The Aesthetics of Deaf West Theatre: 
Balancing the Theatre-Going Experience for Deaf and Hearing Audiences

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements 
For the degree of Master of the Arts in Theatre

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Dedication

For Eboni Rafus-Brenning

My love, my wife, my best friend, and my favorite proof-reader.

Thank you for all that you do and everything that you are.

And, thank you for always believing in me.
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Abstract

The Aesthetics of Deaf West Theatre: Balancing the Theatre-Going Experience for Deaf and Hearing Audiences

By

Brandice Rafus-Brenning

Master of Arts in Theatre

The respective theatres of hearing audiences and Deaf audiences were once very far apart in styles and accessibility. The mainstream theatre in the U.S., generally speaking, is primarily the hearing person’s theatre. At one time, the only innovations making hearing theatre inclusive and accessible were interpreters located off to one side and closed-captioning devices, both of which distract from the physical action of the play. Deaf West Theatre (DWT) is one company that is making headway in bridging these style and accessibility divides, bringing the Deaf and hearing communities together. While Deaf West Theatre’s aesthetic is certainly innovative and inclusive, there are still many areas that prove problematic in bringing Deaf and hearing communities on equal footing. Through excavation of some of DWT’s most recent productions, such as Steven Sater and Duncan Sheik’s *Spring Awakening*, Edward Albee’s *At Home at the Zoo*, and Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*, this thesis demonstrates the importance and innovations of DWT’s work and identifies the areas where improvement is still needed to ensure the continuing ability to build bridges between these communities.

This thesis will investigate the background of Deaf West Theatre and their productions, as well as the histories of representation and deaf aesthetics, within the
context of Deaf culture, to track the strides that have been made in this unique area of American Theatre. In studying the past and current productions of DWT, we will trace the progression of innovations made and implemented that have brought them to their present-day success. We will understand how these changes are affecting the Deaf community and how they are enriching the theatre-going experience. In the work of Deaf West Theatre, is the theatre-going experience being enriched for both Deaf and hearing audiences in an equitable division, where knowledge of the production’s plot, themes, conflicts and characters is equally accessible? If not, what can be done to balance accessibility to the production, and thereby, the overall experience? Is it possible to make the experiences for each group equally beneficial?
Introduction

Terminology

The American Deaf community is a vibrant community that possesses a rich and layered visual language. This community is comprised of a diverse population vis-à-vis racial/ethnic identity, varying degrees of ability- and class- privilege, and the full spectrum of sexual and gender identities. As a white, hearing, middle-class, able-privileged, cis-gendered, pansexual woman, I want to ensure that I do not ignore the intersectional identities of this group. The term “Deaf” can mean many things to many people. According to Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren’s article “Hearing Difference across Theatres,” “deaf” with a small ‘d’ has been used over time to denote a person with the audiological condition of having been born deaf or having experienced a hearing loss. People who are “deaf” do not use sign language and may not consider themselves to be a part of the Deaf community. People who identify themselves as “Deaf” with a big ‘D’ consider themselves to be a part of the Deaf community, which uses sign language as their primary means of communication and passing on their culture. They do not equate their Deaf status as having a disability. (Kochhar-Lindgren, Hearing Difference across Theatres 418)

In more recent years, the Deaf community has emphasized the recognition of the many variants of deafness, including the spectrum of intersectional Deaf identities. Elena Ruiz-Williams, Meredith Burke, Vee Yee Chong, and Noppawan Chainarong of

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1 The term intersectionality was coined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1989 to understand how societal structures of dominance and the resulting power via privilege affects identity formation. “Crenshaw’s work shifted gears toward recognizing the multi-dimensionality of groups and identities, instead of seeing them in terms of categorical, mutually exclusive social experiences” (Ruiz-Williams et al. 263).
Gallaudet University call for the use of an acronym that is inclusive of the multi-dimensional realities of the Deaf community. They communicate in their article “‘My Deaf Is Not Your Deaf’: Realizing Intersectional Realities at Gallaudet University” that they attempt to

... carve out a space for DeafBlind, DeafDisabled, and Hard of Hearing signing people’s experiences to come to the fore rather than be erased by a presumptuous, singular, and essentialist term, Deaf. [They] emphasize that sighted and able-privileged Deaf, signing people are not the sole members of (local and international) Signing communities, and [they] believe that by using only Deaf, we exclude the physical, cultural, and linguistic experiences of others. To represent all of these realities, [they] use the acronym DDBDDHH to include Deaf, DeafBlind, DeafDisabled, and Hard of Hearing peoples. (Ruiz-Williams et al. 263)

Unfortunately, there is still not unanimous agreement among the Deaf/DDBDDHH community and academia as to which terms should be used. To add even more complexity to the argument, Guy McIlroy suggests the use of the term “DeaF” to denote a bicultural deaf identity. This term “serves as a linguistic marker of a fluid nature of the bicultural deaf person’s identity that is situated between both the Deaf and the hearing worlds. . .” (McIlroy 510). Persons that are late-deafened and just being introduced to the Deaf community or deaf children that grow up mainly surrounded by hearing peers may identify themselves this way, as well as many other varieties of d/Deaf people. As inclusive as each of these terms strive to be, there are still intersectional identities that aren’t represented. Often the term “Deaf” connotes a deaf person that is “white, cisgender, sighted, and able privileged,” as indicated by Ruiz-Williams et al (265). Just as the term ‘American’ became synonymous with ‘white’ causing the subsequent labels of

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2 Ruiz-Williams et al. note that “Though able-bodied is the most widely used term to denote privileges of ability, we use able-privileged to emphasize that not all privileges of ability are embodied or visible” (263).
African-American, Mexican-American, Asian-American, etc., so has the term ‘Deaf’ become linked to whiteness (Ruiz-Williams et al. 265). Because of this connotation, identifiers such as Deaf People of Color (DPOC), which also includes: DeafBlind People of Color (DBPOC), DeafDisabled People of Color (DDPOC), and Hard of Hearing People of Color (HHPOC), have come into use (264).

