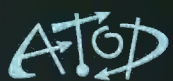


high school education kit

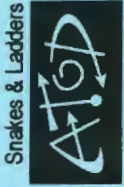


Performing  
quality  
school shows  
for 21 years

australian theatre of the deaf

# Snakes & Ladders





# Australian Theatre of the Deaf

In 2000 Australian Theatre of the Deaf (ATOD) celebrates its 21st birthday as a professional theatre company. Supported by the Australia Council for the Arts, NSW Ministry for the Arts, sponsors, members and donations, ATOD produces mainstage productions, school shows for all levels of education and community shows.

Renowned for its unique and accessible visual style, the company tours throughout Australia and supplements its program with workshops in visual theatre and non-verbal communication, performances at corporate events, launches, fundraisers and festivals. ATOD also organises Auslan (Australian Sign Language) Interpreted performances for other theatre companies.

## 'Snakes & Ladders'

"One out of five people will experience mental illness at some time in their life. This may not affect you but it will certainly affect someone you know" This vital message about mental health is relevant to the whole community but particularly the teenagers of today.

Three talented Deaf actors bring this message home in a positive and touching story of a young woman's grapple with mental illness, and her eventual triumph with the support of her friends. We see thoughts materialise as a shadow, casting a haze of confusion, but as her shadow dissolves with help, a powerful message of hope and understanding is received by all.

## Education Kit

This education kit introduces aspects of Mental Health and Illness plus information about Deafness and Sign Language. We have accompanied the information with activity ideas to enhance your classroom preparation for the show and discussions after the performance. These activity ideas are starting points and can be adapted to suit different years or different subject areas.

For further activities regarding visual theatre and non-verbal communication, Australian Theatre of the Deaf can run the workshop 'Drama with vision' at your school. Led by professional Deaf actors, 'Drama with Vision' explores theatre techniques designed to free the imagination to enable students to communicate their ideas visually. Skills developed have applications in any public speaking, presentation and/or drama situations that require confidence, visual communication and understanding of body language and movement. Special discounts apply for schools that have booked a performance of 'Snakes & Ladders'.

Additional resources are listed on the back of this kit and you are also welcome to contact the ATOD office to discuss ideas further.

# Mental Health & Illness

We recommend that students are not informed that this show is about mental illness, and discussions on mental health topics are conducted after the performance.

Having no prior knowledge means that as students witness the development of the main character's illness they will experience an accurate simulation of the confusion, shock and stigma that affects many when they learn their friend or loved one is suffering from a mental illness.

## Discussion points

Mental illness has been a taboo subject that has only recently been acceptable to discuss in public. TV advertising campaigns staged over the past 5 years have been a major catalyst for opening the path to discussion. Now many are aware that one in five people will experience a mental illness at some time in their life. But despite the public awareness some myths, stereotypes and stigma still linger from the earlier days. Providing a forum for students to discuss mental health facts helps break down the incorrect assumptions and fear. Knowledge leads to acceptance, early detection and support.

### \* Body and Mind

An important point to raise when discussing mental illness is that the 'mind' is really part of the body. There should be no distinction between illnesses that affect our physical bodies and those that affect our mental state. Mental illness does not mean that a person is lazy, weak or bad. It is an illness, just like cancer or heart disease. A person cannot be blamed for having a mental illness. Just like people with physical illnesses, they need our care and support. Most mental illnesses are caused by chemical and hormonal imbalances that the sufferer has no control over. Apart from behavioural changes mental illnesses can also have physical symptoms (for example not sleeping well, or sleeping too much) thus showing the strong link between body and mind.

### \* Good mental health

In the same way we can keep our bodies healthy (sport and diet etc) we can also look after our mental state. Good mental health means feeling good about yourself and having control of your life. Going out with friends and sharing problems is a good step to maintaining a healthy mind. Good mental health means having a balance in your life to enjoy the good things and manage the stressful and sad times in a healthy way.

Of course we can all feel stressed out or sad but when the feeling remains for a long time or our emotions are too strong with no balance then it is time to get help. Feeling very sad (depression) or too full of energy and extremely happy (mania) are signs that our mental health may be unstable. When we have symptoms of physical ailments we go to the doctor for advice, so our mental well being should be treated with the same respect and awareness.

