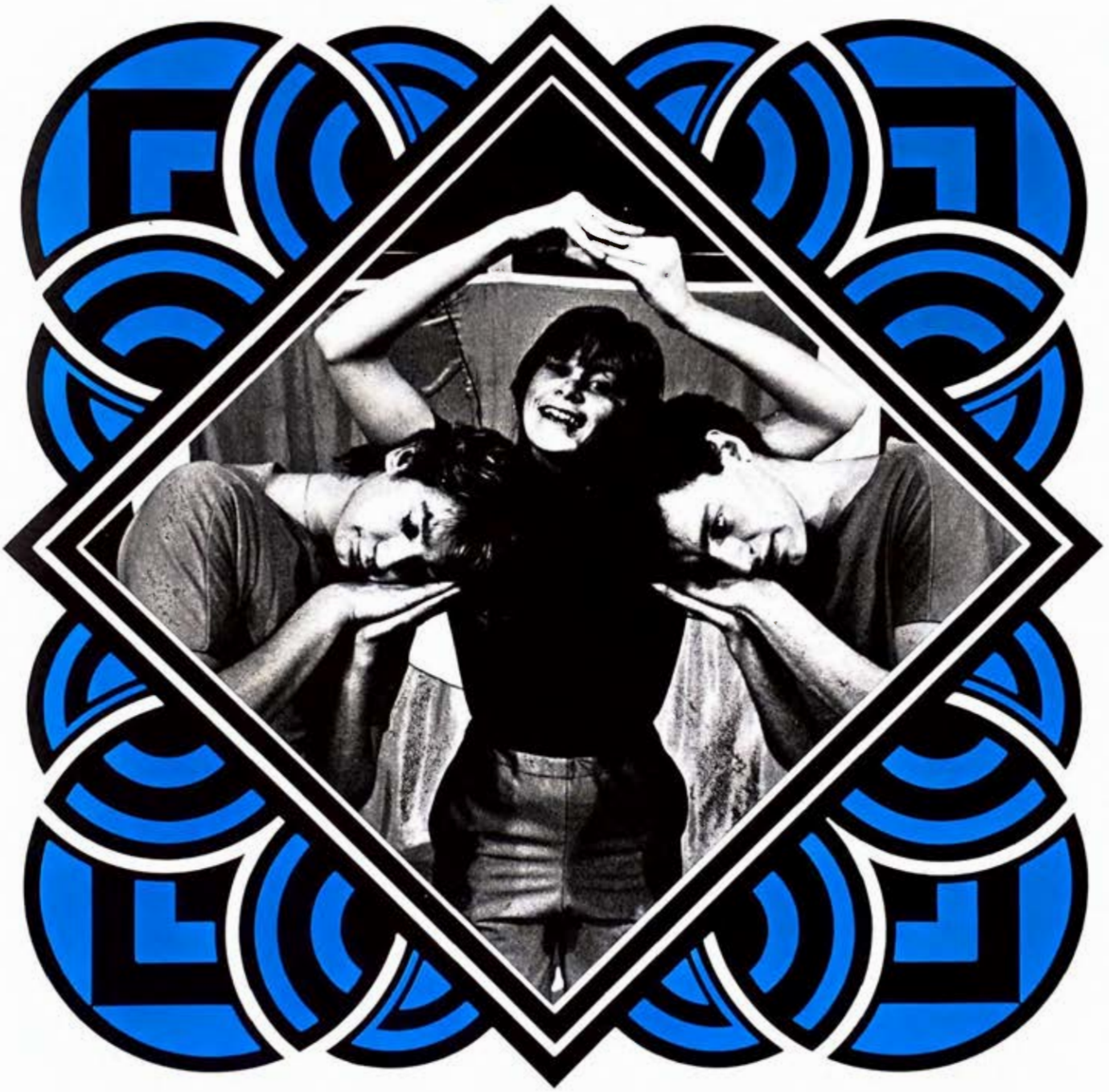
# Theatre of the Deaf Study Guide



The Theatre of the Deaf
is a division of
The Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust
(Incorporated in ACT)

# Theatre of the Deaf

Theatre-In-Education is an avenue for memorable and entertaining learning experiences. TIE programmes can best succeed with good cooperation between teachers and the performing companies. From first contact and booking onward, the teachers are our main link in providing satisfying performances in the schools. To prepare you for our arrival, and to help you lead follow-up discussions in the classroom, we have compiled this guide.