Because of this complexity and ongoing quest to find appropriately representative labels, it seems integral to define the way in which the term “Deaf” will be used in this thesis. I wish to acknowledge the full spectrum of Deaf/DDBDDHH/DeafF/DPOC identities in this thesis, but in the effort to ensure clarity and streamline the flow of this analysis, I will default to the term “Deaf”. It here refers to Deaf, DeafBlind, DeafDisabled, Hard of Hearing, DeafF, DPOC persons as well as those members of the Deaf community that became d/Deaf at varying stages of life. If the intention is to include audiollogically deaf persons that do not utilize sign language, the term ‘deaf’ will be used or the compound ‘d/Deaf’ which is inclusive of ‘deaf” and ‘Deaf” at the same time. These complexities within the Deaf community are challenging in navigating inclusiveness and acknowledging the vibrant diversity in everyday life and, especially, in the theatre.

Statement of Problem

The respective theatres of hearing audiences and Deaf audiences were once very far apart in styles and accessibility. The mainstream theatre in the U.S., generally speaking, is primarily the hearing person’s theatre. At one time, the only innovations making hearing theatre inclusive and accessible were interpreters located off to one side and closed-captioning devices, both of which distract from the physical action of the
play. According to Michael Paulson’s *New York Times*’ article “Lights, Gestures, Action! How to Stage a Broadway Musical with Deaf Actors,” Ariel Baker-Gibbs’ *HowlRound* article “Where do we Look? Going to the Theater as a Deaf Person,” and Sarah Wilbur’s *The Drama Review* article, “Gestural Economies and Production Pedagogies in Deaf West’s Spring Awakening,” when producing theatre for and by the Deaf community there are a plethora of considerations to navigate to ensure accessibility. Examples of such considerations include, but are not limited to: the need for constant visibility by way of sufficient lighting (Baker-Gibbs 1/Paulson 3), non-distracting background design and costuming (Paulson 4), and specific blocking needs (Paulson 4); the greater need for extended rehearsal time (for translation and implementation of sign-language) and therefore money (Wilbur 152-153); and the need to put a system of communication in place for both cueing and translation (Paulson 4/Wilbur 151).

Deaf West Theatre (DWT) is one company that is making headway in bridging these style and accessibility divides, bringing the Deaf and hearing communities together. While Deaf West Theatre’s aesthetic is certainly innovative and inclusive, there are still many areas that prove problematic in bringing Deaf and hearing communities on equal footing. Through excavation of some of DWT’s most recent productions³, such as Steven Sater and Duncan Sheik’s *Spring Awakening*, Edward Albee’s *At Home at the Zoo*, and Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*, this thesis reveals the importance and innovations of DWT’s work and identifies the areas where improvement is still needed to ensure the continuing ability to build bridges between these communities. It is so important, socially and culturally speaking, that we study what audiences are being exposed to, especially

³ A full list of DWT’s production history is available in the appendix.
the representations of marginalized groups that are sending subconscious messages to the minds of the audience. David Giles, author of *Media Psychology*, identifies that “[t]he less visible a group is in the media [and other representative art forms], the more likely it will be represented by a stereotype” (Giles 175). Stereotypes are damaging ideas to perpetuate. From the long history of stereotypes endured by d/Deaf people, we receive messages that d/Deaf people are incomplete, incapable of communication or functioning in daily life. Such asinine misrepresentations only serve to support and reify notions held by the audist⁴ hegemonic society. We must address and correct these misrepresentations so that we may begin on a path to repair the damaged identities and mis-representations of this marginalized community and to implement these ideas in other productions and continue to grow this much-needed collaboration of hearing and Deaf communities.

This thesis will investigate the background of Deaf West Theatre and their productions, as well as the histories of representation and deaf aesthetics, within the context of Deaf culture, to track the strides that have been made in this unique area of American Theatre. In studying the past and current productions of DWT, we will trace the progression of innovations made and implemented that have brought them to their present-day success. We will understand how these changes are affecting the Deaf community and how they are enriching the theatre-going experience. In the work of Deaf West Theatre, is the theatre-going experience being enriched for both Deaf and hearing audiences in an equitable division, where knowledge of the production’s plot, themes,

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⁴ “Tom Humphries originated the term audism in 1975, which is the notion that one is superior based on one’s ability to hear or behave in the manner of one who hears…Individuals who hold and/or practice these beliefs may be labeled as audists” (Gertz 63).
conflicts, and characters is equally accessible? If not, what can be done to balance accessibility to the production, and thereby, the overall experience? Is it possible to make the experiences for each group equally beneficial?

