The National Theatre of the Deaf

The lone actor strutted proudly to the center of the stage, chest out, and head held high. He bowed slightly, then straightened and moved his head slowly sideways as his eyes scanned the audience. He raised his right, white-gloved hand and fingerspelled with machine-gun rapidity: "G-i-a-n-n-i S-c-h-i-c-c-i." He clapped his hands and suddenly the stage was overflowing with colorfully-costumed actors and movement... movement everywhere. Hands, fingers, faces, bodies, and voices began to communicate. No one had ever seen anything like it before.

The year was 1967. A new era in American theatre had begun. The National Theatre of the Deaf had arrived.

Samuel Hirsch described what he had seen as, "Pure art, drawn from a new medium of human expression." The National Observer called it, "Exciting, inventive, beautiful, and unusual."

And it was unique. While deaf persons in the audiences followed the performance in sign language, hearing actors signed and spoke their own roles and interpreted the spoken word for their deaf colleagues for the benefit of the hearing patrons. The result was, indeed, a performance where "you not only see everything that is said, you also hear everything that is shown."

The previous spring NTD had taped "Experiment in Television," for NBC, conducted its first three-week summer school, and gone on its first national tour. In addition to performing Giacamo Puccini's "Gianni Schicci," the NTD cast performed Saroyan's "The Man With His Heart in the Highlands," Tsuruya Namboku's "The Tale of Kasane," and "Tyger! Tyger! and Other Burnings."

When word got out of NBC's plans to show "Experiment in Television," which was the first major production using sign language on national television, the network received a telegram from the Alexander Graham Bell Association objecting to such plans and arguing that the exposure of sign language on television would undermine the efforts of "thousands of parents of deaf children and teachers of the deaf who are trying to teach deaf children to speak." The telegram also predicted that "This program will evoke unfavorable reaction from educators and parents and the informed public."

Next, NBC received a letter from the director of the Bell Association which stated: "... we are opposed to any programming which indicates that the use of the language of signs is inevitable for deaf children or it is anything more than an artificial language, and a foreign one at that, for the deaf of this country."

This opposition to the program caught unsuspecting NBC executives by surprise. They turned to NTD Director David Hays for reaction. Hays responded to the Bell objections and pointed out that such programs would "bring enormous cultural benefit to the deaf who are deprived of theatre" and "show highly gifted deaf people working in a developed art form of great beauty..."

When word reached the deaf community of the Bell Association's objections, NBC began receiving letters in support of the program. NBC decided to proceed with the program, and it appeared on national television that year.

But how did the National Theatre of the Deaf come about? It had been started at the O'Neill Theatre Center in Waterford, Connecticut, in 1965. The O'Neill Memorial Theatre Foundation had come into existence only a year before. Named in memory of Eugene O'Neill, the O'Neill Theatre Center was formed to preserve and promote legitimate theatre in America.

The widespread adoption and use of pure oralism in teaching deaf children in the late 19th century had relegated sign language to a villain-like role and blamed it as the obstacle to the satisfactory development of speech by deaf children. As a result, sign language became unpopular and a stigma was attached to it which made many persons uncomfortable...
THE EUGENE O'NEILL MEMORIAL THEATRE FOUNDATION presents

THE NATIONAL THEATRE OF THE DEAF

A SPECTACULAR EVENING—
FOUR PLAYS

Directed by
YOSHIO Aoyama
JOHN HIRSCH
GEOE LASKO
JOE LAYTON

FIRST NATIONAL TOUR
and unwilling to use it in public. Some educators and parents openly forbade its use. Those who continued to use sign language were often led to feel that they did so only because they were oral failures. Consequently, with their own language under attack, deaf people felt guilty and very much like an unwanted minority. The attempt to make hearing persons out of deaf people led to their loss of identity. While their deafness and the daily problems it created persisted, there was, except for an occasional newspaper article or within family circles—little awareness of the plight of deaf people. They were, as Mack Scism noted, "America's great unknown minority."

