

An analyzation of aspects of Theatre for the Deaf and compared effectiveness to traditional American Theatre.

To what extent does the use of American Sign Language and exaggerated facial expressions in Theatre for the Deaf substitute for voice and gestures in traditional American theatre?

Theatre

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Introduction

Approximately one in every twenty people are deaf or hard of hearing in America.¹ Deafness is classified as a disability and is not often accommodated for in daily life, one example of this being theatre.² Many performances do not allow many opportunities for deaf actors, and deaf audience members often have difficulties gaining the full meaning of performances due to a lack of communication and understanding.³ However, Theatre for the Deaf allows for both deaf actors and audience members to fully experience theatre and gain full meaning from performances through the use of American Sign Language in performances.⁴ Assessing and understanding Theatre for the Deaf arises the question, **to what extent does the use of American Sign Language and exaggerated facial expressions in Theatre for the Deaf substitute for voice and gestures in traditional American theatre?** In order to evaluate this question, the differences between traditional American theatre and Theatre for the Deaf will be explored and analyzed, with references to two Theatre for the Deaf performances, *Spring Awakening* and *Tribes*. In addition, challenges directors and performers face while trying to accurately and effectively create performances for deaf audiences will be explored. This research question is worth investigating because theatre is such an impactful form of art and allowing for representation of the deaf community onstage aids in normalizing deafness and removing stigma.

¹ Ross Mitchell. *How many deaf people are there in the United States*, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/16177267. Accessed 12 Oct. 2018

² DJ Kurs, *American Sign Language in Theatre and Its Impact*, 5 Apr. 2016, howlround.com/american-sign-language-in-theatre-and-social-advancement-or-why-we-need-more-deaf-actors-onstage. Accessed 3 Dec. 2017.

³ DJ Kurs.

⁴ DJ Kurs.

Context

Theatre for the Deaf is a form of theatre that caters specifically to deaf audiences through American Sign Language. As a growing form of theatre, Theatre for the Deaf impacts audiences to a great extent through representation of the deaf community in adaptations of traditionally hearing performances, such as musicals or common plays not written for deaf audiences, or productions created specifically for deaf theatre. This representation is influential because of the stigma often associated with American Sign Language as a disability, with this stigma leading to less exposure of normalized deafness.⁵ Creating a deaf theatre performance can appear to be challenging due to the lack of voice and hand gestures, however these aspects are greatly made up for through the use of exaggerated facial expressions and connotation from American Sign Language. Animated facial expressions are used to better emphasize mood and tone and are used in deaf communities to give a better understanding to what is being communicated.⁶ Utilizing this in theatre allows for better understanding of dialogue, as well as more thorough characterization to be created. Furthermore, connotation behind many signs allows for deaf audience members to better understand dialogue and intended meaning without relying on an interpreter.⁷ Connotation in the context of American Sign Language is any meaning not displayed through the use of words, or multiple meanings corresponding with one sign. Since American Sign Language is movement based, less words are used to allow for faster communication, which means that more must be implied.⁸ Because of the full use of connotation

⁵ DJ Kurs.

⁶ DJ Kurs.

⁷ DJ Kurs.

⁸ DJ Kurs.

in American Sign Language which is emphasized through facial expressions, performances greater resonate with deaf audiences and performances are better established.⁹

Traditional American theatre and Theatre for the Deaf

Voice and gesture are essential aspects of traditional American theatre while also being the most discernable difference between traditional American theatre and Theatre for the Deaf. In traditional American theatre, voice is used to convey meaning, characterization and subtext through characters themselves, while gestures and body language aid in providing subtext.¹⁰ However, in Theatre for the Deaf, these concepts are altered in order to incorporate American Sign Language. Although this difference is prevalent in performances, aspects going into creating performances remain relatively similar; for example, dialogue. Because of this, plays catered to hearing audiences can easily be adapted to be performed by a deaf cast. In traditional American theatre, voice is often heavily depended on to convey meaning. Inflection and tone create subtext and emotion that add layers to the dialogue of the performance. In addition, voice can also create characterization as each character's voice is unique and creates diversity among characters.¹¹ For example, accents suggest where the character is from, and adding a lisp or stutter to voice can add depth to the character. However, although voice is depended upon to convey these aspects, removing voice from a performance does not dispose of them. Animated facial expressions are used in deaf culture and are used to add the same layers of meaning behind dialogue that inflection and tone otherwise would have. Posture of characters can also play a

⁹ DJ Kurs.

¹⁰ DJ Kurs.

¹¹ DJ Kurs.

large role in creating characterization. Because of this, the intended interpretation of the performance is not lost once voice is adapted into American Sign Language.

