

## THE THEATRE OF THE DEAF

Australia's THEATRE OF THE DEAF, a company of both deaf and hearing actors, presents a unique visual-and-aural style of theatre. The fundamental element in our work is language: in fact, two languages. First, the beautiful moving pictures and symbols of sign language - the language used by deaf people - and second, the spoken text. We synchronise the verbal dialogue with the visual dialogue (and action) as if the actors' gesturing hands had their own 'voices'.

It is not a mime show. Each play is 'spoken' in the sign language of our deaf actors and spoken via the fine voices of our on-stage hearing actors.

It is not "Theatre for the Deaf". The greatest misconception about the Theatre of the Deaf is that it is for deaf people only, that hearing audiences will find it silently incomprehensible. We make theatre accessible to the deaf community (at present, approximately ten percent of our audience) yet hearing audiences have the double benefit of hearing and seeing every word in addition to whatever songs, music, and sound effects we create as a part of the production. This is what makes our work different <sup>from</sup> ~~than~~ any other theatre's in Australia.

In a sense, deaf people are natural actors. Their hearing impairment creates an initial barrier in communication that is broken down through concentrated and active efforts - efforts in which 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 viable.

For those well versed in gesture language, signs are more easily understood across international borders than the various verbal languages, as all sign languages are based on the physicalisation of sights, thoughts, and emotions. There can be confusions. The American phrase for "Good morning" looks alot like some well known Italian gestures that usually accompany the heated and colourful arguments following traffic accidents on the streets of Rome.

In Theatre of the Deaf performances we use a theatricalised form of Australian Sign Language. The developed or most widely recognised ~~gestures~~ <sup>gestures</sup> and symbols of the Australian deaf community are adapted and enlarged to make a stage language that is both picturesque and lyrical.

Deaf actors attack their roles as any actor would: reading, discussing, exploring emotions, and memorising lines. 'Signs' are sometimes altered to create visual jokes and clarity on a large stage, or to allow a more synchronous meshing of sign with the hearing actors' voices. Hearing and deaf actors share in discussions of the character: each must embody the same essence - one through voice, and one through signs, body language, and facial expressions.

The concern for the director (who speaks with the actors in sign language or through a sign language interpreter ) is to heighten the visual elements of the action while orchestrating the words and/or music in support. ~~The goal is a play that is interesting to hearing and deaf audiences~~ The goal is a play that is both entertaining and comprehensible to both deaf and hearing audiences. It is, of course, important that the audience is able to see the language as well as hear it. For the ear, the voicing actors - when their own characters are not a part of the plot - can become members of the ensemble, formal geza orchestras or kurombo props assistants from Kabuki theatre, musicians, window washers, etc. What is important is that the voice is live and a part of the staging concept.

The main body of our work over the last six years has been in the field of Theatre-In-Education. Rather than continually dealing with 'the problems of deafness', our shows tackle any issue our writers find important. In recent years, productions have included; FINGERPAINTING - a presentation of folk stories from the many home countries of Australia's multi-cultural society, HOW - a visual history of how the world was created, I LIVE HERE - an examination of prejudice in all forms, THE INVADERS - a dramatisation of the conflict between country life and city life and how both must learn to respect the land, ODD BODS - a farcical look at the problems of learning to share and live together.

TIE work is important, not only for the understanding we hope to create for the issues presented in each play, but also in developing young theatre audiences and in introducing the capabilities of talented deaf performers. For the development of our art form and the growth of our performers' skills, however, our goal is to be more than a TIE company.

There are countless classic and modern plays suitable for production in our unique style, <sup>allowing</sup> ~~During our recent two and one-half week season of Brecht's MAN EQUALS MAN~~ the actors ~~were able~~ to work on characters and scripts far more demanding than the limits of a forty-five minute TIE play, ~~MAN EQUALS MAN~~. During our recent two and one-half week season of Brecht's MAN EQUALS MAN (sponsored by the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust) the company reached over 1,700 university students,

teachers, and adults who would not have had the opportunity to see our work - indeed, many had not even been aware that there was such a thing as the Theatre of the Deaf.

Our main concern is to find literate material with vital possibilities, both visual and aural. There are no ideological limits defining what we must do. Artistically, the only limits to what we can do are set by the limits of our own imaginations. To refresh and stretch these imaginations, we take acting, dance, improvisation, mime and voice classes during our annual summer workshops programme, open to both deaf and hearing participants from around Australia.

As a professional theatre company we have the responsibility of providing high quality performances in our new theatrical medium and making them accessible to the greatest number of people in Australia. We aim for six weeks of touring to different regions of N.S.W and interstate, reaching thousands of children and adults who "have never seen anything like it".

It is not easy to explain how our theatrical style works. We are a theatre whose voice must be seen and heard.

#### The Theatre of the Deaf Returns to Adelaide

The Theatre of the Deaf will visit Adelaide from March 10 - 21 to participate in the education programme of the Adelaide Festival Fringe.

This will be the company's third visit to Adelaide, having previously participated in the Festival Fringe in 1984 and the Come Out Festival in 1985.

Two plays from the company's repertoire, both written by Richard Tulloch, will be performed in schools in the Adelaide Metropolitan area.

ODD BODS, which is for infant levels K-3, uses slapstick comedy to focus on the difficulties we all find when sharing a house, a room or even a classroom.

SILENT VIDEO, the company's latest play for primary schools, shows the frustrations and difficulties of deafness and challenges hearing people's perceptions of what deaf people can and cannot do.

The Theatre of the Deaf is a division of the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust.