of expression. But the change was not without consequence; as Deaf actors blended voice with sign language performance, their style of performing changed. Finding themselves no longer on stage alone, but working with speaking actors, Deaf actors changed how they performed, and they changed their choice of material to perform.

The few films of the Los Angeles Club for the Deaf during the 1940s that have survived featured the style of performance favored at the time: vaudeville shows, short comedy skits, and even dreadful blackface performances, alternating with beauty pageants and awards ceremonies. Other films show poetry, typically translations of the classics, and singing in the form of rhythmic clapping, or dancing to popular tunes like “Yankee Doodle.” In her history of Deaf theater, Dorothy Miles describes community performances as descendants of the early “literary societies” founded at schools for the deaf. She claims that the earliest such society is the Clerc Literary Association of Philadelphia, founded in 1865. Gallaudet College founded its literary society in 1874.

Wolf Bragg was popular for his Deaf club performances through the 1930s when he conceived the idea of mounting full-length play productions under the auspices of the Hebrew Association of the Deaf. Using money pooled from friends and fellow aspiring actors, Wolf produced sign language translations of mainstream plays, including The Monkey's Paw and Auf Weidersehen, both popular with audiences during the years leading up to the Second World War. He rented high school theaters for the evening and printed fliers to distribute at Deaf clubs announcing the place and date of the performances. The plays were wildly popular, filling the theaters with two or three hundred in attendance, in part because Wolf himself was a compelling presence on stage.

Until his departure in 1925, Wolf had attended the New York School for the Deaf at Fanwood and learned the skill of sign storytelling from older students. As in other schools for the deaf at the
time, Fanwood had a tradition of performance in the evening hours after classes had ended. Wolf's strong sense of timing and colorfully vivid style of signing could hold an audience for hours. He would entertain audiences of friends at his home with stories cribbed from the *Reader's Digest*, with a favorite being one of a man who at the urging of his wife went on a hiking trip with his best friend, only to find himself the target of a murder planned by his wife and friend, who were having an affair. Without access to movies or to plays, which were not subtitled or captioned in those days, Deaf people were drawn to these informal storytelling events at homes and clubs as well as at plays performed at theaters. Like Yiddish theater aimed at a community both set apart and brought together by its foreign tongue, Deaf theater in New York promised its audience vivid sign language theater, and by all reports, it delivered.

Wolf Bragg's productions brought in Deaf people with little or no experience in acting, with sets designed on a shoestring on borrowed stages. Miles describes Wolf as a "demanding director" who coaxed performances out of fellow Deaf club members. Just as Yiddish theater responded to the growing demand of Jewish immigrants for entertainment in their own language, Deaf theater was designed for Deaf audiences. There was no voiced English translation of these productions because there was no one who needed to hear it. David Lifson describes Yiddish theater as a respite from the difficult lives that Jewish immigrants experienced, and a powerful reminder of what they had left behind in their homelands. In Deaf theater, the homeland was the community and the schools, brought together for a moment in an expression of drama. In the hands of directors like Wolf Bragg, sign language theater was arresting and satisfying.

During this period, Gallaudet College had an active theater; not only was there a dramatic club, where actors were invited to audition, but the college's fraternities and sororities mounted their own plays as well, creating a lively theatrical environment on campus.