THE PAST AND THE PRESENT OF DEAF THEATRES AROUND THE WORLD

(Based on a presentation at the first annual conference of National and Worldwide Deaf Theatres, Connecticut, August 2-12, 1995)

Thirty years ago, in 1966, at the time David Hays and I were discussing the possibility of a National Theatre of the Deaf (NTD), he brought up the idea of taking our yet-to-be-founded theatre to Europe to participate in the International Theatre Festival to be held in Warsaw in 1967. This took place many months before the National Theatre of the Deaf was established, even before we knew whether or not we would be successful in obtaining a grant from the U.S. government. "Why Europe?" I asked. David replied, "We can get reviews and some renown to bring back here." But that idea was put aside the moment we received an offer from NBC around the same time to tape an hour-long TV show, which we hoped would be a more immediate way to gain some recognition with the American public. That was in early March, 1966, two months before we were awarded the grant from the U.S. government. "Why Europe?" I asked. David replied, "We can get reviews and some renown to bring back here." But that idea was put aside the moment we received an offer from NBC around the same time to tape an hour-long TV show, which we hoped would be a more immediate way to gain some recognition with the American public. That was in early March, 1966, two months before we were awarded the grant from the U.S. government.

Later, in 1969, we were able to make our European debut in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, at the World Games for the Deaf (WGD) with our, by now, solidly funded NTD company. The Moscow Theatre of Mimicry and Gesture appeared there, too, with its colorful repertoire. Their company was four years older than ours, and both of us were the first and only professional deaf theatre companies in the world. We were impressed by each other's high performance standards, distinct styles, and by our respective innovative adaptations of sign language for the stage. We began to envision the possibility of establishing an exchange program for the actors. Many Deaf people from different parts of the world attending that conference were inspired by the Russian and American groups to establish their own theatre companies when they returned home to their respective countries. The 1969 CISS-sponsored games in Belgrade proved to be a catalyst for the establishment of deaf theatres around the world.

Today, three decades later, we can say with pride that the NTD has undoubtedly played a vital role in inspiring a number of Deaf people to establish Deaf theatre companies in their own countries, including a number of theatre companies in the United States. Some of them have turned professional and some semi-professional, although there are still a number of Deaf theatres around the world that maintain a non-professional status. Most of them survive, in spite of lack of financial support and training or inadequate public interest.

Let me now take you on a tour to a number of countries to see a bit of history behind some of the Deaf theatres. I will mention only the ones I am most familiar with, having worked with them over the years as a guest actor, teacher, an accomplished actor, director, playwright and lecturer, Bernard Bragg was born deaf into a deaf family. He grew up in the world of theatre and has performed all his life for deaf and hearing audiences around the globe. He attended the New York School for the Deaf; is a Gallaudet graduate and holds a master's degree in special education with a minor in drama from San Francisco State University. He taught at the California School for the Deaf in Berkeley for a number of years.

After studying with world-renowned mime, Marcel Marceau, in Paris, Bragg went on to help establish the National Theatre of the Deaf (NTD), and then for ten years was their lead actor, administrator and sign master. He was an Artist-in-Residence at the Moscow Theatre of Sign and Mime and at Gallaudet University.

Bragg co-wrote and directed the play, "Tales from a Clubroom." He holds an honorary doctorate in humane letters (LHD) from Gallaudet University. Among the highest honors ever awarded to Bragg was the International Medal Award presented by the World Federation of the Deaf in 1975.

His autobiography, Lessons in Laughter, was published in 1989 and his newest book, Meeting Halfway in American Sign Language, co-authored with Jack R. Olson, was published in 1993.
workshop leader, or consultant. In addition to those mentioned, numerous other active theatre groups exist.

