

DEAF THEATRE: A NEW STYLE

By

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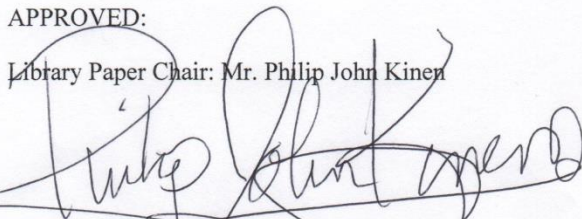
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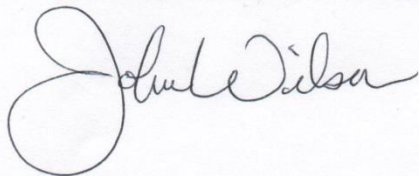
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## ABSTRACT

By

Bronwyn Fisher

Deaf Theatre as a style should be considered one of the many prominent movements within theatre history. A focus on theatre history is expanded to highlight elements within these movements, and compare them to Deaf Theatre to establish the style as a movement. With this focus, there is also a depth into the understanding of deaf culture and the histories of two deaf theatres, National Theatre of the Deaf and Deaf West, within the United States to allow Deaf Theatre to be what it is now.

## INTRODUCTION

In the past few years, Deaf Theatre has been gaining recognition through a particular style of performance that has pulled in a wide audience. This new theatrical art form has an interesting characteristic that sets itself apart from regular theatre; American Sign Language, a hand-gestural language used by the deaf. By bringing in a different view, this trend has changed how theatre can be presented on stage. With the extensive history of Deaf Theatre, and the understanding of Deaf culture, we find that this new medium in the last forty years is a lesser known style that should be merged with the list of stylistic movements that span the history of theatre.

## THEATRE MOVEMENTS

Theatre is ephemeral. It has a beginning, middle, and sometimes has an end. Theatre history is broken up into sections that are commonly called 'isms,' but are better termed as a style or a movement. Each movement, with several exceptions of a few such as Epic Theatre, end with those three letters. To gain an understanding into how Deaf Theatre became a style (one that has yet to be properly recognized as a movement), one has to know the theatre history by getting synopsis of the movements that impacted theatre and the world in a large way.

As of right now, there are six prominent movements from the history of theatre as told by the two writers, Oscar Brockett and Robert Findley, of the highly recognized textbook, *Century of*

*Innovation: A History of European and American Theatre and Drama since the Late Nineteenth Century*. The six movements are known as Realism, Naturalism, Symbolism, Expressionism, Surrealism, and finally, Absurdism. Each of these movements came about as a way to challenge the status quo, and to change what is being perceived to be the truth.

Realism began as a style in 1853 by Jules-Husson Champfleury, who was a novelist and a critic, and by the early 1860's the theoretical bases of the style had been debated among different periodicals of the time (Brockett, Findley 5). After the deliberation, it was established, upon different points, that realism is the "truthful representation of the real world, it is based upon direct observation of contemporary life and manners, and artists must be impersonal and objective in their attitudes toward subject matter" (Brockett, Findley 5).

This movement separated the truth from what is real and what is not. Supernatural elements, for instance, are not real and therefore are not the truth. The stage then is set with realistic elements that are derived from the observation of the world. As another example, if one designs a house that someone has observed, then that house put upon the stage is real as any other house.

In Realism, there was a theoretical base that defined the motives of finding truth in the world. The same goes for Naturalism. The primary theorist for Naturalism was Emilie Zola. He argued that truth "is not revealed in a series of complications leading to crisis and resolution but in a more haphazard collection of events that create texture and a sense of direction" and so he suggested "that a play should be "a fragment of existence" without apparent beginning, middle, or end" (Brockett, Findley 23).

The naturalistic theory applies an emphasis “on heredity and environment made human victims of forces beyond their control; even “will” became merely an impulse dictated by earlier influences. Naturalists avoided concern for beauty and instead usually concentrated on human beings in the throes of greed, lust, fear, and anger. They sought to record social conditions without passing judgement” (Brockett, Findley 23).