Limitations

The limitations present in pursuing answers to the question of equitable theatre-going experiences include both my position as a hearing person and the void of Deaf Critics, and therefore Deaf theatrical criticism, within the mainstream theatre in the United States. Furthermore, in pursuit of assessing equity of these experiences, we must remember that equal does not always equate to the same. As Deaf audiences and hearing audiences require different accommodations to make their experiences accessible and enjoyable, we must consider what criteria will balance the benefits gained and acquire full accessibility to the productions of Deaf West Theatre. Full accessibility, in this thesis, refers to the level of access afforded each audience group to gain knowledge of each production’s plot, themes, conflicts, and characters within the course of viewing one performance.

As a white, hearing woman with a beginner conversational knowledge of ASL, that there may be some holes in my view of the Deaf community, Deaf Culture, and the Deaf experience. With that said, I have done my best to be thorough in my research, to include published perspectives from the Deaf community, and to seek guidance from members of the Deaf community in assuring that this thesis’ analysis is as unbiased as possible.
Representation is important at every level in the theatre: the actors and characters that represent members of our society, the writers who create the stories that reflect the breadth of the human experience, the directors who shape those stories, the producers that make these stories visible to the world, and the critics that inspire theatre practitioners to improve their work and thoroughly connect with the audiences for whom they make theatre. One major concern for the theatre community at large as well as the Deaf theatre community is the void of Deaf criticism. It is incredibly difficult for theatre companies like DWT to know how their work is being received by the Deaf community outside of their immediate circles. How can they make improvements if they don’t know what needs improving?

Those that do review the work of DWT are hearing and almost always have little to no knowledge of American Sign Language. How can they make an accurate and full assessment of the work without having this knowledge? While their ideas are worthwhile, their point-of-view is that of a hearing person, who sees the ASL component as more of a choreographic element than another language system. While some theatre critics have a very astute perception of the deep emotional levels brought to the work by Deaf actors, a Deaf critic would have insights into Deaf culture, the usage of ASL, and the Deaf community that most hearing critics are simply not familiar with. In an attempt to work around this dearth of Deaf criticism, I have scoured published works, public forums, professional and amateur theatrical reviews, Deaf news station broadcasts (through transcripts as well as the assistance of an ASL interpreter), and interviews with Deaf artists to expose perspectives from the Deaf community itself.
This thesis specifically looks at small portion of western theatre from a western perspective. Productions outside of local and national productions by Deaf West Theatre, outside of Broadway and, more broadly, outside of the United States have not been considered in any analysis. There may be other theatre practitioners implementing Deaf aesthetics that are not brought under consideration throughout this thesis. In fact, scholar Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren, whose research is largely based on non-western multicultural dance forms and d/Deaf theatre, will be used here to assist in evaluating a western-based theatre company’s work. This ultra-specific analysis may exclude theatrical works of great importance and innovation to the world of theatre, especially for practitioners adopting a multi-cultural aesthetic.

Methodology & Framework

Through an aesthetic analysis of DWT’s work and an examination of documented responses (reviews, interviews, comments on public forums, etc.) to this work, we will assess the equity of the theatre-going experience for both Deaf and hearing audiences. Equity of Deaf and hearing audiences’ experiences will be assessed through an evaluation of the level of access that each group possesses to the knowledge of the production’s plot, themes, conflicts, and characters. These levels of access will be ascertained through the exploration of a variety of production reviews, cast interviews, and audience comments on public forums. As people within specific cultural groups are not all the same and have varying responses to theatrical productions, this analysis is meant to garner an overall understanding of each group’s theatre-going experience in order to assess the viewer equity provided by Deaf West productions. In no way should
this thesis be seen to identify the experiences for all Deaf or all hearing people that have seen the work of Deaf West Theatre.

In order to analyze the aesthetic developed by Deaf West Theatre (DWT), we must first ask if a DWT company aesthetic can be identified. Through thorough examination of DWT’s production history (see appendix), by way of theatrical reviews, interviews, news programs, articles, theses, and my personal viewing experiences of Big River (2/12/05), Spring Awakening (12/20/15), At Home at the Zoo (3/18/17), and Our Town (10/21/17), I have conducted analysis on the emergence of Deaf West’s aesthetic. Through documentation of each production, I trace the recurrence of specific practices, the trials of practices that were later excluded from their work, and other practices that were later integrated into productions on a regular basis. From these observations, I define a list of aesthetic criteria, from which DWT models their productions. This set of criteria, identified in chapter one, will serve to analyze the overall effects of Deaf West’s work and to assess the theatre-going experience for both Deaf and hearing audience members.

In reference to DWT’s 2003 Broadway run and subsequent 2004-2005 touring production of Mark Twain’s classic story Big River, Hard of Hearing academic Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren has identified Deaf West Theatre as having created a “third space” where hearing and Deaf cultures come together and are able to communicate with one another through the implementation of the “third ear” (a cross-sensory way of conversing across cultures). The development of Kochhar-Lindgren’s third space, ideally, provides a common ground for members of various cultural groups to undergo a similar experience that allows them to communicate with and gain understanding of the other cultural
groups within the space through the implementation of *the third ear*, the development of unique and innovative ways of listening across cultures. Kochhar-Lindgren’s theories will be used to further assess the level of equity among the experiences of DWT patrons and to reinforce the existence of DWT’s aesthetic. Here the term ‘aesthetic’ refers to the underlying principles that guide DWT’s productions as well as the finished visual effects and conventions created in each production. Kochhar-Lindgren believes:

