The Sound of One Hand Clapping: Performing Arts and Deaf People

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(Abridged Version for Proceedings)

The 1970s and 1980s have been called the “golden age” of Deaf performing arts, a time when Deaf theatre artists made great breakthroughs, winning Tonys, Emmys and Oscars in the process, and theatre professionals trumpeted American Sign Language as a new art form. The golden age has also become an “Age of Access” as hearing theatres have provided interpreters for Deaf theatre patrons and included Deaf performers in certain productions.

The golden age and the age of access offer many opportunities for Deaf performing artists. But where will these Deaf artists get their training? From schools? Few provide educational programs in the performing arts. From community colleges and universities? Only Gallaudet and NTID currently offer courses in theatre. From professional training programs? The National Theatre of the Deaf operates a successful summer school, but it only serves a small number of trainees.

You may be wondering why I titled my presentation “The Sound of One Hand Clapping.” An old Buddhist riddle asks, “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” and for deaf people, the answer is easy. We “clap” soundlessly by holding our hands in the air and twisting them back and forth. But when we look at educational opportunities for Deaf people in the performing arts, the reaction is to hold our hands forward and make the same twisting motion—the sign for “so-so.” Other than a few outstanding programs at schools such as Phoenix Day School, MSSD, Louisiana School for Deaf, Gallaudet University, NTID, and a few other programs, training opportunities are few and far between.

In the 1960s, Black theatre artists and educators urged the schools to provide training programs in the performing arts for Black people. They criticized the school systems for not offering creative experiences in the performing arts and focusing too much on teaching English and basic academic subjects. Does that sound familiar? Well Black theatre artists and educators established many performing arts programs for Black students during the 1970s and the 1980s. I would
like to see a similar commitment in schools, colleges, and universities to expand educational opportunities in the performing arts for Deaf students.

Education in the performing arts is not a luxury but a necessity. Whether students participate in creative dramatics classes or perform before audiences, they can grow in many ways. They can strengthen their imaginative skills, refine their communication abilities, learn how to “put themselves in other peoples shoes,” increase their leadership skills, understand themselves better—the list goes on and on.

And Deaf students gain even more benefits. One benefit is the validation of their own culture. Some school drama programs have invented original plays about Deaf people. For example, Phoenix Day School, MSSD, and Louisiana School for the Deaf have all developed plays based on their students’ experiences in school and at home. MSSD’s Broken Promises shows the problems of drug abuse and how students deal with it and Reluctant Heroes shows how Deaf students who are “outsiders” or not popular at school learn how to deal with feelings of inferiority.

Schools have also developed plays about Deaf history. An obvious example is the Clerc and Gallaudet pageants presented on Gallaudet Day. But some schools go even further. Southwestern Collegiate Institute for the Deaf created Deaf Smith, a play about a famous Deaf scout during the Mexican-American War.

Plays may also be developed around: 1) Deaf school life, for example, Northwest Theatre of the Deaf’s production of An Evening with Patrick Graybill; 2) Deaf family situations, for example, A Play of Our Own I, II, and III in which a Deaf woman from a deaf family marries a hearing man, becomes pregnant, gives birth to the child, etc.; 3) The art of sign language, for example, Fairmount Theatre of the Deaf’s award-winning Circus of Signs; and 4) Cross-cultural issues between Deaf and hearing people, for example, Gallaudet University’s recent production of The Phoney about a wealthy Deaf resident of Hollywood who tries to become “hearing” so that he can meet movie stars and get film roles. We will see short clips of several of these productions.

These new works help expand the range of Deaf literature. ASL does not yet have a written form so Deaf literature tends to focus less on written forms, such as novels and short stories, and more on performed works such as poetry, folklore, and plays. The more we can add to this literature the better.

Another benefit of theatre programs is an opportunity to develop self-esteem, self-confidence, and pride. A theatre program is probably the only place in school where Deaf students can succeed regardless of
their ability to read and write in English. Students who may have been labeled “not smart” can participate in theatre activities because all they need are their bodies, their imaginations, their emotions, and their sign language. When students use these tools to create theatre pieces, their self-esteem and confidence grow by leaps and bounds.

