

THEATRE OF THE DEAF
ARTISTIC REPORT
1993

SING AND SIGN

'Sing and Sign', directed by Mike Canfield and designed by Mandy Smith was performed 38 times to approximately 5,600 students. This is an extremely successful show teaching children some basic signing so they can join in with the actors 'sign-singing' well known and popular songs (including 'Old MacDonald had a Farm' and 'The Best Things in Life are Free'). The students thoroughly enjoy learning the signs and during the show they find out more about Deafness - that Deaf people enjoy music, sign-singing and dancing. Consequently this performance combines important elements:

1. Popular music that the students relate well to.
2. Education about Deafness and AUSLAN (Australian Sign Language).
3. Audience participation - where the children perform the songs with the actors.

'Sing and Sign' has proved so popular that we have decided to include it in our schools program for 1994 and already we have a substantial number of bookings for Sydney schools and also, along with 'Shape-Up', 'Sing and Sign' will be performed during a 4 week Victorian Arts Council tour.

QUEENSLAND ARTS COUNCIL

During 1993 TOD had two 6 week tours to Queensland where we performed 'Shape-Up', (directed by Julia Cotton and designed by Martha Jabour early in 1992). 'Shape-Up' is about health and fitness and particularly self-esteem. It is aimed at primary school children and has been a very successful production for the company. The first tour to Queensland included country areas and was very well received. For the second tour the company was based in Brisbane and performed in the South Brisbane area. This time 'Shape-Up' - a very physical show was presented 3 times a day, 5 days a week and by the 4th week one of our actors had problems with her back, resulting in us having to send Mike Canfield up to replace her. Obviously this was quite an inconvenience and in the future we will endeavour to limit the number of performances to a maximum of 12 per week. However, the Queensland Arts Council was very understanding and we appreciate the amount of work they did on our behalf.

TRAINING

As part of the ongoing actors training policy the company sent our 4 actors to the National Theatre of the Deaf Summer School in Connecticut USA for 4 weeks of intensive training in Deaf Theatre. This was an exceptional opportunity for the actors and worth the Company's considerable investment. NTD is the largest and most prestigious Deaf Theatre company in the world and this gave our actors the chance to work and train with the best in the field. They did very well with only

minor difficulties encountered by the different language (American Sign Language, ASL is different to Australian Sign Language, Auslan) and one of our actors, Samantha Wilson, won an achievement award. Interestingly, an area of focus during the Summer School was the translation and interpretation of scripts. TOD's visual theatre emphasis has meant our actors have little experience of script work so this was a new area for them and it is something we have decided to include in this year's program - workshopping a script. It was also interesting for our actors to discover we are the only Deaf Theatre company with a policy of employing only Deaf actors, most companies have both Deaf and hearing actors and still rely heavily on a combination of dialogue and signing. While this is an interesting form of theatre in itself, we are pleased to realise that TOD is unique and innovative in it's purely visual approach.

MARITIME MUSEUM

In September the company performed a specially devised show, 'Ahoy' for schools at the Maritime Museum. While this was a new experience for the company and definitely a worthwhile exercise, it was only partially successful. This was due in part to the Museum's inexperience in presenting shows in this way and also a lack of understanding/communication between the Museum (there were three changes of staff responsible for the project) and TOD as to who was responsible for what. Consequently a third week, during the school holidays, had to be cancelled due to lack of bookings. Instead the company performed 'Sing and Sign' at Bondi Pavilion, however, bookings again were low because of lack of time to plan this alternative.

Whilst the season of 'Ahoy' at the Maritime Museum was not as successful as we had hoped it gave us an insight as to what is required. In future, performances arranged with other organisations of this nature will need to be thoroughly planned and responsibilities made very clear.

SAVANT

'Savant' was the first mainstage show for TOD in 2 years and was considered an important project for the Company. We employed Margaret Davis as dramaturg (funded by the Literature Board) and Sofya Gollan to play the lead character, 'Nettie'. Mike Canfield was also involved as a performer in the production. Firstly, we had a 3 week workshop, developing basic ideas, experimenting with styles and researching background material on which the play would be based. This workshop took place in April, a 4 week rehearsal period in August took these preliminary ideas further and the structure of the play evolved. This was videotaped and a final 2 weeks of rehearsal took place before the production was presented at the Performance Space in December. Spreading the development of 'Savant' over this time worked well and we were all very pleased with the final product and the audience response. Reviews were positive and it was generally felt that this production was a further development of TOD's visual story-telling style. 'Savant' was greatly enhanced by the set and costume design of Stephen Curtis and the music and sound devised and performed by Matthew Fargher. Geoff Cobham's lighting also contributed to the Victorian, gothic atmosphere of the play. Although audience responses were excellent, numbers were down and this was

felt to be due to :-

- a) a very short season, (10 performances, the only time we could get the Performance Space)
- b) too close to Christmas, (9 - 19th December)
- c) the misconception that TOD performances are only for Deaf audiences.

Consequently we are aware of the need to address the promotion of the Company and particularly performances for the general public.

Having spent considerable time and money developing what is considered a very strong production we are now trying to 'sell' 'Savant' for future seasons. We are hoping the Canberra Festival will include it in their program as being involved in an Australian Theatre Festival would be a great achievement for the Company.

DEAF DRAMA OUTREACH PROGRAM

Saturday morning classes for young Deaf people continued during 1993 with a performance at the end of the year. Tutors included Julia Cotton, Mike Canfield, Sofya Gollan and the TOD actors. While this is a very important part of TOD's role in the Deaf Community and also important in developing potential actors for the Company, by the end of the year it was felt necessary to re-assess the program. It was decided that, instead of the weekly class it would be better to have an intensive Summer School of 2 - 3 weeks. We also plan to start Drama classes for Deaf adults and workshops for hearing people learning Sign Language in 1994.

ONGOING PROJECTS

During 1993 the Company performed 'Castles in the Air', directed by Mike Canfield, at the Deaf Society for a fundraising dinner. This was performed again in Brisbane for the Queensland Association of the Deaf and also in Newcastle at the Newcastle Civic Playhouse. Other performances for the Deaf Community included 'The Royal Family' for the Deaf Hostel during Deaf Pride Week, the Deaf Pride Week Launch, and a performance by Mike Canfield at the 10th anniversary of the Australian Caption Centre. Also, as part of Mike's preparation to take over as Artistic Director, he spent 2 weeks with the Australian People's Theatre observing workshops of 2 new plays.