…we must ‘conceptualize new ways of knowing a culture and of gaining a deepened understanding of how the members of a society know each other.’ These new listening practices in the theatre must engage, as well, a deaf (and hard-of-hearing) aesthetic that begins to pull apart our notions of hearing, since traditional understandings of hearing rely on certain repressed assumptions about deafness. *(Hearing Difference across Theatres 417)*

DWT has developed such an aesthetic. Their work helps to break down preconceptions of ‘hearing’ and what, precisely, it means ‘to hear’ for both hearing and Deaf audiences. With this self-reflection comes an examination of attitudes toward deafness and what it means to be d/Deaf for both hearing and Deaf audiences. Hearing people are not the only ones who harbor deep-seated beliefs or biases about hearing and deafness. Like other marginalized communities that struggle with internalized messages of oppression communicated by the institutionalized biases inherent in American structures, governments, and culture (e.g. the existence of colorism⁵ within the African-American community), d/Deaf people still receive the same messages disseminated by mainstream culture and must actively engage and challenge those ideas on a regular basis.

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⁵ Colorism is the idea that lighter skin tones are more beautiful and desirable, resulting in prejudice and discrimination toward people with darker skin tones. This is an ideal of the dominant white society that has been internalized by some people of color. This prejudicial perspective is still perpetuated within communities of color.
Internalization of audist beliefs occur within the Deaf community through dysconscious audism. According to Genie Gertz and H-Dirksen L. Bauman,

[d]ysconscious audism is the acceptance of dominant hearing norms, privileges and cultural values by Deaf individuals, and the subsequent perception of hearing society as being more appropriate than Deaf society. . . By internalizing dysconscious audism, Deaf people disempower themselves, and contribute to a continued perception that being Deaf and promoting the values and norms of Deaf Culture is an obstacle to success. They may believe the only way to succeed is to become ‘like hearing.’ (qtd. in Gertz 64-65)

Internalization of such oppressive messages is damaging to groups that fall outside of hegemonic white or hearing cultures. This may result in self-hatred, incomplete identity formation, and disempowerment (Gertz 65).

Analysis of Deaf West’s productions of Spring Awakening, At Home at the Zoo, and Our Town will be conducted by first examining the responses to each production by both Deaf and hearing audience members. These responses will be collected from professional and amateur theatrical critiques, articles, interviews, and audience comments posted on public online forums. From these responses, the level of accessibility to the productions’ plot, themes, conflicts, and characters as well as the overall quality of the experiences will be ascertained. These criteria, along with insights derived from Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren’s theories of the third space and third ear, will serve as a tool to weigh the equity of the theatre-going experience for both Deaf and hearing audiences throughout each production, thus deciphering the level of balance between their respective experiences. Deaf West’s aesthetic criteria, laid out in chapter one, will also serve to identify the successes and failures of each production’s ability to provide equitable experiences, particularly in terms of accessibility to the production’s modes of communication, narrative and characters.
Chapter One: Deaf West Theatre’s Aesthetic

The aesthetic of Deaf West Theatre has been an ever changing one since their first production in 1991. Upon examination of theatrical reviews, interviews, articles, videos, theses, books, and my own recollections of three of the four most-recent productions as well as the 2005 production of Big River, I have compiled a list of 11 aesthetic criteria upon which DWT bases their productions. The company’s more recent productions reveal the basic core of the DWT aesthetic. This core can be defined by the following attributes:

1.) Selection of material that lends itself to the integration of Deaf and hearing cultures. A story that could be adapted or built upon, adding narrative layers and parallels, is most desirable. The addition of Deaf Culture should work to reinforce the themes of the original work.

This criterion is best represented by the Big River, Cyrano, and Spring Awakening productions. Big River was the first of DWT’s productions to add such an obvious layer to the story already being told. The story centers on a white teenage boy, Huck, and a runaway African-American slave, Jim, both of whom are attempting to flee their miserable circumstances (a murderous father and slavery, respectively). The additional layer added to the story is in regard to the Deaf and hearing communities represented onstage. Huck is played by Deaf actor Tyrone Giordano and voiced by Daniel H. Jenkins. Jim is played by hearing actor Michael McElroy, who signs and sings/speaks simultaneously. Playbill’s Ernio Hernandez explains: “The differences between deaf and hearing cultures began to permeate the story as much as the tale’s juxtaposing of black and white cultures” (Hernandez). Beyond the actors being White and Deaf (Giordano/Huck) and Black and hearing (McElroy/Jim), this permeation becomes abundantly clear in one particular scene, in which Huck plays a mean trick on Jim,
making him believe he is about to be caught as a runaway slave. Jim is very hurt and angry that Huck would use his vulnerability against him. Jim and Huck reconcile through the poignant number, “Worlds Apart”. Jim then tells Huck a story about how he discovered his daughter had gone deaf. He slapped her, thinking she was merely being contrary, only to find that she could not hear him calling her. Jim’s ignorance parallels that of Huck’s in the moments before. Emphasizing the layering effect that DWT’s productions create, UCLA’s professor of Musicology, Dr. Raymond Knapp, points out that “[t]he way that the song centres the issues of slavery and deafness around a common thread of unbridgeable difference is an invention of the musical” (Knapp 106). Whether intentional or not, this story-layering is a direct result of DWT’s unique aesthetic of casting both Deaf and hearing actors as well as the simultaneous use of ASL and English.

