

Deaf Talent: Richness within Our Stories

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ABSTRACT

Art, in all its many forms, has always given people the opportunity to express their inner thoughts and feelings. Art adapts to the person, and different people exploring the same material will lead to different artistic expressions of that material. As a person changes over time, art can change with them, allowing them to discover new ideas by letting their imagination run free. Theatre arts have always been a breeding ground for presenting new perspectives, since there are no set rules and anyone can present a story onstage. New ideas for presenting information are being discovered all the time, leading to a never-ending wellspring of ways to pass along knowledge. This paper advocates for providing artistic theatre opportunities for Deaf students and emerging theatre artists in order to increase access and representation, as well as promote mutual communication.

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different people exploring the same material will lead to different artistic expressions of that material. As a person changes over time, art can change with them, allowing them to discover new ideas by letting their imagination run free. Engaging with art broadens people's awareness of other people's perspectives and leads to more understanding and appreciation of their situations.

Theatre arts have always been a breeding ground for presenting new perspectives, since there are no set rules and anyone can present a story onstage. Cultural perspectives are one of the biggest influences in how art is presented, as every culture will tell a story through its own eyes. For example one of Broadway's most popular musicals, *The Lion King*, would not be the same if it was not influenced by the rich culture of South Africa (Paulson, 2017). However, not all groups have the same opportunities to present their perspectives through theater. The Deaf community is one such group. Traditionally, they have not explored artistic expression through theater due to a lack of exposure, awareness, and opportunities. The New York Deaf Theatre (NYDT) is working to help change that, by increasing the Deaf community's access to theater. Since 2012, I have been the Artistic Director for New York Deaf Theatre, a non-profit theatre company founded by a small group of Deaf artists in 1979. Our mission is to provide artistic theatre opportunities to Deaf talent, including actors, directors, playwrights, designers, and various positions in crew, to develop and show their work on and offstage. Producing a show through "Deaf eyes" showcases Deaf cultural experiences and perspectives.

The concept of showcasing Deaf culture in "Deaf art" is relatively new, as I discussed as part of a panel presentation facilitated by Dr. Nancy Smithner at the NYU Forum on Performance as Activism. Since I am Deaf, I responded in ASL and interpreters translated my response into English for audience members not familiar with the language.

Speaking of Deaf art, it's really a new topic. And Deaf talent is something we have to kind of find in the community because it's not something that people have expressed often because of the oppression that people have experienced. So we have to learn even through those oppressive experiences to show our whole heart towards our art and just to show all audiences what we have to offer. And I—it's interesting because I've seen some people who are more limited in their talent because they're afraid to be that vulnerable.

Working with the Deaf community—having them come and see our art—have them appreciate our performances—it may be the first time they see a performance that is offered in American Sign Language—and they don't have enough opportunities to see those types of creative efforts and so if we can create something that they can understand directly, then we've focused our efforts in the right place.

By providing a space for the Deaf community to engage in theatre, both as creators and audience members, NYDT is committed to expanding the opportunities for the Deaf community to participate in theatre and for the theatre community to see things from a Deaf perspective.

One of the opportunities I'm most proud of facilitating as NYDT's Artistic Director is a series of workshops that explore new ideas to showcase a Deaf perspective in theatre. At one workshop, the participants and I discussed the idea that to fully express their artistic vision it was helpful for Deaf playwrights to do so in their first language, ASL. As a result, we came up with the idea of a visual script, where Deaf playwrights can "write" their story in ASL. Since then we have worked on refining this idea. While it is still in development, the progress has been very exciting. Working with Deaf talent to overcome the obstacles they face led to a creative solution that could lead us to new ways of thinking about how to produce art. NYDT workshops and productions are not limited to Deaf talent. Indeed, we are open to working with everyone who is interested in Deaf theatre, learning a new visual language, and working as a team to discover a new artforms. Creative expression from the Deaf community is not just about discovering new ways to entertain, but also helping form new ways for everyone to express themselves, and provide an awareness of Deaf culture and an understanding Deaf perspectives to the larger community.

Allowing Deaf voices to be heard through theatre involves having FULL accessibility for audiences, both Deaf and hearing. Part of achieving this goal is presenting more theatre experiences in Deaf people's first language, American Sign Language (ASL), with translations provided for non-signers. Imagine yourself seeing a production in your native language. It is a rare occurrence for a production to be done entirely in ASL, and the chance to see a production in your native language can be a life-changing experience. Early NYDT productions were mostly presented with some actors using

ASL while other actors used spoken English simultaneously. One of my goals, as the NYDT Artistic Director, is encouraging the creative intermixing of ASL and English in our productions, including scenes with ASL and Open Captions in English, scenes with ASL and spoken English performed at different times, and even scenes without any language at all. These different presentations add a more realistic sense of how the Deaf and hearing communities interact. Deaf theatre is not limited to the incorporation of ASL and art can always be expressed without speech. For example, Charlie Chaplin became famous without ever speaking, relying solely on body language. Moreover, one of New York City's longest-running off-Broadway shows, *Blue Man Group*, is a perfect example of how a story can be expressive and entertaining without a single spoken word. More recently, the popular interactive theatre experience, *Sleep No More*, encourages the audience to follow actors around a building, submerging them into the world of *Macbeth* largely without spoken words. These artists and productions are prime examples of how theatre art can always find a way to creatively engage audiences of all types.

