The History of Deaf Theatre

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Introduction

Before Deaf theatre became a formal profession, it existed in various forms across the world. One such form was short-form comedy acts or poetry events at local Deaf clubs or short acts from the Gallaudet Theatre Club starting in 1892. These were not full-length performances, and the acts were performed by Deaf people for Deaf people. They rarely included interpreters in these acts. In the early 1900s, there were a few mainstream plays that involved Deaf characters, although these actors were seldom actually Deaf and the performance rarely included sign language as a respected manner of communication.

This lack of signed language often stemmed from ignorance about sign language as a language in its own right. Views of sign language as barbaric kept it out of mainstream theatre for many years. However, things began to change as sign language gained more respect, with research such as William Stokoe's to support the validity. As a result, plays began to more publicly include sign language as an expressive medium. The first play noted to use sign language in a respected way was *The Miracle Worker* by William Gibson, a play that follows the story of Helen Keller (Baldwin, 1993). More formal forms of Deaf theatre in the United States started to pop up around the 1960s. In 1961, Gallaudet University offered formal theatre classes, though they had theatre performances prior to this time.

Over the years, Deaf theatre has transformed and expanded. Many groups began to appear that would forever change the world of Deaf theatre, such as the National Theatre of the Deaf, or NTD, and Deaf West in the United States. In current days, many of these groups involve a variety of both hearing and Deaf actors. There is also an increasing number of plays with all-hearing casts that have interpreters, though the accessibility of that can be debated. What Deaf theatre is, what it means, and who it is for are all questions that need to be answered as theatre continues to develop.

National Theatre of the Deaf

When exploring Deaf theatre, one important group to note is the National Theatre for the Deaf, or NTD. This theatre group was encouraged and advocated for by many hearing people for many years before coming to fruition in 1967. The eventual co-founders were David Hayes and Bernard Bragg, with Hayes being the founding artistic director. Prior to working with the NTD, Hayes did not have any experience with the Deaf community or sign language, though he did have experience in theatre. Bernard Bragg was a Deaf man who had professional theatrical experience, even being involved in a television show.

The National Theatre of the Deaf hoped to bridge the gap between hearing theatre and Deaf theatre. Though most of the founders were hearing, many people involved held deep admiration and respect for the Deaf community, a large number of actors involved were Deaf, and many were graduates from Gallaudet. Two influential women, Anne Bancroft and Dr. Edna S Levine, helped to popularize the theatre in their own ways in the early days. Bancroft was a Broadway actor who became invested in the success of NTD. Bancroft's performance in *The Miracle Worker* play was what helped to inspire a full-fledged theatre for the Deaf (Fisher, 2015). She was an influential person in the world of Broadway, and very dedicated to learning about and engaging with the Deaf community. Dr. Edna S. Levine was a psychologist with experience working with Deaf clients. Together, their energy and dedication inspired David Hays and others to push on with this project through trials and tribulations. The women reached out to Hays for his help with the theatre because he had experience as a Broadway set designer (Fisher, 2015). The road to success was a long journey for the NTD, and they struggled to gather funding for sign-language productions on Broadway for many years.

Bancroft fought to argue that NTD was also a social tool; many Deaf people found themselves stuck in the same kinds of jobs with few opportunities for change. NTD would allow

Deaf people to be involved in the creative sphere in a natural way. Over time, however, Bancroft moved on to other pursuits. Finally, in 1962, NTD was able to set up in the Eugene O'Neill Center, which led to their success in receiving funding from the Vocational Rehabilitation Administration. After a few performances, including a few Gallaudet actors, the overall reactions were positive. Audiences enjoyed the uniqueness of their performances, and the group was able to secure and apply for more funding (Baldwin, 1993).