## Introduction

The 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 'hand-speak' used by most deaf people – and second, the spoken text.

Each script – either already written or devised through improvisation and discussion – is translated into Australian Sign Language and then staged with concern towards coordinating the verbal dialogue with the visual dialogue (and action) as if the actors' gesturing hands had their own 'voices'.

## What the Theatre of the Deaf is not:

A. 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.

B. It is not always a play about deafness. Rather than continually dealing with 'the problems of deafness', our performances tackle any issue our writers find important, from creation to conservation. It is the skill of our actors which makes the Theatre of the Deaf unique.

C. It is not Theatre FOR the Deaf. At present, approximately 10% of our audiences have impaired hearing. The rest are adults and school children of the general public. We make theatre accessible to members of the deaf community, 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. For the first few minutes of any of our plays hearing audiences tend to look at the actor who is speaking the lines with his mouth only. They soon realise, however, that the same character is being presented visually by the deaf actor, and focus shifts to watching development of the action while keeping the ear tuned.

## History of 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 international deaf community over the past twenty years. Major acting awards in England and the United States have been won by deaf actresses. There have been numerous guest appearances by deaf actors on television serials, while Linda Bove, a deaf American actress, is a regular 'resident' of Sesame Street.

There are now several professional theatres in the world which employ a company of deaf actors. Russia houses the oldest company, the Moscow Theatre of Mimicry and Gesture, which has been in operation on and off for sixty years. The USA hosts perhaps a half-dozen professional theatres of the deaf. The most famous of these is the long-standing National Theatre of the Deaf. The NTD has performed on Broadway, national and international television, and hundreds of stages around the world. There are also professional theatres of the deaf in England, Scandinavia, and Japan.

Australia's Theatre of the Deaf had its origins in the early 1970s under the guidance of the Adult Deaf Society of NSW. The group provided an opportunity for local members of the deaf community to perform in and view theatrical productions; it was a theatre for the deaf. Similar groups were started up in Adelaide, Melbourne and Brisbane – though none has shared our good fortune in securing Federal Arts funding, and they remain amateur theatre groups.

Following a tour of Australia by the NTD in 1974, the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust began its long-term commitment to the development of a professional theatre of the deaf in Australia by hiring a hearing director to work with the NSW group. Early years were spent taking mime, acting, dance and mask classes with later performances of King Lear, Of Rogues and Clowns, and Five Flights to Freedom in major Sydney venues.

In 1979, with backing from the Australia Council's Theatre Board and the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust, the company was launched as a fully professional theatre.

By 1986, the company had developed 16 original productions for school children with performances in Tasmania, Melbourne, South Australia, the ACT, plus regional centres and towns throughout NSW. There have been appearances on local and national television, a performance before HRH The Prince of Wales, an Order of Australia Medal for founding member Nola Colefax, and mainstage productions such as The Winter's Tale, The Threepenny Opera, and Man Equals Man.

The Theatre of the Deaf is the only professional deaf theatre in Australia and is now one of Sydney's premier Theatre-in-Education troupes.

# Deafness

More than one million Australians have some sort of hearing loss. People with mild losses have difficulty hearing soft speech. Moderate loss means that speech can only be heard if the speaker is close to the person with impaired hearing – people with these hearing losses usually find hearing aids helpful*. A smaller number of people have profound hearing losses. These people can hear very little, even with hearing aids. They may therefore need to communicate through lipreading and Signing.

*Hearing aids do not clarify speech; they can only amplify all the sounds they pick up.

There are two main 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 losses can often be treated by doctors.

Sensorineural Hearing Loss (or Nerve Deafness): This type of hearing impairment is due to the loss of some or all of the 'hair cells' – the numerous nerve endings on each ear's single nerve of hearing. 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 Rubella and Meningitis. Sensorineural hearing loss can also be inherited, though the factors are as yet undetermined.

In Australia, more than two children in 1,000 are born with hearing loss. This means that most schools have no more than one or two children who require hearing aids. Because hearing deteriorates, however, one in four (25%) of people over 65 years of age need hearing aids.