Art cannot only showcase and explore a culture, but also bring about change in how that culture is perceived. During the Performance as Activism panel discussion, Dr. Smithner asked the panelists to reflect on how how activism can move society towards social change. I had a two part response:

Speaking of activism and deaf talent, I've been impacted by two big things. One is the hearing audience who are amazed to see deaf culture on stage—because so rarely do we see that. And that's not a bad thing; that's a great thing—that they can come to that realization. And I hope to be able to show that talent in a way that not all deaf people are the same. You do not portray every deaf person the same and I want hearing audiences to see that diversity within the community. And also being able to be a role model for deaf children. Deaf children don't have many role models out in society—Marlee Matlin may be the only one that comes to mind—but there are a lot of deaf people out there working but they just don't have exposure. And so if I can give exposure to people that children can see and know that they are here—they are in their communities, they are working, and then maybe those deaf kids won't think of deafness as such a bad thing. And if we stop talking

about an ability to hear and start talking about the culture and the language and the richness that exist within our stories, the deaf kids will be able to internalize that—and that's important.

Representation is important; seeing oneself in a character can give a person a feeling of belonging and provides children with a role model who they can aspire to emulate. The depiction of Deaf characters and the casting of Deaf actors are the keys to creating this type of representation. Unfortunately, not everyone in the modern film and theatre industries provides these opportunities to Deaf talent, even when there is a Deaf role in a story. In most cases, characters with Deaf backgrounds are performed by hearing actors who have a little or no experience with Deaf culture or ASL. For example, in 2015, the History Channel produced a mini-series, *Texas Rising*, based on the true story of the formation of the Texas Rangers during the Texas Revolution. It included the character Ranger Captain Erastus “Deaf” Smith, based on a real Deaf Texan soldier. Jeffrey Dean Morgan, a hearing actor with no record of experiences in Deaf culture, was cast in the role. In response, award-winning Deaf director Jules Dameron, used a social media protest with the hashtag “#Deaftalent” and wrote a blog regarding the mini-series and Mr. Morgan:

So ask yourself: is it okay for the production companies to allow a hearing actor to play an iconic historical deaf figure that holds so much significance to the d/Deaf community? Jeffrey Dean Morgan is a hearing man, talented, and he has a far greater privilege than deaf people will ever have, along with (assuming) most of the production company who have made this casting choice. Morgan is doing what he is supposed to be doing as a professional actor. Look for the best roles that will escalate his career. Deaf actors do not have that privilege, or not yet. They could if the system was different.

Hearing people should not own the decisions that revolve around representing d/Deaf people. They are already making decisions for people that they have not even the slightest understanding of. For starters, deaf actors are simply deaf. This does not mean that they are unable to act. It is #DeafTalent's standpoint that deaf roles are meant for deaf actors. Anyone who considers involving deaf

characters or stories about them should consider working with actual deaf people. Who said it was okay for hearing people to make decisions that determine deaf people's lives? Doesn't anyone find it a bit odd that sometimes people create films or stories that involve deaf characters, and never hire a deaf person to be involved?

Deaf people continue to be barred from opportunities to work in the industry. According to "CinemAbility" (a documentary directed by Jenni Gold) the fabric of the Hollywood industry does not have enough people of diversity/disability. They need access to resources and opportunities to become skilled actors. So of course, it's a genuine catch-22. No opportunities, no access to training or the industry, and no room for improvement. (Dameron, 2015)

#DeafTalent has been spread worldwide and is an attempt to show the hearing community just how tired Deaf people are of having their culture and language ignored or misrepresented when they are portrayed. In addition to giving Deaf roles to hearing actors, the creation of Deaf roles is often done without the input of Deaf people, leading to inaccurate representations of Deaf life. Without authenticity, a hearing audience will never understand how Deaf people grew up or recognize the differences in how we experience the world. A Deaf character that is a caricature doesn't fill children's need for Deaf role models. Roles that reflect the real experiences of Deaf people will help them accept who they are and inspire them to understand that they can do anything they want to. Stories that focus on a broad range of experiences, not just the well-worn conflict of being Deaf in a hearing world, are also needed. Deaf people do more than think about their deafness—we can fight like Dwayne Johnson, dance like Bob Fosse, and make people laugh like Charlie Chaplin. We're just asking for the chance to be seen and to be understood.