Backlash from the World

Hays listened to feedback from the Deaf community and brought on more deaf performers for the project, though that is not to say that they didn't experience backlash regardless. Groups such as ones operated by Alexander Graham Bell, a fierce defender of oralism, opposed the theatre when they were given a special program on NBC (Baldwin, 1993). The company found themselves having to defend not only their theatre, but the use of sign language as a valid language and culturally significant art form. David Hays and others who believed in and funded the NTD persevered and were able to establish a nationally touring group with NTD.

One man, Lou Fant, a hearing child of a Deaf adult, left his work at Gallaudet in order to help the National Theatre of the Deaf. Maher's book "Seeing Languages In Signs" provides insight from Fant about the early days of this theatre:

> "Nearly all of the productions of the NTD were rendered in manually coded English, because ASL was considered bastardized English and not proper for use on the stage. Occasionally we would throw in some colloquial expression from 'real sign language.' that was our term for the signed language used by most adult deaf people when communicating among themselves. I did a monologue… in which I used 'real sign

language,' and it caused some consternation among a couple of the members of the company."

Early on, the theatre was still having to tread carefully while attempting to break open the ignorance the Deaf community faced in the world. In some ways, they had to tailor their performances to both hearing and Deaf audiences, which may have at times limited their true accessibility to the Deaf community.

Deaf West

Following the successes of the National Theatre of the Deaf, Deaf West, another professional theatre company, came into fruition within the early nineties and is still growing to this day. Deaf West was founded in 1991 by a man named Ed Waterstreet, creating a theater for the deaf, specifically focusing on American Sign Language. Within Ed Waterstreet and his beliefs, "he strived to move away from what he believes to be NTD's idea of English being the dominant language of the stage. Waterstreet 'wanted true artistic expression of sign unrestrained by the dictates of the spoken world, and for the benefit of the deaf, not hearing audience.'" (Fisher, 2015).

Deaf West Theatre became well known within the twenty first century, and "like NTD, created the careers of many deaf actors and actresses of today, such as Daniel N. Durant, a deaf actor who started on the *Switched at Birth* television show, and is now acting alongside Marlee Matlin and Camryn Manheim on the stage production of *Spring Awakening*" (Fisher, 2015). The company puts on at minimum three to five different productions per year - specifically including national tours and Broadway productions. Outside of productions on stage, the company also has educational workshop opportunities, allowing deaf and hard of hearing people to learn more about theatre.

Deaf West Theatre takes their productions a step further, not simply just creating productions as is, but incorporating their own version of the stories being told, often including and weaving in Deaf culture and history while still keeping the major themes of the original production. This allows for the creation of a new message to be told, one that is geared towards and focused on the teachings of signed language and Deaf culture: "...DWT not only keeps the original themes intact but utilizes them to tell their own story, thereby reshaping the typically audio-centric form of musical theatre to shine a light on this marginalized community that is usually not even considered in the creation of such productions" (Rafus-Brenning, 2018). Creating a new movement of including and representing the Deaf community, Deaf West Theatre created a space for Deaf performers and audience members to be welcomed and allowed to enjoy a world where they are usually ignored or not considered. Creating productions that include signed language, sometimes spoken words, singing, dancing, and movement in general creates a layered performance that all audiences can connect with and communicate with.

Problems that Deaf West Faced

Despite overall positive community reactions to the theatre, like NTD, they also faced issues with financing. One popular play they produced was *Spring Awakening.* This production had to rely on crowdfunding to be brought to Broadway, but the overall lack of investment in America in Deaf theatre was apparent through their struggles (Donovan, 2023). Donovan's article "Broadway Bodies: A Critical History of Conformity" delves deep into another problem that Deaf West experienced: their public perception from an accessibility standpoint. He explains that the performances created by Deaf West were inherently "bilingual," and therefore may lead to some misconceptions about ASL to hearing viewers. Those who do not know ASL may watch these performances and believe that ASL is a gestural or dance-like language, misunderstanding

that it is a language itself. Despite Waterstreet's goals to create a production that was more accessible and focused on Deaf people rather than hearing, some criticize the approach that they landed on.