DWT’s 2012 production of Stephen Sachs’ Cyrano, a modern adaptation of Edmond Rostand’s Cyrano de Bergerac, also highlights how they build upon the foundation of the original work via an adaptation that incorporates aspects of Deaf culture. Sharon Perlmutter, of Talkin’ Broadway, exclaims in her review, Cyrano, that . . . the very best Deaf West productions. . . are those in which the use of ASL and simultaneous interpretation adds something to the original play. Sachs’s adaptation makes deafness a natural fit for Cyrano, exploring the relationship between Cyrano and Chris in ways in which Rostand never did. . ., while, at the same time, using the framework of the tale to say something about the issues facing deaf people today. (Perlmutter 1)

Cyrano’s nose in the original has become Cyrano’s deafness in the adaptation. It is both his shame and, later in the play, his pride. This was the first DWT production where the main character was identified as deaf, not a character that “is not specifically deaf or hearing” (Perlmutter 1). Cyrano’s brother, Chris, is hearing and interprets for Cyrano in the context of the play. Cyrano is voiced by another actor who expresses Cyrano’s
romantic nature and way with words. This highlights Chris’ ineptitude in interpreting, conveying to the audience just how much is being lost in translation.

DWT’s treatment of Steven Sater and Duncan Sheik’s *Spring Awakening* draws parallels between “the societal oppression and irrepressible sexuality of teenagers” (McNulty, *Spring*) of 1891 Germany with the dark history of the oppression of the Deaf community during this time-period. Deaf educators were pushing for the teaching of oralism⁶, thus banning the use of sign language in the schools. Specifically, as director Michael Arden explained, in Germany around this time-period, Deaf individuals were being sterilized and “it was forbidden for deaf and hearing couples to marry” (qtd. in D. Gordon 2). Once again, DWT has added their unique layer to the story and still supported the major themes of the original production. In fact, Sarah Wilbur notes just how DWT utilizes the themes of the original production to convey a new message: “Deaf West’s revival meaningfully leverages the piece’s core message of communicative ruptures between institutions, parents, and adolescents to illuminate normative constraints placed on nonhearing youth and adults” (Wilbur 147). Here she identifies that DWT not only keeps the original themes intact but utilizes them to tell their own story, thereby reshaping the typically audio-centric artistic form of musical theatre to shine a light on this marginalized community that is usually not even considered in the creation of such productions.

2.) Simultaneous use of theatricalized Sign Language, speaking, singing, dance, and movement is necessary. The layering of multiple modes of communication

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⁶ Oralism refers to a method used to teach deaf individuals. This approach reinforced aspects of oral language, utilizing lip reading, mimicry of mouth shapes and breathing used during speech, and speech itself. These skills were taught in lieu of utilizing sign language.
combine to “creat[e] a third language” (Giordano) that elevates the narrative. Deaf and hearing actors are incorporated into the story, which serve to support the formation of a third language and create new levels of storytelling.

This aspect of DWT’s aesthetic is visible in every production in their history, (see appendix). In the musicals such as *Sleeping Beauty Wakes, Oliver!, Pippin, Big River,* and *Spring Awakening,* Deaf actors sign and dance while hearing actors sing, speak, dance, and sometimes sign. In plays, such as *Cyrano, Our Town, At Home at the Zoo,* etc., Deaf actors sign while hearing actors speak. Sometimes this is accomplished through a form of shadow7 interpreting, in which the double-cast roles interpret for one another and stay near each other throughout the action of the play, and other times zone8 interpreting, in which the voicing actors have been placed near the perimeter of the stage or even above the stage. This aesthetic criterion feeds directly into the story-layering aesthetic criterion number one. It is this creation of a third language that allows the story-layering to occur.

3.) Double- or multi-casting of certain characters, pairing a Deaf actor or actors with a hearing actor. The actors of doubled characters should develop and demonstrate a complementary relationship. Sometimes the double-casting is more of a reciprocal shadow interpreting relationship and other times the partners are like pieces of one whole.

This aesthetic criterion, possibly the most recognizable of Deaf West’s aesthetics, can be found in each of DWT’s productions. Most productions employ double-casting of at least the main characters. The only main characters that are not split are usually hearing actors

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7 Shadow interpretation “employs an interpreter for each character. The interpreter moves on-stage with one specific actor and signs only that character’s lines” (Andrews 34).

8 Zone Interpretation requires that the stage is split into areas. “An interpreter signs all conversations in the zone in which he or she stands” (Andrews 33-34).
who also have some level of fluency in ASL, such as trained interpreters Austin McKenzie\(^9\) as Melchior and Camryn Manheim\(^10\) as Frau Bergman in *Spring Awakening*.

Other times, some characters are cast by more than two actors. The first example of this was in DWT’s 2017 production of Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*, in which the role of the Stage Manager was shared by four actors. Jane Kaczmarek voiced the character, while Troy Kotsur, Russell Harvard, and Alexandria Wailes alternated performing the signing half of the character.

Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren addresses the significance of DWT’s double-casting aesthetic. In response to a scene where *Big River*’s audience is introduced to Huck’s father, whom he calls “Pap” (signed by Troy Kotsur and voiced by James Devine), Kochhar-Lindgren presents a borrowed description that details the synchronized movement of the character’s two halves and then offers her own keen analysis:

> The doubling of the character is dramatically effective in communicating the double nature of the father, but the effect of this scene goes beyond the psychological dimension. It plays with the ways in which hearing and deafness are presumed doubles of each other and what happens when the two play off of each other in their complexities. The scene, which is riveting, has to do with the ways in which speaking, singing, and signing work off of each other to ‘double say’ the scene. (*Hearing Difference* 116)

Kochhar-Lindgren’s analysis of this double-casting aesthetic echoes the initial aesthetic of story-layering. It seems that she believes the double-casting aesthetic to be directly feeding into the story-layering aesthetic.

