

THE THEATRE OF THE DEAF

The appearance of talented deaf performers in stage and film theatres around the world has helped to greatly increase public awareness of deafness and the deaf community over the last twenty to thirty years. There is now a tradition of professional theatres of deaf actors in many of the advanced nations. Russia houses the oldest company, the MOSCOW THEATRE OF MIMICRY AND GESTURE, which has been in operation on and off for 60 years. The USA hosts perhaps a half-dozen professional theatres of the deaf, the most famous of which is the NATIONAL THEATRE OF THE DEAF with performances on Broadway and internationally in over twenty foreign countries. England has had INTERIM THEATRE, Japan has just started the JAPANESE NATIONAL THEATRE OF THE DEAF, and there is the professional THEATRE OF THE DEAF here in Australia.

This is the Australian THEATRE OF THE DEAF's 10th year, its fifth as a fully professional theatre organization. The time has nurtured the growth of an amateur community theatre group into one of New South Wales' best known Theatre In Education companies. This is a position we hope to maintain and improve, if possible, reaching beyond New South Wales to other states and other mediums.

As Australia's only professional company of deaf and hearing performers using sign language as an art form, we find that we have two sets of responsibilities:

First, we have community obligations to give positive credit to the expressive capabilities of Australian Sign Language and the people who use it. Although we are not a welfare-action group, because we are in a highly visible position we must help remove many of the misconceptions about deafness--either directly through the specific themes of our programmes, or indirectly through positive presentations highlighting the capabilities of our deaf performers.

Second, as a professional theatre company we have the responsibility of providing high quality performances and making them accessible to the greatest number of people in Australia.

The main body of our work at present is in the Theatre In Education programmes, touring Infant, Primary, and Secondary schools presenting performances and visual theatre workshops in sign language and voice. We are also providing workshops for High School, University, and professional theatre groups as this allows us the opportunity to demonstrate our work and how it is developed, and it gives the students a chance to visualize thoughts--presenting them concretely as an experiment in a new discipline, or in conjunction with standard acting techniques.

Theatre In Education is unique to my experience. Here in New South Wales there are a great number of individuals and companies vying for performance time in any and all of the hundreds of public and private schools throughout the Sydney Metropolitan Area. There is, in a way, a TIE glut.

Because the Department of Education does not make itself responsible for providing school children with in-house theatre programmes, it is the role of every TIE company to create meaningful experiences that leave the students with a better understanding or interest in a topic either immediately or extra-curricularly relevant.

At the THEATRE OF THE DEAF, our major concern is to find literate material with a vital combination of the visual and spoken word. Since few children have any direct experience with sign language, we encourage audience participation in creating and using gestures, clarifying those signs that most catch the children's eye, and holding a direct dialogue between actors and audience. In many of our performances and workshops we leave time for questions about sign language, deafness, or the specific work. These are important times for us and the feedback can be more telling than hearty applause--though that, too, is always welcome.

In a sense, deaf people are natural actors. The hearing impairment creates an initial barrier in communication that is broken down through concentrated and active efforts where inventing a clarifying gesture or mimed movement becomes a routine of daily life. It is the basic drive to communicate that makes 'the invisible handicap' visible and, in the case of sign language, theatrically valuable.

In THEATRE OF THE DEAF performances we use a theatrical form of Australian Sign Language. The developed and most widely recognized gestures and signs of the Australian deaf community are adapted and enlarged to make a stage language that is both comprehensible and lyric.

Sign language is not universal, as many would believe. Each country has developed or borrowed one of the various manual alphabets and sign systems to create individual national languages. Many would opt for an international sign language, but the value of the individual languages is that the gestures often reflect a nation's perspectives and cultural traditions.

The Australian sign phrase for 'good morning' is the "thumbs-up" gesture for 'good' followed by a movement somewhat resembling pulling on one's clothes. In America, the phrase is 'good' plus a gesture creating a picture of the sun rising over the horizon. In Japan, it is a head-off-the-pillow "waking from sleep" followed by two index fingers (indicating two people) approaching each other and--in the uniquely Asian form of greeting--'bowing'.

For those well versed in gesture languages signs are more easily understood internationally than the various verbal languages, despite the differences. But there can be confusions. The American phrase for 'good morning' is also very similar to those well known Italian gestures that usually accompany the heated and colorful arguments following minor traffic accidents on the streets of Rome.

The initial value of TIE is the quality of the theatrical experience during the performance. The next step is equally important, yet it is frequently out of our hands: it is the nature of any and all follow-up discussions as led by the teacher in or out of the classroom.

The TIE programmes can really succeed only with the greatest co-operation between the teachers and the artists. From first contact and booking onward, the teachers are our main link in providing satisfying performances in the schools. It is important that we give the teachers the information needed to prepare students for our arrival. It is equally important that the teachers do not let the performances come and go as in a vacuum.

To make the most of the one or two hours teachers and artists spend together in contact with the students, I encourage any dialogue that would help clarify needs, expectations, and achievements. We ask for assessments and offer return visits for workshops or other performances. We invite suggestions on how to improve our follow up work and we encourage each teacher to spend as much time as can be given discussing the effectiveness and material of each TIE presentation. I am certain every TIE group would agree that we, too, want to know what was learned, what questions were asked, what was 'a favorite part'.

I firmly believe Theatre In Education is an avenue for worthwhile and entertaining learning experiences. As with any learning experience, those ideas that remain after 'the lesson' is over are the telling ones, and often the most valuable.

---Ben Strout
Artistic Director
Theatre of the Deaf