Another approach that Deaf West takes that may perpetuate harmful ideas is the use of simultaneous communication in their performances. Simultaneous communication, also referred to as SimCom, is an approach in which people both speak and sign at the same time. Methods of language, such as SimComming, may also present misconceptions about signed language to the hearing community because SimComming inherently degrades the signing quality. Donovan's article notes the harm of SimComming, stating: "it should be noted that many d/Deaf people do not consider SimCom effective, in part because it privileges voiced language due to the fact that talking renders the speaker's face unavailable for the nonverbal cues that are an integral part of ASL. Nevertheless, *DWSA*'s SimCom staging and its emphasis on the characters' inability to communicate became entwined" (Donovan, 2023).

The Black Drum

The Black Drum is the first completely Deaf-led signed musical. It was first performed at The Festival Clin d'Oeil in France and also produced by the Deaf Culture Center and the Canadian Culture Society of the Deaf. *The Black Drum* stands as a testament to an incredible representation and milestone for the Deaf community and theatre. Though previous groups aimed to create theatre that was accessible to Deaf audiences, *The Black Drum* did not focus on the hearing audience. All cast members were Deaf, as well as the crew and producers. The play focuses more on feeling rather than the auditory sense of hearing. Signed music is an artistic method of music that incorporates signed language lyrics and/or non-auditory-based works of music. Signed music does not translate whatsoever to pre-existing works of music, and its

composition, recording, and performance of it is completely created and done on its own. Performers used the vibration of drums and the visual aspects to tell “the story of a young woman (Joan) whose life is upended as she mourns the death of her wife (Karen). She is propelled on a fantastical journey to a sinister ‘in-between’ dark world controlled by the “Minister,” with no music, laughter, love, or freedom” (Cripps, et. al, 2022). Joan continues on to discover her own version of signed music and Deaf identity, and uses her version of a colorful world to defeat the Minister.

As discovered in interviews between cast and team members, it is clear that the Deaf actors and production team members had previously only worked with ‘hearing-dominated’ production teams and cast member groups. Inclusion between the Deaf and hearing community was possible due to the cast and crew members engaging with everyone’s community and artistic expressions, as well as recognizing one’s own oppression. Performers and cast members who have experienced signed language oppression within society were able to remain true to themselves and signed language. This is important because “incorporating signed language in publicly accessible artistic work is beneficial for all audiences and ultimately enriches Deaf and hearing alike. Engaging diverse audience members meaningfully without sacrificing collective creation and ownership among signing Deaf professionals makes *The Black Drum* unique in mainstream theatre” (Cripps, 2024).

This gave the production its honor of being an authentic performance. It put a spotlight on how things changed from using hearing-led influences to fully Deaf performances by Deaf led and owned art forms. This approach preserved the storytelling nature of Deaf culture. Songs like “Boat, Drink, Fun, Enjoy…” and “Oh Darn, I Hear Nothing!” both showcase the authentic experiences by Deaf people and embody the sound of silence. Musical theatre was given a new

definition. Compared to interpreted music, oftentimes, the meaning can be lost in translation. American Sign Language is an expressive language that must be articulated correctly in every part of its English translation to become truly accessible to Deaf audiences.

When the narrative focuses on music being strictly for hearing people, creativity is limited. Through the shift in focus, *The Black Drum* realized that theatre and music should not be perceived as only for the ears. The multisensory show gives the audience a completely different experience. Movement, vibration, and emotion all play a role in what is felt when seeing the show for the first time. It bridges the gap between what is heard and what is felt. The audience gets to "hear" with their eyes and their bodies.

A story must contain the ability to move the audience internally, mentally and emotionally. Bahan's principle of storytelling contains the tale, the performer, and the audience (Bahan, 2006). In this case, the drum in the performance was not only seen, but felt through vibrations by the audience.

After watching the performance, the audience's reactions were documented. There was a strong sense of cultural belonging in the Deaf audience members who attended. Their approach also highlights the cultural importance and deeper meaning behind why it is so important for hearing interpreters to be fully immersed as well.