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\(^9\) Austin McKenzie’s fluency in ASL developed from his interpreter training, according to Joe Gambino’s *Playbill* article “What’s a Name Sign? Spring Awakening Cast Show Off Their Unique Identities in ASL” (2).

\(^10\) Camryn Manheim worked previously as an ASL interpreter, according to the *SF Gate* article, “How actress Camryn Manheim became fluent in ASL” (3).
4.) The theatrical sign language is developed by ASL masters and tailored to reflect the meaning of the spoken text (or vice versa, if the material begins as an original sign language piece), mood and rhythm of the music, and any specific dialect needs.

This aspect of DWT’s process is most rigorous when mounting musical productions.

Musical productions can require anywhere from around two (e.g. Pippin\textsuperscript{11}) to seven ASL masters\textsuperscript{12} (e.g. Oliver!\textsuperscript{13}), whereas plays usually involve one (e.g. American Buffalo\textsuperscript{14}) to three (e.g. At Home at the Zoo\textsuperscript{15}). According to Linda Bove, the translation process from spoken English (an audio-based language) to ASL (a visually-based language) is incredibly complex, especially for musicals (Calhoun et al. 90-93). There are many more things to consider than one would think. Big River required four ASL masters (three Deaf and one hearing) to create the end result (Calhoun et al. 90). The mission of the ASL master team was to ensure that the Deaf and hearing audience members were “...enjoying the same experience at the same time,” as indicated by ASL master, Linda Bove


\textsuperscript{12} ASL masters are individuals fluent in ASL, employed to: create translations of established written material, monitor the cast’s accuracy in signing, to advise options for developing character through the style of signing, ensure the grammatical components of ASL (facial expression, handshape, and body movements) are adhered to, and to ensure clarity of the signs being used.


(Calhoun et al. 91). They wanted the audience “to look at each other and to smile. [They didn’t] want one half of the audience to laugh, and the other half to feel left out” (Calhoun et al. 91). To do this, the team would have to eliminate the English word order and get to the meaning of the words being said/sung.

To briefly summarize the process, once the team identified the meaning of each line, utilizing their hearing ASL Master, they developed the meaning and the equivalent signs, making adjustments to ensure they were keeping the rhythm of the music. Some signs that they wanted to use had to be discarded in order to preserve the rhythm. Using a sort of ASL shorthand, referred to as a “gloss” or “notation” (Calhoun et al. 92), the team developed an initial script. A video recording of the translations was also made. Referring to this script, the team worked one on one with each actor to develop the actor’s own notes (that they could understand, since the gloss only makes sense to the creators). The actors would also review the video translations. Linda Bove, also known as Sesame Street’s “Linda the Librarian”, explains the complexity of this seven to eight-month long translation process:

. . . The challenge is how to bring English lyrics and their ASL translations together. There is colloquial ASL, signs that we use on a daily basis. But we can’t use those signs here. We have to take the signing to an artistic level. ASL has its own rhythm, its own lyricism. It can be angular and flowing. It is a visually exponential language. The signs that we selected aren’t used in daily conversation, but they strike the heart of our deaf audience. I see it as visual poetry. And it is an experience to be awed in your first language. And the hearing audience is awed: they hear a familiar word and then see how the word is signed. Their perception changes, and the language is elevated. (Calhoun et al. 92)

The translators also had to consider how to develop the accents of the characters. Like in spoken English, people using ASL express themselves differently depending on where they are from and the social status that they hold in society. The translation team wanted
to “express the depth of the human condition of these characters, and that required
discussion with each of the actors. [They would] give tools to the actors that they could
use to incorporate with their characters” (Calhoun et al. 93). This process has been
similar for each of the musicals produced by DWT. The process for the plays is also
similar, without the need to match musical rhythms. However, certain playwrights, like
David Mamet, write in a very specific rhythm and speed (Whatley 4-5). Sometimes this
can play into how the lines are signed and which signs are chosen for the translation.

5.) Staging, lighting, and costuming that is focused toward clarity, visibility, and
supporting the narrative.

According to New York Times writer Michael Paulson, in DWT’s Broadway production
of Spring Awakening “[t]he deaf actors [were] often downstage and lighted from the
front; their hearing partners are generally lighted from behind, and in ensemble numbers
the cast members look toward the signers,” (Paulson 3) as director Michael Arden has
ordained that the focus be on the signing. In regard to ensuring clarity and visibility,
Paulson notes that:

[c]larity of communication has guided production decisions, affecting
costumes (certain shades and patterns were rejected because they were
thought to create ‘visual noise’) and choreography (hand movement is
primarily for language, not just aesthetics, and for obvious reasons, signers
need to face the audience). (Paulson 4)

‘Visual noise’ can make it difficult for signs to be understood. Much like someone
wearing small stripes on camera, a blurriness can distract viewers. In this case though,
important information can be missed because of it. Furthermore, in an effort to ensure
language clarity for the audience and for other actors,

[d]uring rehearsals, the A.S.L. masters coached actors on expressiveness
and negotiated with choreographers (for example, they insisted on limiting
Clarity is always important in theatre, but especially so when it can make or ruin a show for Deaf audience members.

