional meanness. And certainly she does not share Sarah's anguished upbringing, hostility for hearing society, or marriage complications. *Children of a Lesser God*’s principal issues, conflicts, and characters remain Medoff's fictional constructs.

Director Gordon Davidson joined the team at a critical juncture, prodding Medoff with a barrage of questions about deafness and the peculiar nature of James' and Sarah's relationship, prompting him to relinquish male dominant perspectives and to texture the action more from Sarah's point of view. The continuous input — perhaps sometimes veiled criticism — from the entire team naturally sparked some tensions as Medoff sequestered himself away and labored over endless rewrites. Nonetheless, Medoff adored his inordinately civilized, intelligent associations with the Mark Taper company and particularly with
Davidson, which he describes as “the best I’ve ever had with a theatre or director. It’s like father/son or brother/brother – full of love and understanding.” The intense collaboration, the hot-wiring of each other, persevered even throughout the eight preview performances leading up to the Broadway opening and contributed in no small measure to Medoff’s metamorphosis explained earlier.

The title *Children of a Lesser God* takes its meaning from several lines in Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* and explicitly suggests the play’s theme:

For why is all around us here

As if some lesser god had made the world,

But had not force to shape it as he would?

Medoff notes that people regularly misinterpret the title to mean that deaf people are God’s flawed creations, not quite up to snuff with the rest of society. Actually, it refers to the propensity of people like James who try to make others over in their own image. Like self-proclaimed demigods, they lift up and celebrate conformity and, consequently, subordinate values associated with differentness. This tendency proliferates throughout the story and informs all main characters. James implores Sarah to practice speech skills she can never perfect in order to gain greater access to mainstream hearing society; Orin fights with Sarah to affirm deaf culture allegiance and reject hearing culture lifestyles; hard-of-hearing Lydia tries desperately to transform herself into some facsimile of a hearing/speaking person to impress James; Mrs. Norman avoids encouraging, accommodating, or reconciling her young daughter’s frantic search for identity; Mr. Franklin ignores the extraordinary aptitude and cultural preferences of his deaf students; and Sarah rigidly expects compromise on any number of issues but proffers little in return. This dynamic permeates all of society and thus renders Medoff’s play universally relevant. Deafness literally characterizes Sarah and others, but more importantly it serves metaphorically to illustrate how readily many of us anesthetize our perception of other people’s unique, identifying attributes. The play discloses compassion “not for those who cannot hear sounds,
but for those who cannot hear the chords of communication between people, and in this we are all hard of hearing, as well as partially blind, numb of touch, with fast-food taste buds and stuffy noses.”

Numerous scenes delineate characters’ agonizing frustrations when communication barriers accentuate human differences and therefore prohibit them from fully crossing over into the other’s world. The music scene in Act II epitomizes this dilemma. James struggles valiantly but unsuccessfully – even painfully – to explain to Sarah the nature of music and his affection for it. She knows this phenomenon only as soundless vibrations with none of the infinite modulations which arouse serenity and wonder in James. This excruciating scene focuses all preceding perceptual and relational difficulties, the ultimate separateness of their respective worlds, and foreshadows the end. The explosive climax occurs when James pins Sarah’s arms to her sides and forces her finally to speak. Her largely unintelligible uttering makes shockingly evident to both James and Sarah that they cannot completely occupy each other’s worlds. In Sarah’s words, they must “meet in another place; not in silence or in sound but somewhere else.” Until they figure out what that means and how to do it, they must “un-join.”

The play ends sadly but optimistically with James and Sarah facing each other from a distance. Sarah holds the sign for “join” as she and James promise to help each other to mature as sensitive, secure individuals better capable of appreciating human differences. Will they reunite? Medoff says, “Yes, of course they’ll try. They have to try again. They owe it to themselves to try again.” Whether or not he will further dramatize their story is uncertain. Occasionally he feels the characters tug themselves into his consciousness, coaxing some sort of continued development. Thus far, however, somewhat wary of sequelitis rampaging across Hollywood, Medoff is not compelled to do more with Sarah and James. If eventually he does, it is because he wants them, as human beings and as a couple,
to succeed or fail for adult reasons which transcend difficulties explored by *Children of a Lesser God*.

**The Hands of Its Enemy**

Simply stated, *The Hands of Its Enemy* deals with self-discovery, with uncovering and facing the truth about how family events and relationships can inflict substantial emotional and psychological damage. It also documents the intimate, complex, and nearly magical ways in which a play progresses from playwright impulse through intense rehearsal experimentation to performance. On deeper levels, the play touches on aspects of domestic violence, child abuse, alcohol addiction and rehabilitation, and trust between loved ones and colleagues. Even though the central character played by Phyllis Frelich is deaf, no particular deaf culture issues predominate. A few (e.g., communication difficulties and interpreter ethics and protocol) surface in the natural course of the action, but unlike in *Children of a Lesser God*, deafness in this play remains incidental. Early in Act I when Howard asks about the absence of deaf characters in her play, deaf playwright Marieta Yerby explains that she should not be limited in what she writes about any more than Stephen Crane should go to war in order to write *The Red Badge of Courage*. Medoff and Frelich feel exactly the same way about not constricting the type of characters Frelich might play or the life circumstances surrounding those characters.

The play found inspiration many years before 1983 when Medoff began writing it. He remembers a dear friend who long before then suffered through family hardships similar to what the character Marieta Yerby intends to purge via *In Defense of Another*, the play within the play. Confused and haunted by how such atrocities collapse people’s spiritual health, Medoff expropriated the story and its demons and in the fall of 1983 gave them fictional form. He merged his overwhelming need to therapeutically dissect these serious problems with his determination to write a second play for Frelich. Because he loves the