As opposed to creating a musical with a hearing cast, working to create a musical with a deaf cast presents the challenge of deaf performers not understanding music in the same context as hearing performers. Interpreting music as a deaf performer is most often being told lyrics. There is no rhythm, vocals, or beat to go off of. During an interview, Daniel N. Durant, who played Moritz Stiefel in Deaf West's production of *Spring Awakening*, stated, "I grew up never understanding music. I'm sorry. I'm deaf."¹² Because of this challenge, timing plays a large role in creating musicals, due to deaf performers signing lyrics while music is played behind them.¹³ In this context, these performers are less singing and more acting with musical accompaniment, but through facial expression and body language the meaning behind the lyrics can be conveyed, and the idea of singing is interpreted by the deaf audience.¹⁴

Deaf West Theatre, as well as other theatre organizations such as The National Theatre for the Deaf have been working for years to remove the stigma around Deaf Theatre by adapting hearing performances as well as performing original deaf plays. The National Theatre for the Deaf began in 1967 after David Hayes, the light designer on a Broadway production of *The Miracle Worker* about Hellen Keller, wanted to continue bringing attention to the deaf community through theatre.¹⁵ Hayes went on to found The National Theatre for the Deaf, which removed a great amount of stigma around American Sign Language and deaf culture.¹⁶ The

¹² *Working in the Theatre: Sign Language Theatre*, American Theatre Wing, 20 Jan. 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=IIX4Zt4sPtE. Accessed 22 Jan. 2018.

¹³ *Working in the Theatre: Sign Language Theatre*.

¹⁴ *Working in the Theatre: Sign Language Theatre*.

¹⁵ *ABOUT The National Theatre of the Deaf*, National Theatre of the Deaf, 2014, www.ntd.org/ntd_about.html. Accessed 30 Jan. 2018.

¹⁶ *ABOUT The National Theatre of the Deaf*.

National Theatre for the Deaf believes that the merging of American Sign Language and speech adds complexity and layers to a performance, and they seek out deaf and hard of hearing artists to perform.¹⁷ Deaf West began in Los Angeles and was founded much later in 1991¹⁸. Deaf West focuses on creating performances specifically for deaf audiences, and the productions that are put on are created with deaf culture in mind.¹⁹ Deaf West prides itself on creating a bridge between deaf and hearing cultures through the performances produced.²⁰

Another similarity to traditional American theatre, there is more than one way to create a Theatre for the Deaf performance. For example, sim-com, shadowing, interpretation, and full deaf productions are all classified as deaf theatre, yet they are all unique and use American Sign Language in different ways. Full deaf productions tend to be classified as the most effective to a deaf audience because it is full immersion and consistently using American Sign Language.²¹ Because of the extensive use of American Sign Language as well as the use of animated facial expressions, a deaf audience has an easier time understanding the plot and relating to the characters. Sim-com is another form of deaf theatre, where performers both sign and speak. This form is less effective than full deaf, however it still effectively gets plot and characterization across. Sim-com often uses less exaggerated facial expressions because of the use of speech in the performance. In addition, performers who use English as their first language make a habit of placing less of a focus on their American Sign Language performance, giving rise to mistakes and a less effective performance.²² This can be difficult for a deaf audience because it removes a

¹⁷ *ABOUT The National Theatre of the Deaf.*

¹⁸ *Deaf West Theatre*, www.deafwest.org/. Accessed 15 Jan. 2018.

¹⁹ *Deaf West Theatre.*

²⁰ *Deaf West Theatre.*

²¹ Linda Buchwald, *Deaf Talent, Seen and Heard*, 20 Oct. 2015, www.americantheatre.org/2015/10/20/deaf-talent-seen-and-heard/. Accessed 17 Apr. 2018.

²² Linda Buchwald.

layer of understanding, however gestures aid in making up for the lesser expressions and help to



Figure 1, shadowing in a Theatre for the Deaf performance.

fill gaps between misunderstood dialogue.²³

Shadowing and interpreting are both very similar forms of theatre for the deaf that involve the performers using only speech. As seen in figure 1,²⁴ shadowing is when a performer using American Sign Language follows behind the speaking performer and

translates what they are saying.²⁵ This form of deaf theatre is not extremely effective because it lacks the use of movement and gesture that a single performer using American Sign Language would have. Interpretation is the least effective form of deaf theatre, and sometimes is not even considered part of deaf theatre at all.²⁶ As seen in figure 2,²⁷ interpretation involves a single



Figure 2, interpretation of a Theatre for the Deaf performance.

person standing to the side of the stage translating what the performers are saying.²⁸ This completely draws the attention of the audience away from the performance as they attempt to go back and forth between performer and interpreter.²⁹ Creating a

²³ Linda Buchwald.