6.) Integration of technology that aids in supporting the overall vision but does not distract from the action of the performance. Some technology could include: projection, flat-screen monitors for incorporating digital communication, microphones for the singing/speaking actors, and subwoofers that enhance the vibrations of the music.

DWT has gone through many changes with incorporating technological elements into their productions. Once DWT relocated to their current space in North Hollywood, California, they installed an infrared sound system, known as the “Sennheiser Infrared Audio Headset System” (Linza 67). This system would enable hearing audience members to listen to sign-to-voice interpreters through a headset. These interpreters would speak into a microphone in the theatre’s sound booth. Those voicing the production were responsible for matching their verbal performance to the rhythm of the ASL. During DWT’s 1992 production of *Shirley Valentine*, this accommodation was well-received and sent ticket sales through the roof. However, when the system was used at another theatre space, the system created problems for hearing audiences that had some knowledge of sign language. Because the booth was not sound proof, as it was in DWT’s own space, these audience members were distracted by the sounds coming from the booth (Linza 67-68).

According to scholar Pam Linza, “In 1997, DWT introduced another new method called Supertitles for hard of hearing, late-deafened, and non-signing audiences” (Linza 68) in their productions of George Bernard Shaw’s *Saint Joan* and Lyle Kessler’s
**Orphans.** This innovation is a device that displays English translations, like large captions, of the performance and descriptions of any action that isn’t immediately recognizable to the non-signing audience. This device hangs from the ceiling of the stage itself and is reported not to interfere with or distract from the action on the stage. This captioning technique proved possibly “effective in strengthening audience appeal for non-signing audiences without inhibiting audience appeal for deaf audiences” (Linza 68).

According to critic Karen Wada, Deaf West’s production of *Cyrano,*

integrated e-language into Deaf West’s trademark blending of signed and spoken language presented by deaf and hearing performers for deaf and hearing audiences. Flat screen monitors glow[ed] with online messages while actors. . . express[ed] with their hands and faces what Sachs calls the ‘intimate, visceral, kinetic’ beauty of American Sign Language. (Wada, *Cyrano* 1-2)

According to *Talkin’ Broadway*’s theatre critic Sharon Perlmutter, however, there were some opening night technical issues with the flat-screen monitors. The texts being sent on stage didn’t match up with the reading of the said texts (Perlmutter 2). *Spring Awakening* utilized projection of signed and spoken lines on the walls themselves and the school chalkboard. These are just a few examples of technological elements that have been incorporated into DWT’s productions.

7.) Dance or movement should develop from and/or incorporate the sign language being used.

Examples of this aesthetic decision can be seen in each of DWT’s musicals. According to the *Hollywood Reporter*’s Jordan Riefe, in *Spring Awakening* choreographer Spencer Liff replaced the original Broadway dance routines “with moves that incorporate[d] sign language, weaving it into the natural flow of the production. At times this [was] almost unnoticeable. But at its best, it enhance[d] the drama with a poetically expressive
dimension. . .” (Riefe 3). Regarding another level of the choreography, ASL-English interpreter Craig Fogel felt that “. . . Liff, Alexandria Wailes, and the ASL Masters did a brilliant job ‘musicalizing’ this world for Deaf eyes. . . the movement onstage indicated to profoundly Deaf audience members the moments when dialogue moved into song” (qtd. in Epstein & Needham 5).

8.) Theatrical, creative, and technical decisions should provide equitable access for Deaf and hearing audiences.

DWT’s mission, according to Deaf actor Tyrone Giordano, “is total access to theater-bringing classic and contemporary theater works to deaf audiences by incorporating ASL, and heightening or enhancing the theatrical experience for hearing audiences through the same device” (Giordano). He continues on to explain the gain for each member of the audience in watching this art form,

. . . for the auditory pleasure of hearing audience members, voice and music are also there in a synthesis of sign and sound. The benefit for deaf audiences is that they can enjoy plays with sign incorporated into the production by signing actors, as opposed to splitting focus between the central action onstage and an interpreter off to the side”. (Giordano)

The opportunity for hearing and Deaf individuals to share in stories, connect to a shared focus, and to broaden their ideas and perceptions of those seemingly unlike them is also a perk for the audiences, not to mention a huge positive result of DWT’s aesthetic.

This aesthetic element is always the goal, but even Deaf West has acknowledged that it doesn’t always play out this way. According to DWT’s founder and first artistic director, Ed Waterstreet, a majority of DWT’s audiences have been hearing (qtd. in Morgan 4). This may be due to a lack of advertising near the Deaf community or because of the theatricalized sign language that the company employs. Also, the newness of
seeing ASL onstage could have been very intriguing for hearing audiences. The exact cause of this imbalance is not clear. With 75% of their audiences being hearing at this particular time, Waterstreet acknowledged that the hearing audience had to be catered to as well (Morgan 4). Pam Linza indicates that,

> [d]espite some negative feedback and pressure from the deaf and hearing communities, DWT…continue[d] to take risks in making unconventional and innovative artistic and cultural decisions to develop successful productions for deaf and hearing audiences. (Linza 74)

In this effort, DWT produced their first musical, *Oliver!*, in 2000, which was intended to appeal to all audience members, Deaf and hearing. Waterstreet, who is Deaf, admits that “there is no question that the hearing audience gets a double benefit: They can hear the music, and there’s the added visual element of the signing. For the deaf, this is a new kind of stylized signing” (qtd. in Morgan). Even though this aesthetic goal isn’t always reached at a perfect balance, DWT still aims to make it so.

