

THEATRE OF THE DEAF

THE SIGN OF THE PHANTOM

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

Theatre of the Deaf (TOD) is renowned for its unique visual style which has made a strong impact on audiences nationally and internationally. This style is a combination of facial expression, body movement and gesture which can be understood by everyone, Deaf and hearing. For the first time, TOD has produced an original Deaf musical which utilises the Company's visual style for the narrative and Australian Sign Language (Auslan) for the songs.

The production of an original musical has been a goal of mine for years. For the past few years, TOD has been using sign singing to present songs, combining Auslan and dance. Sign singing is the art of sign language with music and has become a rising new art form. The response from audiences has been overwhelmingly positive and therefore, the time is right to stage an original Deaf musical.

The Sign of the Phantom was conceptualised late last year. Preliminary discussions and planning, such as hiring a Musical Director, Writer, Choreographer, were done before the musical was further developed. For the past few years, TOD has created productions from scratch, meaning that we usually work in groups and create ideas collaboratively. The Sign of the Phantom had four weeks of creative development workshops before we commenced rehearsing. In the workshops, a lot of discussion and improvisation occurred. In the first two weeks of creative development the concept of the musical was formed. The writer then had a few months to write the script before we continued the next two weeks of workshops. In those two weeks, we worked on the first draft of the script and the songs. After that, we had three months before rehearsal started. This gave the writer the opportunity to rewrite the draft and finalise it. When rehearsal started, some final alterations were made as new ideas came forth. The rehearsal for the musical was very intense and hard work for everybody.

The process of creating the Deaf musical was quite different from the norm. When it comes to sign singing, the Deaf signer usually follows the tempo and rhythm of the lyrics and music. But for this musical, it works the other way around. The Deaf actors first have a go trying to sign the lyrics in their own rhythm, then the musicians try to fit in with their music and voice. For the narrative, we study the scenes in the script and then I guide the Deaf actors and hearing singers through the steps. Once they understand what to do, they have a go and try the scene. We polish the scene as time goes by. During rehearsals, we have a sign language interpreter to interpret for everybody, voice and signing. Mainly, we do everything over and over again, improving the scenes everyday. As the famous saying goes, "practice makes perfect!"

The development of The Sign of the Phantom is a first for Australian and Deaf theatre. The musical form has been tried before by Deaf theatre companies in the USA. These musicals were "spoken language" based and "classical" - signed translations of well known shows. The Deaf musical challenges preconceived ideas about music and language. It is anticipated that the production will visually portray the narrative and songs in such a unique way that the audience will perceive an entirely new musical experience.

The original musical reflects the multicultural nature of Australian society. Deafness is recognised by the Ethnic Affairs Commission as a cultural identity in its own right, not a disability. The production gives an insight into the world of Deafness, challenges preconceived ideas about aural experience and offers music as a truly universal and multicultural medium. Both the Deaf and hearing communities will be able to share the experience as equals.

The Sign of the Phantom is a valuable development for Australian theatre, not simply in terms of structure, form and content but one which reflects the diversity of our cultural experiences. The creative team selected for this project have delivered a production with depth, imagination and experimentation. The musical challenges the senses and preconceptions of the audience on all levels and gives a depth of sensual experience rarely offered.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mike Canfield". The script is fluid and cursive, with a large, sweeping "M" and a long, trailing flourish at the end.

Mike Canfield
Artistic Director