Could a national theatre of the deaf change attitudes towards deaf people and their language?

When David Hays, one of Broadway's outstanding scenic designers, saw Thornton Wilder's "Our Town," at Gallaudet College, he was struck by the beauty of sign language on the stage. Hays saw signs as "sculpture in the air." To him sign language was not the crude gesticulation it had been portrayed to be but "fluid, delicate, powerful, image-rich language."

Edna Levine, Anne Bancroft, and Arthur Penn had submitted a proposal to the federal government requesting funds to establish a national theatre of the deaf, but the proposal had been turned down. When the O'Neill Center began, David Hays helped George White start it. He remembered the Levine proposal and seeing "Our Town." He began to envision a new
theatre concept based on visual language and approached Levine about it. Levine introduced Hays to Bernard Bragg, who had studied mime under the famous French pantomimist, Marcel Marceau. Bragg was the first deaf professional actor-mime to gain national attention in the United States. He had performed many one-man shows throughout the country and in Europe. He had appeared on national television and, at one time, had his own weekly television show which featured him as “The Quiet Man.”

Hays developed a proposal with input from Bragg, Levine, and others and submitted it to the Social and Rehabilitation Service of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. He was mainly interested in the artistic possibilities, but he was in essence proposing to use the theatre to address social ills affecting deaf people. Was such an approach possible? To some the idea was startling, but Hays argued that before social attitudes could be changed and better employment opportunities gained for deaf people there had to be a more truthful and accurate image of deaf people and their capabilities. More awareness had to be created. What would be a better way than to expose the public to a group of deaf people at their best—articulate, well-trained, highly skilled, professional deaf actors in a totally new setting? It was a bold idea in the late 1960s—some even thought it a bit radical. When many first heard of the proposal their first question was “A National Theatre of the What?” Fortunately, a planning grant was approved and the National Theatre of the Deaf was on its way.

If the National Theatre of the Deaf were to be successful, it had to be different, Hays, Bragg, and their colleagues realized. They would have to attempt an approach never tried before by other professional theatre groups. They decided to make NTD a language theatre—a theatre that would concentrate on visual language. While pantomime was considered part of this theatre it was decided early to avoid excessive use of that medium (which was popular among deaf theatre groups in Europe) because it was a form which belonged to hearing theatre and because it emphasized muteness—an image deaf actors did not wish to convey.

And, did it work? In comparison to the first tour which took the company to major cities in the United States, the 23rd tour took the troupe on a 30,000-mile swing through nine states and to Japan, South Korea, and Singapore. During the past two decades of the company’s existence, it has done almost 3,000 performances, and appeared in more than 400 theatres, the first company to perform in all 50 states. It has performed in 16 foreign countries making it the most traveled American theatre company. The company (continued on page 356)
Some of the actors and actresses who are or have been with the National Theatre of the Deaf

All photos courtesy of the National Theatre of the Deaf.

CAROLE LEE AQUILINE

BETTI BONNI

JANICE COLE

PAUL JOHNSTON

CHARLES COREY

RITA COREY

GILBERT EASTMAN

RALPH WHITE

SAMUEL E. EDWARDS
In 1971 the National Theatre of the Deaf produced its first original work, a five-part piece entitled, "My Third Eye." Written by members of the cast, this production introduced the audience to the world of deafness and to sign language and included an amusing "side-show" where "strange" people talked instead of signed. The actors also shared their personal experiences of being deaf. Some excerpts from the biography segment:

Bernard Bragg: When I was four and a half years old, I was awakened one morning, bathed, dressed in fresh, new clothes, and given my breakfast. My mother and I left the apartment together, and I never went back there again.

As we walked to the subway, I asked, "Where are we going?" but my mother didn't reply. I felt a peculiar panic I'd never felt before. "Mother, where are you taking me," I asked again.