²⁴ *SHADOW INTERPRETED THEATER PROGRAM FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES*, www.miamidadearts.org/education/shadow-interpreted-theater-program-children-and-families. Accessed 12 Oct. 2018.

²⁵ DJ Kurs.

²⁶ DJ Kurs.

²⁷ Jess Lanning. *ASL Interpreted Shows at The Hideout Theatre – Austin*, 28 Apr. 2017, deafnetwork.com/wordpress/blog/2017/04/28/asl-interpreted-shows-at-the-hideout-theatre-austin. Accessed 12 Oct. 2018.

²⁸ Jess Lanning.

²⁹ Jess Lanning.

performance catered to a deaf audience provides effective use of exaggerated facial expression and connotation of American Sign Language that allows for a performance to convey the intended meaning behind dialogue, and different forms of deaf theatre allow for the production of musicals and performances that can be enjoyed by both deaf and hearing audiences.

Works

Spring Awakening

One influential production in the deaf community is *Spring Awakening* by Steven Sater, which was produced as a deaf performance by Deaf West theatre in 2015.³⁰ *Spring Awakening* was among one of the first Theatre for the Deaf performances to be recognized on a large scale within the deaf community, which aided in a larger scale recognition of Theatre for the Deaf as its own form of theatre.³¹ Because of this recognition, the deaf community began to gain greater representation in theatre which aided in removing stigma around American Sign Language and being deaf.³² *Spring Awakening* itself is about a town of teenagers trying to understand puberty, death, abuse and other mature topics with minimal discussion or understanding from adults.³³ *Spring Awakening* being released in American Sign Language easily assimilates with the concept of miscommunication created in the play. By introducing a language barrier between characters in the play, the aspect of misunderstanding is emphasized and therefore aids in creating a sufficient substitute for voice of deaf characters and creates relatability to deaf audiences. In addition, the use of connotation is utilized throughout this performance as hearing characters

³⁰ 'Spring Awakening' Returns to Broadway— *In Sign Language*, 13 Oct. 2015, www.npr.org/2015/10/13/448379000/spring-awakening-returns-to-broadway-in-sign-language. Accessed 30 Jan. 2018.

³¹ 'Spring Awakening' Returns to Broadway— *In Sign Language*.

³² DJ Kurs.

³³ DJ Kurs.

who may not understand different meanings conveyed through certain signs attempt to use them to communicate with deaf characters. This further emphasized the concept of miscommunication as deaf characters are often confused by certain gestures or signs, which aided in appealing to deaf audiences. As being one of the first major influential deaf performances, deaf audience members were greatly impacted not only by the themes and tones of *Spring Awakening*, but also the range and depth of the characters presented through the use of American Sign Language. Deaf West's production of *Spring Awakening* was influential for not only audience members, but also those who worked on and performed in it. Daniel N. Durant, who himself is a deaf actor meaning he can relate better to the character, recollected his experience as discovering a hidden talent, and an exciting experience. Furthermore, Andy Mientus, a hearing performer who played Hanschen in Deaf West's *Spring Awakening*, concluded that working with American Sign Language caused him to reevaluate every word he said as he was performing, as working with a deaf cast gave him a new perspective and influenced him as well.³⁴

Deaf West as a production company states that they intend to bridge the gap between deaf and hearing audience members through the use of theatre, and by utilizing the strengths of both deaf and hearing actors are able to effectively use language and movement in performances. Producing *Spring Awakening* effectively allows this goal to come through, as using deaf performers with voice actors allows the entire audience to interpret mood, tone, connotation, as well as many other aspects without favoring one language over the other. When discussing *Spring Awakening*, DJ Kurs, the artistic director of Deaf West's production of *Spring Awakening* stated "I think sign language is a natural fit for music actually. It offers a new layer of expression

³⁴ 'Spring Awakening' Returns to Broadway— In Sign Language.