**Moscow** The Soviet Deaf Theatre Company, both resident and touring, was subsidized by the government for many years beginning in 1964 and it had its own school, theatre, designers, stagehands and carpenters. It employed and trained over fifty professional actors on a full-time basis. Most of the plays they produced were adaptations of classics, contemporary dramas and comedies. So what happened to this theatre after the fall of communism? Sadly, the theatre has been reduced to a smaller one and has had to become self-supporting, which is a constant struggle. The commitment of the Deaf Russian actors is commendable. The leader of this group, Michael Slipchenko, was once invited to the NTD as an exchange actor assuming my role as the father in *Dybbuk*. The best thing about the exchange program co-sponsored by both the Russian and American theatres was that it brought theatre people together even in the days of Cold War. Art conquers!

**Great Britain** This country once had its own professional theatre company called the British Theatre of the Deaf, thanks to its founder, Pat Keysell, who had previously observed the NTD summer school and toured one whole season with the company. Inspired by what she had learned from her association with NTD, Pat moved on to secure financial support from her government and emulated NTD’s performance style of integrating speaking actors with signing actors on stage. Although she is hearing, she has a deep understanding of the theatrical use of British Sign Language. Unfortunately, her theatre lasted only three years and folded when she left. She was simply exhausted. Shortly afterwards, another theatre company was established by a Deaf actor who studied under our NTD professional school, but again his company was disbanded after a couple of years, due to insufficient public interest and a lack of Deaf actors who would be willing to commit themselves to full-time involvement in theatre. It is obvious that professional theatre companies cannot survive without dedicated leaders. However, in 1992, a unique project called *Deaf Forum Theatre* was established by John Wilson, profoundly Deaf from birth, who has been active in the dramatic arts, with a number of credits both as actor and director. This theatre is unusual in that it encourages audiences to participate in the evolution of the drama presented to them, by helping to resolve the problems faced by characters in the performance. It is interesting to note that the late Dorothy Miles, a former NTD member, was involved in teaching a series of creative signing workshops which focused on the art of using BSL in performance. It was her last contribution to the public awareness of the potential of BSL as a medium of artistic expression.

**Sweden** Thanks to government and public support, as well as interest on the part of Deaf people, the touring theatre company, “Tyst Teater” (Silent Theatre), initially launched under the strong leadership of Gunilla Wagstrom-Lindquist, has thrived over twenty-five years with a cast of four actors. In 1993, I was invited to teach four deaf Swedish student actors at the Stockholm Academy of Dramatic Arts while we were doing a script reading of Strindberg’s *Miss Julie*. After three and a half years of study and internship, two of those students are now performing in hearing theatre companies. Gunilla Wagstrom-Lindquist now produces a monthly TV show, currently in its fifth year which is still very popular not only with deaf viewers but also with hearing people all over the country. This goes to prove that public interest plays an indispensable role in helping to keep any theatre, hearing or deaf, alive and strong.

**Australia** The NTD toured twice in Australia. The first time was in 1975. On that tour, we conducted a number of drama workshops and met several inspired Deaf Australians who expressed interest in turning their theatre club into a professional theatre company. Happily, they succeeded in doing so after intermittently attending the NTD’s professional theatre school. The Australian Theatre of the Deaf (ATOD) is now thriving, thanks to the financial backing of their government and to the strong leadership of the native American, Mike Canfield. He attended the NTD’s professional summer school in 1986 and then joined the ATOD as an actor in 1989 and afterward became the present artistic director of the company. One of the former NTD actors, Carol-lee Aquiline, was the first Deaf artistic director of the ATOD from 1988 to 1992. Worthy of note is that the Board of the World Federation of the Deaf has recently appointed Ms. Aquiline as General Secretary of the Federation.