Achieving this goal of increased representation requires that the Deaf community gains the theatre education and experience needed to obtain these roles. In the United States, there are only a few universities that provide theatre courses accessible to Deaf artists. Providing more places for Deaf people to learn about theatre, even in small ways, will help people achieve their dreams. The earlier theatre is introduced to Deaf children the easier it is for them to develop the skills necessary to work in the entertainment business. I was lucky to be introduced to

theatre in high school, although I didn't receive actual theatre education until college where I studied theatre production at Rochester Institute of Technology. I credit my involvement in theatre productions for improving my writing skills and my ability to translate from English to ASL. The visual aspects of analyzing scripts, directing, and performing were key to these improvements. My theatre education is directly related to my improved ability to understand and communicate with others, especially those who do not use ASL.

Through my graduate work in the Program in Educational Theatre at NYU I have become convinced that visually-oriented educational theatre programs are essential to teaching Deaf children how to express and advocate for themselves. Cecily O'Neil once said, "... if students are unable to imagine things differently and consider the world from unfamiliar perspectives, they will be unable to bring about any change in their circumstances. The arts and drama in particular have always provoked these shifts of perspective" (Landy & Montgomery, 2012). One way to help students think about different perspectives is through process drama. As Philip Taylor writes, process drama involves a "structured improvisational activity in which teachers and students jointly contract to an imaginary world" (1998, p. 14). Using both their imaginations and the visual media of theatre helps Deaf students process concepts using a combination of sign language and written language. The use of ASL by the educator enhances the benefits that Deaf students receive (Strong & Prinz, 1997). Process drama is not only intended to help participants problem solve, but more importantly, open their minds to new ideas, express themselves, and meaningfully engage with the specific topic under investigation. As education professor Brenda Rosler explains "Integrating Process Drama into the curriculum changed the focus of the classroom to students, not textbooks. Dramatic dialogues provided my students an important opportunity to question and challenge each other" (Rosler, 2010). Process drama not only helps students with general knowledge acquisition but can also help them learn to listen to each other and work together. These skills are important for all children to learn to foster tolerance and acceptance of others.

Understanding and acceptance of the need of groups other than your own is at the heart of improving how the Deaf community is treated. Theatre education can help Deaf children learn to advocate for themselves and grow into artists whose work can help hearing people see things through "Deaf eyes." While the passage of the Americans

With Disabilities Act (ADA) has led to an increase in accessibility, its scope is limited. It's also important to remember that the burden of obtaining accessibility is on the person who needs the accommodation. Additionally, Deaf children are often born into a hearing family and sometimes it's hard for Deaf children to connect with Deaf culture. The lack of cultural connection can be very isolating.

Ultimately, as a student, professor, teaching artist, actor, Artistic Director, and activist, I want to emphasize that theatre can have long lasting effects on people, especially at an early age. Theatre give students a chance to learn more easily from a teacher who is engaging them visually and letting them use their imaginations to understand the perspective of others. It can help teachers become more aware and understanding of Deaf culture and the struggles their Deaf students may be going through. The effect of representation in media can also positively affect Deaf children and the Deaf community as a whole. Without Deaf role models or any art by Deaf talent, Deaf children will never able to view themselves with equal humanity to those groups who are represented. Deaf voices also have the power to change the way the hearing community views and interacts with the Deaf community. This can't be done without opportunities or giving roles to Deaf talent. Theatre gives Deaf talent a way to bring out their inner emotions and show them to everyone, both on and off-stage. Simultaneously, audiences, no matter who they are, have an opportunity to see the world from a Deaf perspective and be entertained in new ways. It's like killing ten birds with one stone. We just have to find the stone and give it to the right people.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Guido, J. W. (2019). Deaf talent: Richness within our stories. *ArtsPraxis*, 5 (2), 9-17.

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JW Guido is an actor, director, and the Artistic Director for the New York Deaf Theatre (NYDT). Since joining NYDT as the Artistic Director in 2012, JW has focused on creating opportunities for Deaf artists through productions, play development, and other performance and community events. He is also committed to providing accessible performances for both Deaf and hearing audiences. JW has a passion for acting and directing, and has performed in various cities around the US and Canada. Outside of theatre, he teaches American Sign Language in various locations and is the author of *Learn American Sign Language*, a beginner's guide to American Sign Language. Blending his love of theatre and education, JW has worked with TDF as a teaching artist, providing workshops to Deaf students who are preparing to attend Broadway shows. JW is currently a doctoral student in the Program in Educational Theatre at NYU.