The next movement to follow Realism and Naturalism is Symbolism. Symbolism came as a package deal containing a smaller style that carried itself within the movement; Antirealism. To talk of Symbolism is to talk of Antirealism.

Antirealism first appeared in the Symbolism movement and began in Paris during the 1880’s. It started out as a “joint venture of artists, playwrights, essayists, critics, sculptors, and poets” (Cohen 185). Antirealism arrived on the heels of Realism as a counterforce against the first movement. This force against Realism and its practitioners were “united by their disgust with realism and their passion to move the theatre beyond what they saw as its narrow confines” (Cohen 185). It was not just about ideas and a collection of plays, it was about a social and cultural movement that was emotionally charged.

Realism is the observation of truth seen in the everyday life, while Symbolism is somewhat the opposite. Through the process of images and metaphors, Symbolism was about finding the truth of the “*inner* realities that cannot be directly or literally perceived” (Cohen 185). Symbolists believed that realism made art become mundane and smothered the potential for artistic creativity. With this belief, the movement spread quickly allowing for a possibility of a theatre free from the “constraints of verisimilitude” (Cohen 187) or the appearance of truth.

This particular movement only lasted for a very short time as the artists of the style moved on to other newer, emerging movements. Many of the followers of Symbolism deserted the movement for several other styles such as Dadaism, Futurism, and Idealism, but the more popular movement was Expressionism.

Sigmund Freud, one of the most well-known psychologists of the twentieth century, was one of many early artists that had been thought to foreshadow Expressionism. Freud's most popular theories concerned the human psyche which focuses on the personality of a person. These theories are primarily structured into three different parts: the id, ego, and super-ego (McLeod).

Touching briefly on each, the id "is the primitive and instinctive component of personality" (McLeod). The id has two components that make up a personality: the sex instinct, which is known as Eros, and the aggressive instinct which is known as Thanatos. The author of the article, *Id, Ego, and Superego*, Saul McLeod, (who taught A-level psychology at Wigan and Leigh College for ten years and holds a degree in psychology, a masters in research and as of 2011, undertaking a PhD part time at the University of Manchester) writes that the id "is the impulsive (and unconscious) part of our psyche which responds directly and immediately to the instincts." The id is established while a person is a newborn and later the ego and super-ego develops as they grow.

The function of the ego works out "realistic ways of satisfying the id's demands, often compromising or postponing satisfaction to avoid negative consequences of society" while the super-ego's job is to "control the id's impulses, especially those which society forbids" (McLeod). The ego and super-ego was left out of Freud's theory when it came to Expressionism.



Specifically for theatre, and for the Expressionism movement, the id aspect of the theory made it possible to connect and reach compromises between realists and anti-realists styles in drama. It was an aesthetic movement that began in Germany and like Symbolism; it also opposed Realism and Naturalism simply because they glorified science, and had a hatred for a materialistic society. The reason behind this opposition was because they abhorred the need for materialistic objects. This gave reason to the many plays that were written about the battles between man and machine; machine being the materialistic object/society. Expressionists believed that the fundamental truth was found within man; in his spirit, soul, desires, and visions. And to understand man is to know and understand the inner private world in which he dwells.

Brockett and Findley stated in the textbook that Surrealism resembled Expressionism in that the primary point of reference was located within the human being. For Surrealists the key was the unconscious mind while for Expressionists the focus was on the human spirit. The emphasis on the Freudian concept of the unconscious was used in this movement. While Surrealism and Expressionism do resemble each other, they do have some attributes that are opposite to one another. "Surrealism looked inward (to a freed subconscious mind) whereas Expressionism looked outward (to a reshaped nonmaterialistic society) in the search for transformation and fulfillment" (Brockett, Findley 165).

The Expressionists believed that the human world would find solution to unsatisfactory conditions of human existence. If a human could free their subconscious, they then could unleash the power of Automatism, which is the process of discovering the purest form of expression untainted by the everyday world: to discover the source of thought, emotion, and character (Brockett, Findley 165).