Theatre activities can also help increase skill in both ASL and English. When I directed students at the California School for the Deaf in Fremont, I provided them with both an English language script and a script glossed in ASL. This seemed to help them better understand the differences between the two languages. One student in particular was a wonderful actor but his weak reading skills made him a mediocre student. However, by “reading” ASL in the gloss script and transforming it into a sign language performance, he finally began to understand what reading was all about. Today he is a successful community college student.

A third benefit is an opportunity for students (and their families and friends) to explore the conflicts between Deaf and hearing cultures. Louisiana State School for the Deaf created a work titled Obstacles in which students described their frustration in dealing with the hearing world. They presented several vignettes of problem situations, each one followed by a “dream” sequence with an ideal solution to the problem. Laney College in Oakland used a similar idea to show what it meant to experience “Communication Frustration”. Student productions such as these provide an outlet for a great deal of frustration among Deaf students. And hearing family and friends can gain a deeper understanding of the Deaf point of view. Obviously this can improve communication within Deaf/hearing families.

One final benefit of a performing arts program is that it helps counteract the hearing “brainwashing” that students are exposed to on a daily basis by the mass media. During acting improvisation classes which I have taught over the years, I’m often surprised when Deaf students take on hearing behavior. For example, if an improvisation requires a telephone call, Deaf students will usually pick up the phone and “talk” into it like a hearing person instead of improvising a TTY call. Or if students are asked to improvise an authority figure like the President, a doctor, a lawyer, or even a school teacher, they often tend to move their lips in imitation of hearing people. This is probably because students rarely see Deaf role models and are constantly bombarded by the hearing media—books, newspapers, magazines, television, and film—or by comments made by hearing people. Creative dramatics allows the students to put their own deaf stamp on the world. President King Jordan said, “Deaf people can do anything hearing people can,
except hear," and if we emphasize that fact through theatre, we can improve the mental health of our Deaf students.

What kind of theatre works might be developed in Deaf schools, colleges, and universities? Some theatre experts have suggested that we only have two types of theatre: "Sign Language Theatre", which is based on plays by hearing authors, translated into sign language and performed by a signing and a voicing cast; or "Deaf Theatre", which is based on situations unique to Deaf people and generally performed in a realistic or naturalistic style, sometimes without voice narration.

While these two categories worked well during the early years of the golden age, our theatre world has become much more complex since then. I would like to suggest a more useful idea: measuring a theatre work according to a continuum between Deaf and hearing cultures. We can measure elements of the performed work such as language, performance style, and subject matter according to this continuum. For example, if the performance is signed in ASL, it will fall more toward the Deaf culture end of the continuum, while with PSE or even SEE, it will fall more toward the hearing end. In the same way, the performance style can be more Deaf, if, for example, there is a lot of eye contact, distances between actors follow Deaf cultural norms, and the actors perform as Deaf characters; or it can be more hearing, if, for example, actors maintain an eyes front position even when communicating with each other, distances are more in a hearing style, and the actors perform as neutral characters who just happen to use sign language. Some of you may have witnessed the Moscow Theatre of Mimicry performance of Oedipus Rex in 1989 during Deaf Way. I had a hard time believing the actors were Deaf because they always faced front, even when communicating.

We can also apply the Deaf-hearing cultural continuum to the subject matter: The play may be about a Deaf school, a Deaf club, a Deaf family, or a Deaf person struggling with a hearing oppression, or it may merely be a hearing play translated into sign language. Incidentally, a number of people have stated that Deaf audiences require plays that are based on skits, songs, mimicry, and melodrama—broad farce or heavy suspense thrillers, or dramas with lots of action, while supposedly more sophisticated hearing people enjoy more subtle plays with lots of dialogue. But my experience has shown that this is not always true. "Talky" plays such as The Glass Menagerie and Gin Game have proven very successful with Deaf audiences while some of NTD's most popular

productions for hearing people have involved lots of action and broad acting styles.