# Mental Health & Illness cont...

## \* Knowing the signs

Some mental illnesses manifest during the late teenage years due to chemical changes in the body (ie Schizophrenia and Bipolar Disorder). For this reason it is important that students learn the signs of mental illness. In 'Snakes and Ladders' we have avoided portraying one particular mental illness. Instead we have drawn on a mix of symptoms from different illnesses. Accompanying this kit is a booklet that goes into more detail of each mental illness. It has been written to educate a Deaf audience but the information can be applied to anyone.

## \* Recovery

Mental illness can affect people in many different ways. It can be a brief illness or it can be a long-term illness. For sufferers of a long-term illness they may have periods similar to remission where they are completely well before relapsing.

In the past, people with mental illness were often locked away. Sadly nobody knew how to help these people and nobody really wanted to know about it. Now we know that people can get help for their illness. With the right treatment and support most people can lead healthy and normal lives and socialise in the community. And of course early detection like any disease is the best way to a quicker recovery.

## \* They had it too

One way to break down the stigma surrounding mental illness is to recognise that anyone can be affected including famous people. Of course not all of these cases are public knowledge but some celebrities have disclosed their illness to help others. For example we have all heard the sad stories of Vincent Van Gogh, Winston Churchill suffered from clinical depression and to promote awareness Australian Gary McDonald has openly discussed his long battle with anxiety disorder.

## ACTIVITY IDEAS

### 1. Learn the signs

Ask students to pick one illness and research the symptoms and the treatment.

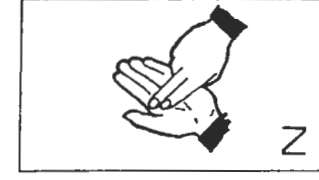
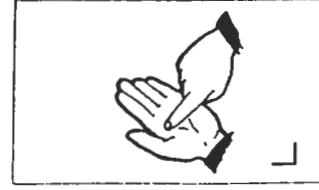
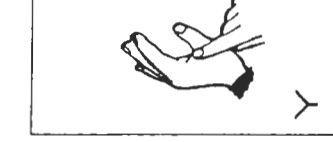
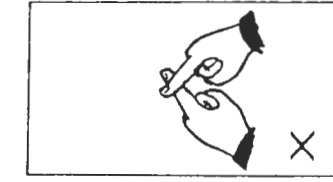
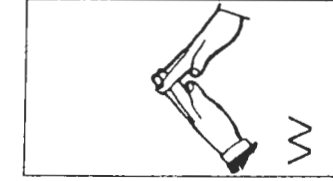
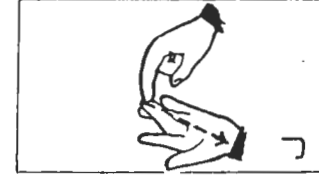
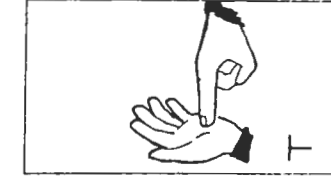
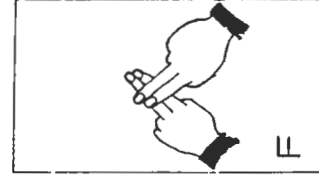
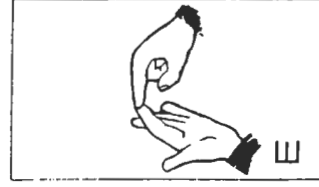
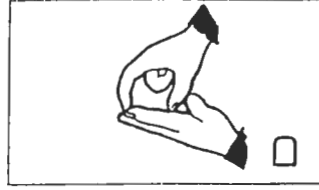
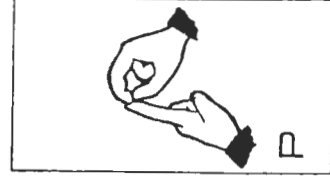
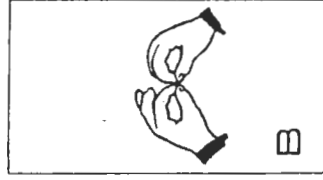
### 2. Stereotypes

People suffering from mental illness are usually subjected to cruel stereotypes. To help students understand why these stereotypes are falsehoods it is useful to explore how stereotypes are formed. Stereotypes are a set of adjectives to describe a defined group of people. The smaller the number of adjectives selected the stronger the stereotype (eg: 3 or 4 adjectives is a strong stereotype). The adjectives are based on assumptions, therefore more information and closer involvement with a defined group will decrease the strength of stereotypes. Test this theory by trying to define groups (eg Americans vs a stereotype of your class etc).