**France** Three Deaf American actors, former members of the NTD (Alfredo Corrado, Julianna Fjeld and Joe Castronovo) were involved in establishing what they hoped would become an international theatre, but it ended up as a solely French theatre retaining the misnomer which reflected the original concept—International Visual Theatre (IVT). This theatre has enjoyed nearly two decades of existence under the stewardship of Alfredo Corrado and has been continuously subsidized by the French government. The IVT has produced a number of original works related to Deaf culture and is quite creative and ambitious. Most recently, several Deaf members of the IVT appeared in a full-length movie called *In the Land of the Deaf*, which has been widely acclaimed both in this country and abroad. Incidentally, there is a popular TV talk show in France, produced by Marie-Theresa Abbou. The first Deaf artistic director of the IVT, Chantal Liennel
and three of her actors attended the 1995 National and Worldwide Deaf Theatres Conference, observing how new American works were being developed.

**Spain** Interestingly, Madrid seems to be the only city that I know of that has five nearby Deaf community theatres. They compete every other year for representation in European Deaf theatre festivals, which are quite popular among Deaf people on this continent. In 1984, I conducted a week-long workshop attended by two or three actors from each of the five community theatres. This workshop focused on development of children’s theatre for the purpose of exposing oral deaf children to the power and beauty of sign language.

**Finland** There are a number of community theatres in the country whose work has finally been brought to the attention of their Ministry of Culture, resulting in the establishment of a grant subsidy for a full-year theatre program designed for adult Deaf people interested in pursuing careers in theatre.

**Italy** Thanks to the financial support by the best known hearing professional theatre school in Palermo, Sicily, the semi-professional theatre of the Deaf has been able to stay alive and active for about ten years. Although it has not yet reached a fully professional status, this small group, under the stewardship of its artistic director, Rosaria Giuranna, has continued to participate in numerous Deaf theatre festivals in different parts of Europe and recently toured in Japan.

**Germany** There are two equally popular professional theatre companies in this country whose respective artistic directors are both Deaf. One of the theatres is based in Hamburg and is under the direction of Peter Schick, and the other, under the direction of Thomas Zander, is located in Berlin. The Berlin theatre follows the German language rather closely, whereas the Hamburg theatre follows the syntax and grammar of the natural sign language of Deaf Germans. The actors of both companies always include silent mouthing while signing. (My term for this kind of expression is “lipsynching”). This stems from the fact that nearly all of Europe is very oral and that deaf people are still primarily taught orally in the classroom. When they later learn sign language by socializing with adult Deaf people, the language which results is a combination of signs and lip movements. Signing accompanied by lip-synching is thus the standard in most Deaf German communities and has therefore become the language of the stage used by both German Deaf theatre groups. In the United States, we have a similar phenomenon. A lot of deaf Americans mouth words or lipsynch them while signing in ASL, although not as much when performing onstage.

**Hong Kong** One of the NTD’s former students from Hong Kong, Samuel Chen, has long been involved in performing amateur theatre for Deaf audiences. He is now very interested in obtaining assistance in gaining professional status for his newly established group which would perform for both Deaf and hearing audiences. The World Federation of the Deaf contacted me recently about the possibility of having me work with the Hong Kong Theatre of the Deaf in the near future, depending on what happens when China takes over the British colony in 1997.

**Japan** NTD’s influence on Japanese Deaf theatre is indisputable. A number of Japanese students have attended the NTD professional theatre school in the past fifteen years. David Hays and Linda Bove appeared on nationwide TV in Japan in 1978. The Japanese Theatre of the Deaf established in Tokyo in mid-’80s is struggling to develop the concept of professional theatre as a career choice for Deaf people. Amateur Deaf theatre groups already exist in a number of Japanese cities and my May 1996 performances in these cities followed by autograph sessions for my autobiography *Lessons in Laughter* (which has recently been translated into Japanese) will hopefully influence more young Japanese to see a career in theatre as a viable option.

**China** A hearing advocate of Deaf theatre and two of his student actors attended the NTD’s professional theatre school about five years ago. Their progress in establishing a theatre in their country was halted by the untimely death of its founder, Wang Zhen-Tai. However, the founder’s son, Wang Ling, himself hearing, has recently taken the responsibility of carrying on his father’s aspiration.