The last of the prominent movement is Absurdism named by Martin Esslin, in his book, *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Absurdism took on plays that were obscured and strange. It had the power to cause riots among many sophisticated audiences. One such play, *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett is an excellent example. It was put to production on November of 1957 in front of an audience of convicts of the San Quentin penitentiary. What was puzzling was that this play had “bewildered the sophisticated audiences of Paris, London, and New York” and yet “was immediately grasped by an audience of convicts” (Esslin 19).

In theatre, Absurdism is the belief that man is cut off and adrift in a chaotic universe. Man is left to construct fictions in order to survive. Chaos is created since there is no objective truth. Lacking logic, man constructs a set of values by which he lives and must recognize those values are based on unverifiable premises, such as God for example.

While Absurdism is not the last movement to be recognized in the twentieth century theatre, it is one of the six that brought forth many more styles, one that includes Deaf Theatre. The concept of Deaf Theatre is still fairly new having only been introduced around seventy years ago with the start of the National Theatre of the Deaf, it is still one that should be considered just as important as the six prominent movements and many more that came from it.

## DEAF THEATRE AS A NEW STYLE

In analyzing other movements, certain aspects can be seen that have similar qualities as Deaf Theatre. Deaf Theatre can be classified as a movement because, not only does it have the same elements as other movements, but it also has impacted, so far, the country and one day, the

entire world. Like other movements, it started off with several notable people who simply wanted to see something new. There are beliefs, certain ways of expressing an important idea on stage, and the theatre made headways for those to expand their talents into careers.

The style may not have a belief system or a theoretical base that stems from what may be considered the Truth within a human being. The truth is that deaf people are just as capable as any other in expressing the realities of their world. The truth in their world is silent, void of noise but filled with vibration and things that can be visibly seen. In the deaf world, deaf people can see what others cannot and they are often faced with the stigma that had been put on them so long ago.

A long time ago, deaf individuals were considered to be deaf and dumb. Historically, they would be placed in an asylum simply because they were considered different and strange. They were categorized on the same level as those with severe mental disabilities. Over the due course of time, the bulk of that stigma went away.

Deaf Theatre aims to put that stigma, the ones that had previously gone away and those that are still in existence, on stage and all the other issues that are confronted on a daily basis, such as the hearing people being ignorant of the deaf, communication problems that constantly happens to this day, and even the on-going discussion of the use of cochlear implants and the so called “cure” people has attached to it.

These issues were put on stage by the deaf playwrights that came from the National Theatre of the Deaf. The company produced the plays, chose the actors, and once performed; these plays became a tool to educate the hearing. Deaf Theatre made a pathway to be taken by many prominent people within the deaf culture. Marlee Matlin is one great example. She started

off on the set of a movie interpretation of a play written by Mark Medoff called *Children of a Lesser God* that was propelled to Broadway fame. This play is set around the relationship of a hearing man and a deaf woman, and brought forth issues between these two different cultures. This movie awarded her the Academy Award and the Golden Globe award.

Deaf Theatre still has a presence today as plays are being produced on stage and brought to Broadway, and thus creating exposure that is needed. It allowed the exposure of sign language to become something that can be learned. American Sign Language has garnered interest in the hearing world and allowed for sign language interpreters to be involved in the deaf culture. Deaf Theatre is a slow but strong presence in deaf culture.

## DEAF CULTURE

In Paddy Ladd's *Understanding Deaf Culture: In search of Deafhood*, psychiatrist Hilde Schlesinger and Kathryn Meadow stated in 1971 that "profound deafness is much more than a medical diagnosis; it is a cultural phenomenon." It is the social and cultural characteristics that can define a culture. In this case it is the deaf people within a community that makes up a deaf culture.

Society can spawn the products of human interaction. A society is a "humanly created organization or system of interrelationships that connects individuals in a common culture" (Basic Concepts). The products of human interactions can be considered components of society, and culture is one of them. Culture can be defined as a set of traditions, rules, symbols that shape and are enacted as feelings, thoughts, and behaviors of groups of people. To help define a deaf culture, one has to be able to understand the elements within it. There are three elements that can

be defined to make up the culture; Language, Values, and Norms. Identity, while is not part of the culture, it is classified as a product of human interaction, and one that is vastly important to the deaf culture.