### 3. Where to get help

Using the phone book as a starting point ask students to formulate a list of where to get help for a friend that has a mental illness.

ALPHABET:  
 Right hand only moves in  
 arrow.  
 all formations.



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# Visual Theatre

Most of the action in 'Snakes & Ladders' involves no talking. Instead the Deaf actors employ visual theatre techniques to convey the story. Following are some games and activities that will introduce students to some of the techniques used in the show.

## ACTIVITY IDEAS

### 1. **Everyday visual communication**

There are many forms of visual communication that are used in every day life.

In some cases these are used to enhance clarity of verbal information (eg: sports referees, body language, facial expressions) but in the majority of instances they are the only effective means of communication for the situation (eg: policeman directing traffic, road signs, semaphore, gesturing with someone who speaks a different language, friends waving hello etc). Ask students to list or demonstrate examples of visual communication and body language in every day life.

### 2. **Imaginary Clay**

Mime relies on the imagination of the audience and the artist to create a pretend environment and objects. This exercise will help students both perform and comprehend mime. Sit students in a circle. One by one, each student mimes creating an object out of imaginary clay. The student then shows how the object is used. When the object has been demonstrated clearly, so that someone can guess what it is, the student can then squash the object back into a ball of clay and pass the ball on to the next student.

### 3. **How do you feel?**

Ask students to walk around the room, and as they do so, call out an emotion to them (eg angry, sad, frightened, happy etc). The students must attempt to express that emotion using their faces, bodies and hands.

### 4. **One finger talk**

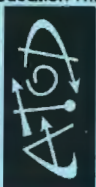
Ask students to demonstrate how many things you can do with one finger (eg dial a phone, signal a waiter, point, scratch, steal icing off a cake, beckon someone over to you, pick something out of your teeth ...and many more).

### 5. **Mirror Me**

In 'Snakes & Ladders' we see one of the actors shadow the main character to theatrically represent the illness she suffers. While it may look easy on stage it takes a lot of practice and its success relies on the actor being visually aware of the other person's movements. The students can tap into this visual style of theatre and learn to open their eyes by pairing up and nominating one person to be the leader and the other to be the mirror (face to face) or shadow (side by side).

### 6. **Talking hands**

This is popular activity that will equip students with a greater understanding of the power of hands in communicating. Seated on chairs facing the class, a group of students (at least 2 or more) have an impromptu conversation or interview with their hands behind their backs. Behind each chair another student sits and slides their hands around the front trying to involve their hands in the conversation matching the expression of the talkers.



# Deafness

More than **one and a half million** Australians have some sort of hearing loss. People with **mild** losses have difficulty hearing speech in noisy conditions. **Moderate** and **severe** losses result in people only being able to hear when the speaker is close by. All of these sorts of losses can be greatly helped by hearing aids. A small number of people have profound hearing loss. Even with hearing aids these people hear only limited parts of speech. They may therefore need to communicate through **lipreading** and/or **signing**.

There are two types of hearing loss:

**Conductive Hearing Loss:** This is due to damage to the eardrum or the small bones of the middle ear. This sort of hearing loss is common in young children following ear infections and can also result from illness or accident. Conductive hearing loss can often be treated by doctors.

**Sensorineural Hearing Loss (or Nerve Deafness):** This type of hearing loss is due to damage to some or all of the "hair cells" - the numerous nerve endings on each ear's single nerve ending. Damage to the nerve of hearing cannot be treated. Sensorineural hearing loss can be caused by a number of factors: old age, loud noise (several rock musicians have hearing losses caused by noise) or the effects of illness such as Rubella and Meningitis. Sensorineural hearing loss can also be inherited, though the factors are not yet determined.

In Australia, more than two children in 1,000 are born with hearing impairment. Because hearing deteriorates, however, one in four (25%) of people over 65 years of age need hearing aids.