After this brief overview of the status of Deaf theatre companies in a number of countries, let me now mention a few salient things that we Deaf actors have learned from interacting with each other through exchange programs, experimental workshops, and theatre festivals (Belgrade in

- Special approaches have to be found which address the adaptation of standard theatrical techniques to the requirement of believability in signed theatre: An example of this occurred when I was invited to Moscow as an artist-in-residence playing the role of Hermes in Prometheus Bound with the complete Russian cast. During one of the rehearsals of the play, I found it difficult to interact with the Russian actor who played the title role because he kept looking steadily in the direction of the audience, instead of looking at me when I confronted him. After a couple of attempts to convince him how necessary it was to keep eye contact, I nearly gave up. Finally, our director persuaded him to try to look directly at me, instead of looking away from me as if he were a hearing person, i.e., as if he were listening to my signing with his ears. The Russian actor agreed to give it a try, and facing me for the first time, we both became even more ferocious and our altercation was terrifically heated. When we finished that scene, we were emotionally drained and all of the actors and crew in the audience gave us a standing ovation, much to our delight.

- Sign languages of the world are as disparate as spoken languages, yet there are a large number of common universals in sign languages, which explains why we Deaf people of the world are quickly able to communicate thoughts and ideas with Deaf people from other countries. In my experimental workshop at the Deaf Way '89, we made this discovery by analyzing how five pairs of Deaf actors from different parts of the world expressed the same story to their partners in their own respective sign languages. We found that a certain number of universals are an integral part of all sign languages.

- A variety of approaches to the complex task of translating spoken dialogue for Deaf theatre or sign language theatre needs to be found. Translation from written texts into artistic or theatrical signing is an important component of the work of every Deaf theatre. To do this successfully, each theatre company has to develop skills at using “sign play” and “signsmithing,” learning to express clearly the meaning of written texts in its national sign language. At the same time, each theatre group has to determine when it is appropriate for artistic purposes to take poetic license in transforming the imagery of written words into a medium which captures the mind and soul through the eye.

• There is a signed art form, termed Visual Vernacular (VV) which has universal appeal to Deaf performers and audiences alike for its use of cinematic techniques. VV does not involve words and signs but rather makes use of close-up views, the long shot, the panoramic view, zooming, slow motion, fast motion cross-cuts and cutaway views—all natural movements of the human body. It is close to our hearts, and Deaf actors with whom I have shared these techniques in my workshops are creative at expressing themselves in VV.

In closing, where do we go from here? The almost three decades since the first rendezvous between the NTD and the Moscow Theatre in Belgrade quite a short span of time when viewed within the context of the history of civilization. A number of Deaf theatres around the world have grown slowly and steadily toward full maturity, struggling to overcome amateurism. By exposing their work to others as well as being exposed to others’ work, theatre people of the Deaf world are thus able to see where they stand and how they can improve their theatres. They zigzag between original and adapted works, at times interpolating Deaf culture into classics or contemporary plays. Most Deaf theatres perform exclusively for Deaf audiences, but in a few countries, they promote their theatres to the hearing public as well. That is not to say that the Deaf theatres in these countries aim to bring about social change. Presenting Deaf theatre as an art form is their primary intent, although it may play a secondary critical part in helping to enhance the image of Deaf people. Through their dedication, Deaf theatre groups around the world have made significant and impressive contributions not only to their own Deaf communities but also to the general cultural life of the societies in which they live.

Information for Readers

You may be interested in knowing that a book is now being co-written by myself and Dr. Pat Scherer, director of the Center on Deafness in Chicago. It is a handbook for those who are interested in Deaf theatre or sign language theatre, and it includes such aspects as

1) the use of interpreters, readers or speaking actors;
2) the integration of deaf, hard of hearing and hearing actors, directors and producers;
3) various performance styles;
4) discussion of the merits of using an infrared system or captioning;
5) language for the stage. There are plans to translate the book into foreign languages for those involved in this kind of theatre around the world.