Language is a “system of verbal symbols through which humans communicate ideas, feelings, and experiences” and “not only a tool, or a means of expression, but it also structures and shapes our experiences of the world and what we see around us” (Basic Concepts).

How does one use language to communicate ideas, feelings, and experiences? In the hearing world, verbal symbols are better described as words that are spoken out loud, or sometimes written. Each culture has their own identifiable language whether it is English, Spanish, or German to name a few. The same for those in the deaf culture, sign language, the visual hand motions that form a letter, a word, or even an image to convey important information, is used. While the hearing use their voices, the deaf uses their hands. Academy Award winner, Marlee Matlin, best described the language of the deaf culture:

The opportunity to communicate in sign language, one of the most beautiful languages in the world, is an advantage that deaf people enjoy. It’s a language that combines several elements at once with a simple hand movement and facial expression: meaning, affect, time and duration. It’s just so beautiful that printed or spoken words can’t begin to describe it.

American Sign Language, or ASL, is considered to be the main mode of communication in the United States, and the one that is most commonly taught. Most often than not, it is considered to be a deaf person’s first language before English within the deaf culture. But one must understand that ASL is centered in the states only and should not be considered universal.

ASL is one of many sign languages in the world, and there are more than seven others around the world; British Sign Language, Australian, Chinese, Irish, Japanese, Spanish, Swedish, and many more. Each country has its' own visual language like ASL.

Values are considered to be preferences; “ideas that people share about what is good, bad, desirable, undesirable” (Basic Concepts). The cultural values within the deaf culture have many elements. Language is considered to be the most important value. Carol Padden, in her essay, *The Deaf Community and the Culture of Deaf People*, states that “because sign language uses the hands, there is a “sacredness” attached to how the hands can be used to communicate” (9). By this she means that “hands are used for daily manual activities, gestures, and sign language, but not for other forms of communication that are *not* sign language” (9). Speaking is another value but one that is not considered appropriate within the deaf culture.

Deaf people can choose to speak within non-deaf activities such as mixed parties, parent-teacher conferences, or other functions. But speaking has not been an ideal aspect within the deaf culture because historically, “speech has traditionally been forced on deaf people as a substitute for their language, it has come to represent confinement and denial of the most fundamental need of deaf people: to communicate deeply and comfortably in their own language” (Padden, 10).

The last aspect of values is Social relations. Social relations are considered to be important in maintaining social and family ties when members are of the same culture or community. Deaf culture “consider social activities an important way of maintain contact with other deaf peers” (Padden, 10).

Norms are “concepts and behaviors that constitute the normal” as well as “behavioral rules or standards for social interactions” (Basic Concepts). This can include in how people get

the attentions of others in an appropriate way. Deaf people are very visual; they naturally adapt to become a visual learner. They rely most on their eyes and less on their ears. Most often the best way to catch a deaf person's attention is to flip the lights on and off, a wave of the hand, a slight vibration of a hard surface if one taps or bangs lightly on it, or a simple tap on the shoulder. While the hearing culture may consider it a rude action, it is something that is considered the important and normal behavior in the deaf culture.

Lastly, Identity is one of the most important components in deaf culture. It is very important to those within the culture to be identified as Deaf or Hard of Hearing. In fact, it is usually how one would introduce themselves to other deaf peers. They typically ask if the person is Deaf or Hard of Hearing. Defining themselves as one or another is a part of the discovery of their self-identity. Their identity is who they are. In *Hearing Difference: The Third Ear in Experimental, Deaf, and Multicultural Theater*, the author, Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren wrote:

*Deaf* with a capital *D* identifies particular members of the Deaf community whose culture is passed through sign language as well as their respective cultural institutions; *deaf* with a lower case *d* refers to those who have an audiological problem hearing but who may not consider themselves members of the Deaf culture (10).