The success of *The Black Drum* has inspired Deaf actors and artists all over the world. It influenced many to create their own work and begin casting Deaf people and representing their own community. *The Black Drum* was built on its own form of influence by those from the National Theatre of the Deaf. The continued celebration of the Deaf community and use of American Sign Language in theatre redefines the meaning of storytelling.

The foundation that this production is based on is a passion for culture, its people, and spreading awareness through a new found art form. It is more than just any performance; *The Black Drum* is experiencing theatre in a brand new way. It challenges the societal norm of music only being auditory and paves the way for inclusivity and expression.

Defining Accessibility and the Future of Deaf Theatre

Accessibility is not just providing wheelchair access to handicapped theatregoers or putting a sign language interpreter in the corner for Deaf audience; instead, it's to provide an immersive and inclusive experience to those who are Deaf, Blind, Hard of Hearing or DeafBlind. In many modern-day productions of plays, there is an interpreter placed on the side of the stage while hearing actors perform. These are called sign language interpreted performances, or SLIPS. The goal with placing an interpreter offstage is to provide "accessibility," but one research article noted that actual attendance from the Deaf community was low during these performances, insinuating that these performances may not be succeeding in their goals (Richardson, 2017). The goals of groups such as the National Theatre of the Deaf, Deaf West, and teams behind *The Black Drum* are to provide true accessibility to both the audience and the cast members, though some may argue that they sometimes fall short in these areas.

The lack of more accessible performances, however, could also be attributed to the struggles for funding. As mentioned, several performances by Deaf Theatre groups had to depend on community involvement and fundraising for their own performances. Entire productions that are Deaf-led and performed in sign language may bring in less revenue due to the fact that Deaf people are in a minority. Hearing people who want to be "accessible" may believe that providing an interpreter is the next best cost-effective option. However, the future of

truly "accessible" performances depends on better funding and support for groups that already exist and want to enter the world of theatre.

Despite struggles for funding or controversies in accessibility, the continuing success of both the National Theatre of the Deaf and Deaf West is important when it comes to defining Deaf Theatre as its own style or movement, both providing important information and history in the growing emergence and understanding of what Deaf Theatre truly is. Not only has it brought new actors to the table and given hearing individuals the chance to learn about Deaf culture through the use of signed language, but most importantly, it has allowed the Deaf community and culture to grow and become more prominent within society: “Deaf Theatre has become a country-wide phenomenon that is steadily climbing in the hearing culture and is being labeled as a style among the likes of Realism, Symbolism, and many more, and it will continue to thrive in the upcoming years” (Fisher, 2015).

Additionally, the accessibility of *The Black Drum* performance provides an important reference for the future of Deaf theatre and accessibility. If sign language interpreted performances produce low turnouts for Deaf audiences, these performances should no longer be the majority of “accessible” productions for the Deaf community. Performances that do not try to accommodate for the lack of sound but instead focus on the feeling of vibrations or visuals may produce larger turnouts for Deaf audiences.

Conclusion

Deaf Theatre aims to take away oppressive and ignorant ideologies from the stage and create an environment that Deaf people can thrive in, not only as members of the theatre production, but as members of the audience. Striving to create these spaces has been around as long as Deaf people have in various forms. Though it started as smaller group performances

taking place at residential schools or in Deaf clubs locally, it has now spread into a worldwide profession and phenomenon. The expansion of this career has given many Deaf people opportunities to bring their creativity to the world in the language that is their own. Focusing on Deaf people and how they naturally experience the world is the way to create a truly accessible theatre. In the future, funding to support those in this field will be vital to the success of Deaf theatre and this will require collaboration between the Deaf and the hearing communities.

Deaf theatre challenges the norm of who and what theatre is for. The importance of funding and support for Deaf cast and production is crucial. The future of Deaf theatre is being able to showcase the experiences of Deaf people for Deaf people. It is integral to incorporate accessibility into the very art that tells the story of those who have been forgotten.

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