"Don't worry, I am with you. Everything is all right," she replied. For the first time in my life, this reassurance wasn't enough. I was frightened.

When the subway ride was over, we walked several blocks to an ominous building on Riverside Drive. Once inside, I smelled, for the first time, the institutional odor of cleanliness and disinfectant. I felt confined by the high ceilings, and dwarfed by the emptiness of the glistening corridors.

I was at the New York School for the Deaf where I would be a boarding student for the next thirteen years of my life. We were standing in the superintendent's office. I was filled with the sickening panic of a washed-away world. My mother kissed me and said, "This is the place where you will get all your education ..." She kissed me and was gone.

Everything I loved and trusted had left me. I was bathed again, and given my uniform. My hair was combed and the supervisor took me into a playroom where other children were playing. It was the first time I had ever seen other deaf children. I knew they were deaf because they behaved differently from the hearing children I knew. "Is this what school is?" I wondered, "a place where children are taken, and left?"

The children in my neighborhood went to school, but they came home every day. I wanted to live at home with my parents, like they did. A boy came to
me and began to sign. He was the son of deaf parents like I was. I was overjoyed because I had someone to talk to. We talked excitedly, and the preoccupation with this new friendship eased my sorrow temporarily.

That night when I was put to bed in a large dormitory, I cried. I thought about my mother and father. I longed for the comforting darkness of my own room. I had watched the other children playing and talking after dinner. They seemed happy. They had each other, but I still had a mother and father.

Maybe they had mothers and fathers ... Maybe someday I would be as happy as they were ... Maybe some day ... and I drifted off to sleep. My first day of school was over.

Freda Norman: A teacher said to me, "Teaching the deaf children through the means of oralism is the best method to adopt because: the majority is hearing and it is up to the minority like you to join them. Being able to speak is likely to help you people to be accepted into the world."

So I spent my life trying to be like the others and I can speak, and read lips. And I wonder, now, how valuable it is that we must always try to be like others. My deafness is ... myself, it is not something that I must fight against, or hide, or overcome.

Joe Sarpy: When I was small, my parents wanted me to attend oral school where children were not allowed to use the language of the hands—sign language or fingerspelling, but had to learn speech and lipreading. My parents are hearing. They wouldn't learn sign language. They hoped I would communicate with them in their way. The teacher said OK and started to teach me how to say different sounds. The teacher held my hand on my throat and nose to feel the vibrations. The teacher wanted me to feel the vibrations that happen when I said M ... M ... M ... and N ... N ... N ... . And the teacher put a stick to hold down my tongue and it touched my windpipe, the teacher wanted to hear me say Ah ... Ah ... Ah ... , and I almost vomited.

Mary Beth Miller: My teacher would use the same stick for all of the children.

Bernard Bragg: It took me weeks and weeks before I was able to make my "K" sound right. At the end of my first school year, there was a demonstration for parents and visitors. I came up on a platform and made just that one letter. The audience applauded, but my mother who is deaf just stared at me as if to ask, "Was that all I had learned during all that time?"

Mary Beth Miller: I would teach some of the kids who knew no sign language. The teacher would tie my hands together.

Ed Waterstreet: Same in my school, when I tried to sign with my friends the teacher caught me and made me sit on my hands.

Bernard Bragg: Spontaneous outbursts of laughter in the classroom were often stilled by scornful reprimands from our fifth-grade teacher not so much because they were impolite or erupted at inappropriate times as because he said they sounded disgustedly unpleasant or irritating—even animalistic. Young and uncomprehending as we were, we were given long lectures on the importance of being consistently aware of what our laughter sounded like to those who could hear. From that time on, we were forced to undergo various exercises like breathing through nose only—breathing through mouth only—either with sound or without—
doing these repeatedly with our hands on our stomachs or heads.