In his essay, *Marginality, Biculturalism, and Social Identity of Deaf People*, R. Greg Emerton writes that the identity of those in the deaf culture develop early in their education when they enter the community. He says:

Deaf Children have the opportunity at school to develop an awareness of a Deaf identity shared with others and can begin to organize their self-image around this, at least in part.

Participation in such a group does three things for the individual. First it provides a sense

of belonging needed for self-definition. Since the self is dependent to a large extent upon an interpretation of how others see one, a healthy self-concept is engendered by the acceptance of a group that values one. Second, such a group maintains pattern of primary group relationships. School relationships within the deaf community are known to be especially strong... Indeed one's acceptance in a deaf group in another locale is frequently dependent upon school affiliation and previous relationships with others in the community. Third, the larger society is interpreted through the traditions of the minority group. Within the Deaf community this means "Deaf Pride". Profound deafness, growing up in a deaf family, and signing fluently are seen as virtues, while "hearing activities such as the use of the telephone or one's voice in conversation are suspect (140).

Society promotes human interaction. The best places for that interaction outside of the home are considered places where people gather such as schools, churches, and theatres. There are schools for the deaf around the country that primarily focuses on the educating the deaf with sign language as a way to communicate. Along with sign language, they are also taught the other common contents that are within the curricula. These contents are taught in each level of education in elementary, middle, and high school. There are a few higher education institutions that are geared towards deaf students and NTID/RIT and Gallaudet are the two only universities in the United States that educate the deaf.

National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) is under Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT). RIT has more majors and minors but NTID focuses on the deaf students. They can choose to go to either one of the two schools and their GPA's will not be affected at all as well as their degree choices. It is based in Rochester New York, and it became a part of RIT in



1968. RIT competed with six other schools to add NTID to their campus to expand the school and allow deaf students a chance to gain more education.

The beginnings of NTID came about by the way of a workshop endorsing a proposal to establish a NTID in 1964. A year later a NTID bill was brought up onto the floor of the House and was unanimously passed and then went to the Senate, which then passed unanimously again. President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the National Technical Institute for the Deaf Act in 1965, allowing the establishment of NTID and providing higher education to those who are deaf or hard of hearing.

The other deaf university, Gallaudet, is based in Washington D.C. and was founded in 1864. The charter to set up the university was signed by President Abraham Lincoln. Like RIT, they admit hearing students, but only five percent into the classes. They have a special 'design your own major' program in which a student can choose from a wide selection of classes to literally design their own major based on their interests.

Gallaudet has an extensive history starting with Amos Kendall, a postmaster general, and Edward Miner Gallaudet, the son of Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet who is also the founder of the first school for deaf students. Kendall donated two acres of his estate to establish a school and housing for twelve deaf and six blind students. Edward became the school's first superintendent. The school was named the Columbia Institution for the Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb and Blind. But it was renamed after Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet and later called Gallaudet University when it was granted university status in October of 1986.

An impactful moment in the history of the university is the Deaf President Now (DPN) movement which was a protest against the hiring of a hearing president. The successful result of

the movement led to the University's first deaf president. DPN has become an important factor within the culture and community because it is "synonymous with self-determination and empowerment for the deaf and hard of hearing people everywhere" (History of Gallaudet University).

Both universities do have a theatre program. Because NTID/RIT is a technical school, there is only a certificate in theatre while Gallaudet has a Bachelor in Theatre Arts. NTID has a Performance Arts Certificate that requires ten semester hours and can be achieved in one semester to acquire this certification. NTID advertises that it "provides students with an additional set of marketable skills" with this certificate (Performance Art Certificate). It covers courses that range from Introduction to Performing Arts to Acting II. It also includes Theatre History Through Deaf Eyes and Sign Mime, Creative Movement, and Visual Theatre. These classes are designed to teach theatre in a unique way that allows the students to gain a different perspective in theatre, and these classes are what no other school, besides Gallaudet, has in their curriculum.

Gallaudet's theatre arts program goes beyond what NTID has in their repertoire. They offer a Bachelor in Theatre Arts: Production/Performance, a minor in dance, and a minor in Theatre Arts: Production/Performance. Their mission is to "provide a unique interdisciplinary education emphasizing collaboration and process, empowering students to affect positive change in society as innovative artists, dynamic leaders, creative thinkers, and engaged educators" (Theatre Arts).