similar to the way that choreography brings a new perspective to music.”³⁵ Understanding the use of connotation in American Sign Language adds depth to characters, and facial expressions create more complex emotions throughout the performance, effectively aiding in creating the intended reaction from the audience. Comparing the performances of *Spring Awakening* without the use of American Sign Language or a deaf cast to Deaf West’s performance, both effectively produce the same ideas and reactions from the audience. The same meaning is able to be conveyed through the use of voice as well as through the use of American Sign Language in their own ways. Furthermore, in some aspects the use of American Sign Language is able to better convey ideas such as miscommunication or isolation. In addition, Deaf West’s production of *Spring Awakening* utilized hearing actors to voice what deaf actors were signing. This allowed the production to hold the same impact of exaggerated the facial expressions. Voicing deaf performers allows for a greater audience, as both deaf and hearing audience members can gain the same understanding of the performance. To continue aiding in understanding, while working with both deaf and hearing performers small cues onstage are used, as opposed to specific lines in traditional American theatre, to enforce correct timing in a performance.³⁶ For example, a subtle move of a hand or tap on the shoulder could mean that the performers should move into the next song or scene. This allows deaf performers to work alongside hearing performers or voice actors while keeping the performance on track and well timed which aids in effectively creating a smooth performance.³⁷ Producing *Spring Awakening* as a deaf performance, Deaf West made effective use of American Sign Language and exaggerated facial features of their performers to further impact both deaf and hearing audiences equally.

³⁵ *Working in the Theatre: Sign Language Theatre.*

³⁶ *Working in the Theatre: Sign Language Theatre.*

³⁷ ‘*Spring Awakening*’ Returns to Broadway— *In Sign Language.*

Tribes

Another influential production for the deaf community is *Tribes* by Nina Raine, which, unlike *Spring Awakening*, was written with the intent of being performed with a full deaf cast instead of being adapted and reintroduced with one. *Tribes* focuses on a family with a deaf child who does not know American Sign Language, and instead learns to read lips.³⁸ He is then introduced to the deaf community when he meets a woman who is going deaf.³⁹ This places a large emphasis on the use of American Sign Language because it not only is being used as a form of communication, but it also is used as a challenge the main character has to overcome thus making the performance more relatable to audiences.⁴⁰ Being written as a play in American Sign Language, *Tribes* does not come across the same issues of attempting to translate important themes and ideas across a language barrier, and instead can play off of the strengths of emphasized facial expressions and exaggerated movement naturally incorporated in American Sign Language. As the play revolves around Billy learning American Sign Language, the use of exaggerated facial expressions is more prevalent throughout the beginning of the performance, and as he learns, more of a reliance is placed on American Sign Language.⁴¹ This change in the performance allows for the utilization of both voice and American Sign Language which gives the performance more depth. For example, the first scene of the play revolves around Billy sitting at the dinner table while his family makes conversation around him. He is unable to understand what they are saying because voice is greater utilized to convey lack of communication.⁴² However, further in the performance Billy meets Sylvia, who is going deaf,

³⁸ Nina Raine on *TRIBES*, Steppenwolf Theatre Company, 15 Jan. 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Seg67ycp58. Accessed 23 Jan. 2018.

³⁹ Nina Raine on *TRIBES*.

⁴⁰ Nina Raine on *TRIBES*.

⁴¹ Nina Raine on *TRIBES*.

⁴² Nina Raine on *TRIBES*.

and learns more about communication through how Sylvia interprets both voice and American Sign Language.⁴³ This allows for the audience to make a better connection with the character as they watch him adapt and work through his issues of miscommunication. Working with both a deaf and hearing cast, a wider range of characters can be achieved as the performance can rely on the abilities of both groups. This creates a more relatable performance for both deaf and hearing audiences, and casting deaf performers resonates more with the deaf audience. Placing a reliance on American Sign Language throughout the performance allows for a better understanding of the plot and working with the deaf community to create a more realistic performance enables themes of the play to greater resonate with the audience, meaning that the use of American Sign Language is effective in the performance.⁴⁴

Tribes was inspired by deaf families in real life, and while Nina Raine herself is not deaf, she wanted to create a performance that would be relatable to deaf audiences.⁴⁵ Nina Raine discussed that upon working with deaf families, she observed the wish that deaf parents would have deaf children, and this longing for similarity inspired Raine to create a performance where the complete opposite would occur.⁴⁶ Nina Raine concluded that to create the greatest impact, she wanted to work off of what common family life is like in deaf households.⁴⁷ Joseph Ausanio, a deaf actor who played the main character Billy stated “*Tribes* completely opened my eyes. I am Billy.”⁴⁸ This impact on performers in the deaf community further added to the aspect of realism in the performance, as actors could relate to their highly realistic characters. Because of this, audiences could gain a better understanding of the characters, as realistic performers connected

⁴³ Nina Raine on *TRIBES*.

⁴⁴ Linda Buchwald.

⁴⁵ Nina Raine on *TRIBES*.

⁴⁶ Nina Raine on *TRIBES*.

⁴⁷ Nina Raine on *TRIBES*.

