

## THE THEATRE OF THE DEAF

The fundamental element in the Theatre of the Deaf is language: actually, two languages. First, the beautiful moving pictures and symbols of 'sign language', the language used by most deaf people, and second, the spoken word. It is this combination of visually expressed dialogue with the music of a writer's best words that the Theatre of the Deaf explores in its unique theatrical style.

What the Theatre of the Deaf is not:

It is not a mime show. Each entire play is 'spoken' in the sign language of our deaf actors and spoken in the fine voices of our hearing actors. Mime is a great part of natural deaf language, a daily breaking through of standard means of communication, yet the sign language in our productions goes far beyond mime to include gestural pictures, concretely visual descriptions of emotion and thought, and a system of acting a character's lines from head to toe to fingertips.

It is also 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. At present, approximately 10% of our audiences are deaf, the rest being adults and school children of the general public. We are a source of pride to members of the deaf community as they can finally see plays presented in their own language by professional actors. Hearing audiences, however, have the double benefit of hearing and seeing every word in addition to whatever songs, music, and sound effects are created by our onstage hearing actors.

There are a number of 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 U.S.A. hosts perhaps a half dozen professional theatre of the deaf, the most famous of which is the long-standing National Theatre of the Deaf. Founded by David Hays almost twenty years ago, the N.T.D. has developed the artistic medium of co-operating signing and voicing actors in performances on Broadway, television, and international stages around the world. This company was the first American theatre to tour all fifty states of the U.S.A. and represented the U.S.A. in the Olympics Arts Festival in 1984.

Australia's Theatre of the Deaf had its origin in the early 1970's under the guidance of the Adult Deaf Society of New South Wales and most especially through the efforts of one of the welfare officers, Mr Nick Neary, a man with experience of deaf theatre in England. Early years were spent with mime, acting, dance, and mask classes and later performances of King Lear, Hamlet, and Of Rogues and Clowns in major Sydney venues. In 1979, with the support of the Australia Council and the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust, the company was launched as a fully professional theatre under the directorship of Adam Salzer, who had been working with the group in its community theatre stages. The company continued to perform 'adult' plays and began a regular season of performances in the schools. Under Ian Watson's directorship,

the Theatre of the Deaf continued to train, develop and expand both in the schools and in the theatres. The company's work has carried it from Tasmania to Melbourne, Adelaide, the A.C.T., regional centres and towns throughout N.S.W. There have also been numerous performances on local and national television.

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 also makes non-verbal communication theatrically viable. In the Theatre of the Deaf performances we use a theatricalized form of Australian Sign Language: the developed and most widely recognised gestures or signs of the Australian deaf community are adapted and enlarged to make a stage language that is both comprehensible and lyric.

The main body of our work over the last six years has been in the field of Theatre-In-Education. Shows are designed for school children concerning issues relevant to each targetted age group. Rather than continually dealing with 'the problems of deafness', our shows tackle any issue our writer's find important and use the artistic medium to make these issues theatrically exciting. In recent years, productions have included: FINGERPAINTING - presentation of folk stories from the many home countries of Australia's multi-cultural society, HOOLIGAN'S HANDS - theatrical presentations of Australian literature to give potential high school leavers a greater appreciation of the books they are forced to read, 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, and ODD BODS - a farcical look at the problems of learning to share and live together.

Theatre-In-Education 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.

With the generous support of the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust, we have been able to mount another production for adult audiences. Financial restrictions over the past four years have prevented us from exploring these larger and more demanding scripts. The Trust <sup>presented</sup> ~~sponsored~~ our recent production of Brecht's MAN EQUALS MAN in a three week season at the Sydney Theatre Company's new Wharf Studio. Brecht's language can be both graphic and lyrical - as is sign language - and therefore translates well into our sign/voice stage language. Through the comedy, stunning moments of truth, and songs of the play we were able to show that our actors are capable of tackling any theatrical event. Demands on the hearing actors (two of the seven characters) were great in voicing the entire play, and special moments - Galy Gay's speech to his own coffin - were lifted to a visual and aural magic as thoughts and emotions were transported from inside the actor's consciousness to the open visual stage.

Rehearsals in Theatre of the the Deaf productions are conducted as with any theatre company, though the director speaks in two languages (or with the aid of a sign language interpreter). Deaf actors attack their roles as any actor would: reading, discussing, exploring, and memorising lines. Signs are sometimes altered to create visual jokes and clarity, or to allow a more synchronous meshing of sign with the hearing actor's voice. 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. For the first few minutes of any of our productions hearing audiences tend to look at the actor who is speaking the lines with his mouth. But they soon realise that the same character is being presented in a visually enlarged manner by the deaf actor, and focus shifts to watching development of the action with the ear tuned.

At the Theatre of the Deaf our main concern is to find literate material with a vital combination of the visual and spoken word. We train the actors in acting, dance, improvisations, mime, and voice in our yearly workshop programmes, open to both deaf and hearing actors. 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 are a theatre, must be seen and heard.

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