NTID is required 10 credit hours, while Gallaudet requires a total of 120 hours for the B.A. of Theatre Arts. Some of the unique courses include Sign Language Translation for the

Theatre, Mime, Scenographic Techniques, Creative movement and drama, preschool-kindergarten, educational drama for grades 1-12 (a two semester course), and many more. Gaining the education at these deaf institutions is important because they are given access to what they need.

Deaf culture is an important aspect of a deaf person's identity because it provides to them the society in which to interact with others, the language to communicate, the values to develop their own morals and become a rounded individual just as a hearing person in the hearing culture would do. Theatre is one component of deaf culture that is important because it allows for the deaf culture to express and showcase their language and tradition as well as the barriers that comes from being in the culture.

## HISTORY OF NATIONAL THEATRE OF THE DEAF

Long before the National Theatre of the Deaf (NTD) became an idea, America and those in the deaf culture was given a little treat of something called "deaf theater" as termed by Stephen C. Baldwin, the author of *Pictures in the Air*. Until NTD was born, deaf theater consisted of "weekend skits, mime shows, and signed songs or poems" (Baldwin, 3). The only way a person could see this theater was to attend a local deaf club, which is usually a rented hall. There theater, bingo games, captioned film screenings, meetings, and much more were held to help in strengthening cultural bonds.

Deaf clubs were not the only place one could hold a theater. Residential schools for the deaf produced one act plays. And three major deaf grass-roots theater groups in New York City held theatrical events as well. These groups produced performances of short original skits but no full length productions.

The idea of having a full-fledged theatre for the deaf was sparked by actress Anne Bancroft. Bancroft was selected to perform her breakout role of Anne Sullivan in the play *The Miracle Worker*. This was a theatrical stage adaptation of the 1957 television production of the same name. Written by William Gibson, it was based on Helen Keller's autobiography about a young deaf-blind-mute woman. As a child, Hellen Keller learned to perceive the world with a different language she was given by her teacher, Anne Sullivan. It enacts the relationship of Anne Sullivan and Helen Keller and how it evolved as the young child learned language.

Anne Bancroft is a well-known name now being the wife of comedian/actor Mel Brooks. She made her mark on Hollywood with several notable roles and few Tony awards to her credit. She died of cancer on June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2005, and survived by Brooks, their son, and grandson (Bio.com). At the time of the play, she was an unknown actress who had the ability to absorb her character, Anne Sullivan, and in order to do that she had to learn sign language and about the deaf community/culture. With this in mind, she decided to visit as many deaf schools as possible, and along the way she met Dr. Edna S. Levine.

Dr. Levine was a psychologist who was well-known for being the founder of many programs that was designed to help "deaf people cope with the feelings of social isolation from hearing people" (Lambert). She devoted her career to those with hearing impairments. Not only

was she a well-known psychologist, she was also an author of the “first comprehensive dictionary of sign language in 1964” (Lambert). She died at the age of 74 on April 7<sup>th</sup>, 1992.

The meeting between these two women became one of the most important events in Deaf Theatre history. Baldwin shared with deaf writer Taras B. Denis the belief that these two women were the ones “behind the formation of the National Theatre of the Deaf” (Baldwin, 6). Denis wrote,

Miss Bancroft and Dr. Levine became fast friends, the outcome which was something never before attempted. On the one hand, the unassuming academic mind of Dr. Levine: dedicated to the deaf, adept at the business of getting the public interested in their cultural needs, a personality with a penchant for convincing. On the other hand, the box office appeal of Miss Bancroft: dedicated to the theater, adept at the business of getting a different kind of interest from her public, a personality who came away from her own lessons in the language of signs convinced that the deaf have more to offer dramawise. And so, it was in the joining of these two separate forces that the traveling repertory theater had its genesis (Baldwin, 6).