⁴⁸ Nina Raine on *TRIBES*.

deaf audiences to deaf characters. Furthermore, *Tribes* is an influential play in the deaf community because unlike other performances on deaf culture, this play presents being deaf in a completely new perspective and utilizes the strengths of deaf culture and language to further emphasize the plot. The play begins with the main character Billy, who is deaf, eating dinner with his family. This scene is set up where his family is talking over dinner without making any accommodations for Billy to understand what they are saying; however, Billy is presented as being used to this through his facial expressions, or lack thereof.⁴⁹ This scene makes a large impact on a deaf audience because although voice and gesture are being used in this scene to portray what the parents are discussing, the lack of American Sign Language and facial expressions resonates with the audience as relatable.⁵⁰ *Tribes* created as a Theatre for the Deaf performance allows thorough use of American Sign Language as well as exaggerated facial expressions as it was inspired by deaf families and has a major element of realism created. This performance is very influential in Theatre for the Deaf and further emphasizes how voice is not essential in theatre. In addition, *Tribes* examines the perspective of the absence of American Sign Language and exaggerated facial expressions in addition to the lack of voice which adds a new layer of complexity to characters, specifically Billy, as well as the aspect of communication as a whole.

Challenges in creating a performance

When representation in Theatre for the Deaf is accurate and characters are relatable to audiences, performances are highly impactful on the deaf community; however, issues often arise when deaf characters are portrayed incorrectly. For many years, being deaf was considered

⁴⁹ Nina Raine on *TRIBES*.

⁵⁰ Nina Raine on *TRIBES*.

an illness, and so representation for the deaf community was nonexistent.⁵¹ However, in the mid-1900s, deaf clubs were established by members of the community who translated and performed deaf versions of traditional American plays.⁵² These clubs gained popularity as the deaf community wanted to experience plays similar to how hearing people did.⁵³ Not long after these deaf clubs became extremely popular among the deaf community, *Spring Awakening* was released, which greatly impacted the deaf community.⁵⁴ Deaf performances became more popular and more production companies attempted to adapt performances into deaf productions.⁵⁵ However, although deaf performances became more popular, issues within Theatre for the Deaf arose. Performances that included deaf roles often would make these roles small with limited lines or would suggest that these characters were not capable of discussion because of the language barrier. In addition, people who were not deaf were often cast to play deaf characters and were instructed to act as though they were deaf. This led to many inaccuracies in performances, as well as making it extremely difficult for deaf performers to find roles in the theatre. American Sign Language can often be spoken incorrectly by performers who had to learn for roles, which does not create the same connotation that deaf performers would be able to announce. This removes a layer of meaning from the performance and confuses audiences.⁵⁶ American Sign Language can often be seen as an afterthought when creating a role in a traditional American theatre play, which is challenging for the audience as members of the deaf community are not able to experience the play to the same extent as the hearing audience. This causes performances to lose effectiveness and does not allow for adequate replacement for

⁵¹ DJ Kurs.

⁵² DJ Kurs.

⁵³ DJ Kurs.

⁵⁴ DJ Kurs.

⁵⁵ DJ Kurs.

⁵⁶ Linda Buchwald.

voice. In addition, not having performers use American Sign Language in plays arises many issues of misunderstandings, as interpreters must determine what the performers are saying, or may even have to guess at what is happening to deliver meaning to deaf audience members.⁵⁷ Furthermore, not using American Sign Language also leaves out the aspect of exaggerated facial expressions which further removes a layer of understanding for deaf audiences. Without the animated expressions often used in deaf culture, mood and tone that is created from inflections in voice are not able to be translated over to deaf audiences. Oliver Sacks, a neurologist who wrote the novel *Seeing Voices* about deaf culture summed up the use of American Sign Language by stating “One can have or imagine disembodied speech, but one cannot have disembodied sign. The body and soul of the signer, his unique human identity, are continuously expressed in the act of signing.”⁵⁸ Understanding that American Sign Language is more than just words creates a more impactful performance while meaning is lost when captions or interpretation is used instead. Creating deaf performances is falsely assumed to be a difficult task which leads to shortcuts created by production companies that create confusion for the audience and wrongfully represent deaf culture.

Conclusion

Theatre for the Deaf is an extremely influential form of theatre in America, allowing for both hearing and deaf audiences to gain an extensive understanding of a performance. Through the proper use of language, characterization, and connotation to further meaning, audiences can easily engage and relate to performances while effectively being able to interpret meaning of a performance. Analyzing all aspects of Theatre for the Deaf enables the conclusion that the use of

⁵⁷ DJ Kurs.

⁵⁸ DJ Kurs.

American Sign Language and exaggerated facial expressions in Theatre for the Deaf effectively substitutes for voice and gesture in traditional American theatre.

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