Acknowledgement: Paul Cameron
Audiologist, National Acoustics Laboratory

# Sign Language

Manual communication or Sign Language as used by Australian deaf people is not just a system of gestures. It is a language, separate from English, which has grown, changed and developed over hundreds of years just like spoken languages. And, just as there are different spoken languages in the world, so are there different sign languages; English, American, Australian, German, Japanese, etc.

A monk by the name of Abbé L'Eppee compiled the first recorded book of signs after taking in a group of deaf children during the French Revolution. The Abbé believed that if he was to learn the children's 'natural' language it would be easier to educate them. He was soon joined by a teacher named Clerc who helped the Abbé teach the deaf in this way.

This system of language and education soon spread to most of Europe, Ireland, and to the United States through a man named Thomas Gallaudet, who sailed to France to study the Abbé's work and later returned to America bringing Clerc with him. Though the alphabets, or fingerspelling, in these countries are based on the one-handed French system, the languages have grown so that American and Irish deaf signers would now have problems understanding one another.

The Sign Language used in England is entirely different to the French system. Manuscripts found in a Spanish monastery show drawings of a two-handed alphabet probably used by monks during their vows of silence. It is thought that this is where the English system of signs started.

Both one-handed and two-handed alphabets have been used in the education of the deaf in Australia. The two-handed system is the most widely accepted one and, though there are regional differences in the actual sign symbols, a new dictionary of Australian Signs has been compiled in the hope of creating a unified system for improved educational use.

Australian Sign Language (Auslan) is separate from English, particularly in the differences of grammar. It can be said that Auslan is ungrammatical compared to English – but then a sentence translated word for word from German into English would also be ungrammatical. The typical English structure of Subject + Verb + Object becomes Object + Subject + Verb; the Object in a phrase is almost always placed first with the rest of the sentence following.

Sign Language is not just an exaggerated and ordered pantomime, but rather a language made up of a variety of components.

Fingerspelling – the 26 letters of the alphabet are represented on the fingers. This is mostly used to spell out proper names or thoughts which have no specific signs, though it can also be used to emphasize a word, e.g. I had a G-O-O-D time. Fingerspelling is easy to learn, but it can take some time to learn to read what another person is spelling. Deaf people read the pattern and not the individual letters.

Gesture – pointing to a thing or person, and the use of common gestures. I and YOU are pointing gestures. STOP and COME are just like a traffic policeman might use.

Pantomime – the part of sign language in which the person acts out the character or story with their whole body, or by using anything else needed to get the story across. For example, when talking about a horse, the speaker can become the horse or the rider, showing the size of the horse, the speed of the ride, etc.

Mimetic Signs – are signs which copy the action involved, as in turning a steering wheel to mean CAR or DRIVE: a bigger steering wheel denotes BUS. Brushing the hair with an imaginary brush means BRUSH or COMB.

Iconic Signs – have some connection to their meaning through shape or outline. HOUSE is made with the two hands forming the roof of a house, while the arm bent straight up at the elbow with fingers extended becomes the trunk and leaves of a TREE.
Esoteric Signs – these signs are more abstract. For example, the 'thumbs up' sign means GOOD. Placing the tip of the GOOD sign on the right temple makes the sign for KNOW, the understanding being that knowledge is good. Take the same sign and move it across the forehead and it creates the sign for CLEVER – i.e. a brainful of good knowledge. Most emotional descriptions and abstract thoughts are expressed by using signs like these.

Facial Expressions – are to deaf people what voice tone and inflection are to hearing people. Sign language with a fixed face is like listening to a monotonous drone. Facial expressions show emphasis, tone and feeling. For example, the sign for GOOD accompanied by a radiant face is extremely positive. The same sign with a 'weak' expression can mean 'SO – SO'.
Facial expressions can also turn a statement into a question: the sign for GOOD with a quizzical expression means ARE YOU WELL or WAS IT GOOD?
These are the basic components of Sign Language. A variety of manners of expression can be made through emphasis on the size, speed, and even rhythm of the signing.
The sign language you will see in our productions is a theatricalization of standard Australian Sign Language. At the beginning of each rehearsal period, the script is translated – not word for word – with concern towards translation of the meaning and the visual effect of the signs on a stage. It is hoped, of course, that our plays are understood equally by hearing and deaf people alike.