These two women started a long journey to set up the National Theatre of the Deaf. They enlisted the help of Broadway set designer, David Hays. “He was best known as the leading designer for the Eugene O’Neill revival of the fifties” most especially *Long Day’s Journey into Night* (Baldwin 7). Before Bancroft tapped Hays to become involved with the process of creating NTD, he had already been experimenting with the theory of physical forms of expression on stage. He believed that the “human body in itself was a source of drama” and he wanted to explore more with it (Baldwin 7).

Hays was the designer for the “New York City Ballet, Boston Opera, Vivian Beaumont Theatre at Lincoln Center, and the Metropolitan Opera Association” (Baldwin, 8). He was not just a designer of sets and lights; he was also a designer of a theatre. He “codesigned the New Mummies Theatre for Mack Scism, who would later become NTD’s tour manager” (Baldwin, 8-9).

Before Hays became involved, Levine, Bancroft, and Arthur Penn went to Gallaudet to see a deaf performance of *Othello*, and it was with this trip and the seeing of the production that inspired them to go to Mary Switzer, who worked in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, and an advocate for deaf rights. She helped them write their first request for grant money, but unfortunately it was not accepted. There were no organizations in existence to help fund them. However, this despair did not discourage them.

Two years later, in 1961, Bancroft, Levine, and Switzer again drafted another proposal for a grant; again was denied for the same reason; and, resulted in the breakup of the group. Hays went on his way to continue designing sets in New York City, while Bancroft and Penn began work on the movie version of *The Miracle Worker*. The work of this movie became successful and led to four nominations, including best director, best screenplay, and best supporting actress while Bancroft won the Academy Award for best actress.

While 1961 was the failure of the second try of the proposal, the year after, 1962, became *the* year that started it all for good. Hays was contacted by George C. White, who had found a property near Long Island Sound and offered it to Hays, who then saw this as an opportunity to give NTD a home. As Baldwin said, “the third time was the charm” (17), and the third, and last,

proposal was accepted and given a grant. Their first showcase, Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*, was a hit. This hit allowed for another grant to set up a touring company.

It took eight years, but finally in 1967, The National Theatre of the Deaf was born. NTD went abroad as a touring company, first in the states and then overseas to other countries. Eventually they became the first company to hit all 50 states, and touched all the continents, which garnered the company an international reputation, performing in thirty-three countries (Baldwin 69). In the beginning of their first tour, Hays said;

You understand, our object is not to create just another theatre for the deaf. Our new theatre is for everybody. It is a mistake to assume that deaf talent has no place in the world of entertainment. It does-and we're going to prove it (Baldwin, 23).

As a new touring company in the seventies, they were typically on the road twenty-six weeks out of each year, starting in the fall. Each year they did two nine-week tours, before and after the Christmas holidays. For each of the nine weeks, they presented over seventy performances. The year 1969 led to the first European performance in Rome followed by England, France, Israel, Italy, and Yugoslavia (Baldwin, 65) making NTD a touring success.

This successful company spawned three television presentations, five local holiday performances, and as well as established poems, stories, novels, essays, and a film. It also introduced many deaf playwrights, some of which who wrote four original NTD plays, presented for the first time on NTD stage. Of the four, Shanny Mow wrote three originals. The first is an athletic spoof, *The Iliad, Play by Play* (1980), a western spoof in Kabuki style, *The Ghost of Chastity Past, or The Incident at Sashimi Junction* (1981), and finally with Hays, wrote *Parzival*:

*From the Horse's Mouth* (1982) (Baldwin 59-60) which provided the inspiration for the Little Theatre of the Deaf.

The Little Theatre of the Deaf (LTD) was viewed as an “offshoot of the parent company” (Baldwin 77). It was established as a children’s company after receiving a grant awarded by the U.S. Office of Education. The second LTD was established after the wildly successful first LTD had exceeded expectations. The purpose of the LTD was to go to different elementary schools and perform for the children. Tall tales, short stories, poems, fairy tales, fables, and even radio plays were many of what was performed at “public schools, and occasionally at museums, libraries, or parks” (Baldwin 77-78).

The success of NTD and LTD established itself as the hallmark company around the country to perform plays that the people in the deaf culture could understand with their first language, American Sign Language. ASL became a gift as they had gained the ability to understand the stories that hearing people have heard for years on stage.