(In the next part of the presentation, clips from a variety of productions are discussed: MSSD’s *You Can’t Take It with You*, California School for the Deaf-Fremont’s *The Miser of the Wild Wild West*, Gallaudet University’s *The Phoney*, Louisiana School for the Deaf’s *Obstacles*, Laney College’s *Communication Frustration*, Northwest Theatre of the Deaf’s *An Evening With Patrick Graybill*, Southwest Collegiate Institute of the Deaf’s *Deaf Smith*, and Fairmount Theatre of the Deaf’s *Circus of Signs.*)

Why have I focused so much attention on continuums between Deaf and hearing cultures? Because the impact of a theatre work on a Deaf or hearing audience often depends on where the work is located on these continuums. Deaf and hearing audiences live in different worlds, so a play that works for one audience may not work for the other. A good example is NTD’s production of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, the story of John Singer, a lonely Deaf person living in a small town. His one Deaf friend is confined to a mental institution, and none of his hearing friends can sign. When his Deaf friend dies, Singer kills himself. For hearing theatre patrons who believe that Deafness is a tragedy, this play arouses their sympathies for the lone and isolated Deaf character of John Singer. By contrast, patrons with a strong Deaf cultural world view are puzzled and exasperated. Why can’t Singer move to a big city and find a wealth of friends there? Why would Singer’s only friendship be with an obese and rather repulsive Deaf person with whom he had nothing in common? Why put up trying to lipread his hearing “friends” who don’t bother to learn even the most basic of signs? As you can see, a theatre work can either clash with or be in harmony with the world views of its audience, depending on where it is on the continuum.

When we attend a good play, we find ourselves suspended halfway between belief and disbelief. Watching *Dracula*, for example, we shiver and sweat because we believe that the on-stage events are real. But when Dracula bares his fangs and bends over poor Lucy, we are not likely to run onto the stage and shoot the vampire. Of course not, because we are aware that the on-stage events are not real. For an effective theatre experience, the audience has to be suspended between belief and disbelief. If a Deaf or sign language theatre work is located in the right place on the continuum, this will happen. If not, the Deaf theatre patrons will enjoy the beautiful sign language or the fascinating set or the wonderful costumes but their lack of belief will block their entry into the imaginary world of the play.
Engaging an audience's imagination poses a challenge to any theatre work, but perhaps a greater challenge is engaging their emotions. Audiences laugh or cry during a performance because theatre invites people to release emotions that they normally repress. This release or catharsis of emotions, represents a fundamental element of the theatre experience. But catharsis is only possible if the audience identifies with the on-stage characters and their circumstances. The performance must be at the right place in our continuum so that Deaf audiences will identify with and become emotionally involved.

When we look at a theatre experience, we can see that it has three elements: the performers, the performance, and the audience. In this brief paper, I have described some of the ways that Deaf culture has had an impact on each of these elements. For performers, Deaf and sign language theatre offers an opportunity for personal growth and enrichment. For the performance, this new theatre form offers an opportunity to expand the medium and to validate and expand the cultural riches of Deaf people. And for the audience, a Deaf or sign language theatre production is an opportunity for Deaf people to experience and celebrate their own culture and their shared humanity. I challenge Deaf programs in schools, colleges, and universities to provide opportunities for continued development of Deaf and sign language performing arts.

About the Presenter:

Dr. Donald R. Bangs, a graduate of Gallaudet University, holds a master’s degree in special education, a second master’s in Radio-TV-Film, and a Ph.D. in dramatic arts. Over the past 25 years he has produced, directed, written, and acted in a host of television and theatre productions. Some of his most memorable works include: The Touch, a comedy-drama about a Deaf-blind person, The Miser, an Emmy-Award-Winning cowboy comedy, The Sea Princess, a fantasy about signing underwater words, and The Phoney, a satire on Deaf people who try to pass as hearing. He is currently serving as the 1991-92 Powrie V. Doctor Chair of Deaf Studies and is working on a book about Deaf theatre in America.