Acknowledgement: Steve Ripley, Theatre of the Deaf

Acknowledgements

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# Activities

After a performance, when the students have returned to the classroom, we recommend that teachers instigate discussions about the issues presented in the play. These discussions can be followed by questions about theatre, sign language, and deafness. We offer the following questions and activities as a guideline:

1. What were the students' preconceptions of the Theatre of the Deaf and deaf people? Did their opinions change after seeing the performance?

2. List the various methods of communication we encounter in the course of our lives (radio, television, newspapers, books, airport announcements, teachers in a classroom, gestures, facial expressions, skywriting, etc.). What information do each of these communicate? Which of these are 'verbal media'?

3. Consider some of the disadvantages of being deaf in a society which depends heavily on verbal media. Do other groups suffer similar disadvantages? (i.e. foreign language or migrant groups).

4. People are communicating non-verbally all the time (a policeman directing traffic, sports referees, simple body language). Investigate every day body language: the things we can learn about people from the way they behave and look and move.

5. (a) Instigate a 'silent morning' in the class, during which no one is allowed to speak with their voice.
(b) Suggest that the students try watching an entire half hour or hour long television programme with the volume turned off.

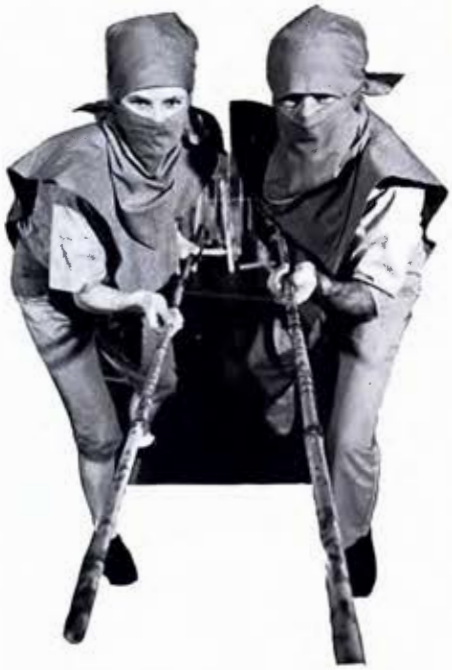
As well as developing skills in visual communication and perception, these are good ways of coming a little closer to an understanding of what it is to be deaf.

6. Children who are less adept at verbal and/or written communication may find themselves to be surprisingly skilled at visual communication and perception.
(a) See how much the students can communicate using only one finger, two fingers, then two hands. Suggest words they can try to make clear through gestures and facial expressions; e.g. think, dream, hungry, tree, bird, car, angry, etc.
(b) Using copies of the 'Manual Alphabet' cards handed out after each performance, spell your names and hold simple conversations in fingerspelling.

7. Find out what signs or gestures the students remember from the production. What 'picture' or actions do each of these signs represent?

8. Mime relies on the imagination of the audience and the artist to create, in their minds, the objects the artist pretends to use.
Try an exercise with 'imaginary clay'. 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 everyone understands what it is meant to be, the student can pass the object on to the next person. That person will then mould the 'clay' to make their own object. Everyone should have a go. A good game for younger children and theatre students.

9. Possibly the best follow-up to a Theatre of the Deaf performance is an additional visit by selected members of the company. Experienced members of the Theatre of the Deaf company are available to lead Non-verbal Communication Workshops of 45 - 90 minutes for a variety of age groups.



# Resources

A. For books on deafness and sign language – including dictionaries of the new Australian Sign Language – please contact:

Deaf Action Books
123 Cambridge Street
Stanmore NSW 2048

B. Other valuable information centres

Adult Deaf Society of New South Wales
123 Cambridge Street
Stanmore NSW 2048
(02)560 6433

Australian Caption Centre
88 Foveaux Street
Surry Hills NSW 2010

C. For further information concerning the numerous theatre games and non-verbal acting exercises Theatre of the Deaf actors use in their training and in workshops, please contact:
Theatre of the Deaf
153 Dowling Street
Potts Point NSW 2011
(02)357 1200

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