## HISTORY OF DEAF WEST

Years later, following the success of NTD and LTD, Deaf West was born into existence in the early 90’s and still exists today. This second company is most well-known of the twenty-first century and like NTD, created the careers of many deaf actors and actresses of today, such as Daniel N. Durant, a deaf actor who started on the *Switched at Birth* television show, and is now acting alongside Marlee Matlin and Camryn Manheim on the stage production of *Spring Awakening*.



Founder, Ed Waterstreet, born in 1943, concentrated on the use of ASL and theatre for the deaf. Not only is he a founder, but he is also an actor best known for *Love is Never Silent*, *Sweet Nothing in my Ear*, and *Deaf Ghost*. He started his career within the National Theatre for the Deaf. Since 1970, he's been married to Linda Bove, another deaf native from NTD, and more notably known for her role as Linda the Librarian on Sesame Street (Giordano). He retired in 2012 after managing the company for twenty-one years.

Deaf West was founded in 1991 and Waterstreet credits his company to be the "realization of a dream" (Giordano). He founded Deaf West with the idea of ASL being the true language. He strived to move away from what he believes to be NTD's idea of English being the dominate language of the stage. Waterstreet "wanted true artistic expression of sign unrestrained by the dictates of the spoken word, and for the benefit of the deaf, not hearing audience" (Giordano).

With that in mind, he started out by "staging what he calls "true deaf theater"" with Donald L. Coburn's *The Gin Game* (Giordano). The play was successful and opened the theater to the world. However, he did notice that the majority of his audience at the time was hearing. He decided to put in an infrared sound system that would allow the hearing to "listen in on the action through their headsets, with the sign-to-voice interpreters planted in the sound booth speaking into a microphone" (Giordano).

This method was somewhat successful but it was not until he decided to find materials "that allowed for both a subtle and direct layer of deaf/hearing conflict" (Giordano). His production of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* featured a deaf Murphy and inmates with a

hearing Nurse Ratchet speaking and signing onstage. This particular method became the most used one in Deaf West and is still used today.

Deaf West puts on at least three to five productions per year based on their subscription seasons. Certain productions can include national tours and Broadway as the new *Spring Awakening* that is being put on right now has shown. Not only does Deaf West put performances on stage, they do put on educational workshops that allow the deaf and hard of hearing children learn more about theatre. They “conduct four 13-week educational outreach programs at culturally underserved schools” and during the summer for deaf and hard of hearing artists, the theatre “conducts a 4-week intensive Professional Training Program” where instructors and guest speakers would establish entertainment industry professionals (Deaf West Theatre Performing Arts). Also free workshops in learning Sign Language is proposed as well for the community.

This theatre employs interns from all degree programs of any aspects to work within the show business. Doing this allows the theatre to expose the deaf industry as well as allow “gainful entertainment industry employment outside the limitations of non-profit theatre” (Deaf West theatre Performing Arts). They believe that every hearing student or intern that interacts with them will have the open-mindedness to not hesitate a deaf candidate for a job.

Creating Deaf West led itself to be one of the only Deaf Theatres in the United States, with NTD now being represented as a children’s theatre. There is also a continuing tradition that started in March of 2012 and that’s called “Signing in the Streets”, an event that brings thousands of people to Disneyland to celebrate deaf culture.

## CONCLUSION

The successful history of NTD and Deaf West is important in defining Deaf Theatre as a style or movement. They provide the vital information in the emergence of Deaf Theatre and the understanding of its unique aspects of it. It has brought forth new actors and given the hearing culture the chance to learn more about deaf culture through the use of theatre and sign language.

In the past few years, the deaf culture has gained a footing in society through the use of Deaf Theatre thanks to the prominent exposure of Deaf West's Broadway productions of *Big River* and *Spring Awakening*. Deaf Theatre has become a country-wide phenomenon that is steadily climbing in the hearing culture and is being labeled as a style among the likes of Realism, Symbolism, and many more, and it will continue to thrive in the upcoming years.

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