Acknowledgement: Paul Cameron, Assistant Manager, Australian Hearing Service, Victoria

## ACTIVITY IDEAS

### 1. What is it like to be Deaf ?

Give each student some cotton wool or earplugs to put in their ears, in order to muffle sounds. Keeping the classroom as quiet as possible, let them try to communicate without using their voices, either through lip reading or through body language. Talk about the experience afterwards

### 2. What are they talking about? (lipreading)

Videotape a television program. Play the program to the class with the volume off. Ask the class to write down or discuss what they think the program was saying. Then replay the tape with the volume on. See how accurate the students were in their understanding.

### 3. Some sounds are easier to hear than others

Divide students into small project groups. Allocate each group objects/ activities that make different noises of varying levels (eg: stop watch, sports whistle, jangling keys, clapping hands, spoken and whispered words etc).

With one student blindfolded, others in the group make the 'sound' starting close to the blindfolded student and moving further away until the sound cannot be heard. Measure the distance when the sound cannot be heard. Repeat for other 'sounds' and other students. Plot results on a graph and discuss the results, ie: pitch and volume.

# Sign Language

Sign language is a vibrant, dynamic, expressive language with strong cultural significance for the Deaf community. There is no universal sign language in the same way there is no universal spoken or written language. Different countries and deaf communities have different sign languages.

Auslan (Australian Sign Language) is the name given to the sign language of the Australian Deaf community. The language is used by Deaf children and adults to communicate at school or work, and with their family and friends. With the aid of sign language interpreters Auslan is used to enable deaf people to access and participate equally in a wide range of activities and situations from universities, meetings, conferences, legal, training, church services and medical consultations.

Many hearing people are aware of fingerspelling. This is a system of different hand shapes used to represent each of the 26 letters of the alphabet (you can find this in the front of the phone book and copy supplied in this kit). Deaf people use fingerspelling to spell out names for people and places. Auslan however includes far more than just fingerspelling. Auslan consists of a rich system of gestures and signs to represent concepts, ideas and things. Auslan is a complete language onto itself with its own grammar and syntax, the same as any of the hundreds of spoken and written languages throughout the world.

Auslan operates on a three dimensional plane utilising space and movement to convey different types of meaning. The use of facial expression is a vital part of the grammatical emphasis in Auslan. For example when you ask a question you usually have a quizzical look on your face (ie you open your eyes wide and lift up your eye brows) as well as use of a questions sign (ie: who, where, when, etc), in the same way spoken languages utilise inflections and tone to enhance expression.

Also many signs are iconic. That is, they 'look like' or are obviously connected to a concept, idea or thing. In similar way to onomatopoeia words 'sound like' what they mean (eg: 'bang', 'cock-a-doodle-do' or 'whoosh'). However for the vast majority of signs the connection is not obvious at all.

Acknowledgement: Dr Trevor Johnston, Senior Research Fellow, Renwick College - University of Newcastle, NSW.

## ACTIVITY IDEAS

### 1. Design your own classroom sign language

Write a list of simple words on the blackboard (ie: drink, sleep, house, dog, eat, apple etc). Ask the students to try to make up a sign for each word. Discuss why they think the word would be signed that way.

### 2. Added facial expression & gesture

You can try activity number 2. on page 5 with different types of programs to demonstrate how important facial expressions and gestures are to enhancing comprehension (eg a newsreader versus Play School)

### 3. What is your name?

Hand out the fingerspelling alphabet sheet (provided in this kit) and encourage students to learn to fingerspell their name and other simple words. Once students have an understanding of the fingerspelling alphabet you can try simple games like eye spy to practice the recognition of the letters.

# re information

**ources:** Deafness Resources Australia  
33 Argyle St, Parramatta, NSW, 2150  
ph: (02) 9204 2970  
fx: (02) 9204 2972  
tty: (02) 9204 2993  
email: dra@aceinfo.net.au

**guage:** Deaf Education Network  
PO Box 500, Strathfield, NSW, 2135  
ph: (02) 9764 4600  
fax: (02) 9746 8426  
tty: (02) 9764 4972  
email: den@deaf.nsw.edu.au

# Australian theatre of the deaf