Compliments were often lavished upon those who came up with forced, but perfectly controlled laughter—and glares were given to those who failed to laugh “properly” or didn’t sound like a “normal” person. Some of us have since then forgotten how to laugh the way we had been taught.

And there are two or three from our group, who have chosen to laugh silently for the rest of their lives.

Mary Beth Miller: When I was 15 or 16—Sam, my brother-in-law and I were talking in the front room about different kinds of fire crackers he bought in Tennessee. He had regular fire crackers—cherry bombs, and TNT. I was fascinated by the TNT. My father was in the living room but he was busy reading. Then he got up and took the paper with him. I knew instantly that he was going to the bathroom. Because he was deaf he always left the door open a crack because the insurance man or paper boy or someone might come—and we might need to let him know. Then Sam and I started talking about the fire crackers again. I asked him all kinds of questions like, “What will happen if I threw a TNT in a garbage can?” He told me that TNT will make dents in the can. He also told me that if I throw a cherry bomb in the toilet it will split open. Sam said, “Father in bathroom?” I said, “Yes.” All of a sudden we both got the same idea and smiled. Sam handed me a cherry bomb and said, “Go on.” I took it and walked through the bed room—dining room and kitchen. I paused because I was a little bit nervous and jittery about it. Sam encouraged me and finally I gave in. I opened the bathroom door and could barely see my father—although the newspaper and his hands were visible. I lit the cherry bomb—ran to the front room. As I ran I felt the shock of the explosion. Sam and I sat down and talked about something else. It was very hard to keep a poker face. Sam said that father was coming. His pants were half down and the torn newspaper in his hand. “What happened?” Then he looked at me and signed, “Don’t you ever do that again!” Then he turned and went back to the bathroom. For three days after that he was constipated.

has done television specials—“A Child’s Christmas in Wales,” and “Who Knows One” for such networks as NBC, CBS, PBS and Dutch and Danish TV. NTD officials estimate over one hundred million television viewers have seen their performances. NTD has been credited with “sparking the establishment” of similar theatres of the deaf in Sweden, England, Australia, France, and Canada.

Three smaller companies have been formed, two Little Theatres of the Deaf and a Theatre of Sign. A Professional School for Deaf Theatre Personnel offers summer workshops for promising deaf playwrights, aspiring actors, and persons interested in developing community theatres.

NTD actors have appeared on national television productions, in soap operas, movies, and commercials. Audree Norton has performed in “Mannix,” “Family Affair,” “Man and the City,” and “Streets of San Francisco.” Bernard Bragg has appeared twice on the David Frost Show. Linda Bove is a regular on Public Broadcasting Service’s “Sesame Street.” She played the role of Melissa in the television serial, “Search for Tomorrow.” Tim Scanlon has appeared on “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood,” “Sesame Street,” and “What’s My Line.” Edmund Waterstreet, who has appeared on “The Mike Douglas Show,” was a Cleo Award finalist for his United Way television commercial in 1978. Phyllis Frelich starred in Mark Medoff’s “Children of a Lesser God,” which appeared on Broadway. The play was based on her and her hearing husband’s lives.

Today sign language no longer carries a stigma. It is respected as a language and is used widely in the education of deaf children. On stage and on television it has been seen by millions at its best—the beautiful, artful, expressive means of communication that it is. Thousands and thousands of Americans have begun to learn sign language so that they can communicate more freely with their fellow deaf Americans. The increased popularity of sign language has given deaf people a new pride and a better self-image. Job opportunities have broadened because of increased awareness of deaf people and their capabilities. Deaf actors have become the heroes and models of deaf and hearing children alike. Bernard Bragg noted these changes when he observed: “People used to push my hands down in embarrassment and tell me not to sign in public. Now people pay to see me perform in sign language.”

Let us display the deaf, who can be just as talented, intelligent, charming, and beautiful as hearing people, in a glamorous and exciting new setting. Let us send them forth as actors equal to the best hearing actors in the world.

—DAVID HAYS