9.) Emphasis on the power of the collective voice as well as celebration of unique, individual styles, inspiring a collaborative environment.

This aesthetic aspect is present in many of the plotlines around which DWT has built their productions. For instance, the plotlines of *Big River* and *Spring Awakening* both depict the oppression of marginalized groups, with overarching messages of acceptance and understanding. This aesthetic aspect is always present, however, in Deaf West’s aesthetic structure. Double- and multi-casting roles create strong bonds between Deaf and hearing actors. Jane Kaczmarek describes her relationship with Troy Kotsur, one of her signing halves in *Our Town*, explaining that “it’s become very intimate at this point. He has never heard a word I’ve said and yet you develop this bond and trust with each other
although there is no verbal communication. That has been an extraordinary experience” (qtd. in Hayashida 4).

Similarly, *Spring Awakening*’s Daniel Stewart and Josh Castille, who shared the role of Ernst also divulged the unique closeness formed through the development of their role together. Daniel Stewart, the voicing half of Ernst, explained the depth of their connection and a shared common goal:

> So I felt a great honor and privilege to be able to explore with him [Josh] and, from the very outset, I wanted Josh and myself to creat[e] together, from the ground up, to be very open and honest. It was so amazing having someone with me, by my side every step of the way, to explore with, to commiserate with and talk about death and love and all our experiences, what Ernst’s home life would be- normally, you don’t get a sounding board, normally you just have yourself. It’s amazing to build a role with another person. Both of us were trying to bring out what’s beautiful in the role, not necessarily trying to bring out some special thing about ourselves. I think we’ve always been fighting for Ernst, and I think that’s what makes our relationship special. (qtd. in McDonald)

Echoing the development of strong bonds between Deaf and hearing actors, *Spring Awakening*’s Austin McKenzie (Melchior), elaborated on his overwhelming feelings upon watching connections between hearing and Deaf cast members form: “I wish I could say this in a way that doesn’t sound cliché, but it’s so mesmerizing and beautiful, and I love getting the opportunity to watch that” (qtd. in Gioia 6). McKenzie hypothesized how the relationships formed so easily, creating such a strong ensemble. Referring to the first full-cast *Spring Awakening* rehearsal, he exclaimed, “We were scared sh*tless. . . We all were. And, I think that’s probably why this made such a great company because we all started in the same room, having the same exact feeling. We were able to connect to our fears. All of us were doing something new” (qtd. in Gioia 6). This merging of Deaf and hearing people, cultures, stories, and theatrical forms creates a
true ensemble. Furthermore, the constant collaboration of Deaf and hearing artists, each having different racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual identities as well as varying levels of hearing and ability-privilege, continues the facilitation of supportive and communicative environments in which to create more-inclusive art.

10.) A system of cueing is developed and practiced to signal to Deaf members of the cast to begin, end, or change parts of the performance. These may include physical touch, use of vibration, specific blocking or stage business, etc. Possibilities are endless, but cues are never obvious to the audience.

In *Big River*, some cueing codes involved the singing actor tapping four times on his/her upstage leg to signal to the Deaf actors to begin signing the song they were about to perform. These codes also involved the strategic placing of sight lines, so that the hearing actor could keep the Deaf actor in his/her periphery at all times (Calhoun et al. 90). In *Spring Awakening*, most of the cueing was put in place by the actors. Whether a shoulder shrug, a point of a finger, a head nod, or the crumpling of a letter, each of the cues are woven into the action of the performance, so that nothing is out of place. Sarah Wilbur reflects on the system of cueing and perceives that “[b]y weaving a series of virtually imperceptible movements into the choreographic structure of ‘The Song of Purple Summer,’ [Spencer] Liff’s tacit gestures secure an ensemble infrastructure in this unique cast where half the members cannot hear the music” (Wilbur 151). This cueing aesthetic builds the ensemble aspect of Deaf West’s aesthetic, further emphasizing the importance of the collective voice. This system of cueing is integral to the musical productions of DWT.

11.) Utilization of theatrical silences in order to heighten pivotal moments and to highlight some aspect of Deaf culture, particularly showcasing ASL.
Big River marked the addition of a sort of special moment that allows the hearing audience members to put themselves in the shoes of the Deaf audience. During the reprise of the number “Waitin’ for the Light to Shine”, there is a point where the music stops and the ensemble continues signing unaccompanied by music or singing. Having seen this refrain signed repeatedly throughout the show, the hearing audience has an understanding of what is being said without the voicing. This moment has been described by critics to be “goosebump-making” (Brantley 1) as well as “powerful” and “moving” (Isherwood, Big River 3). Variety’s Charles Isherwood proclaimed that “[t]hose moments of silence are, in a way, as powerful- and as moving- as any musical climax being belted out on a Broadway stage. . . ” (Isherwood, Big River 3).

Theatre critic Ben Brantley described this moment from his hearing perspective, “For hearing audience members at least, nothing else in this interpretation of ‘Big River’ achieves the magic of that moment of quiet, in which a bridge is crossed into a different realm of perception.” (1). My personal experience in beholding this moment supports Brantley’s claim: for me, it took my breath away and changed the way I thought of d/Deaf people. Mainly due to my own ignorance of the Deaf community or d/Deaf people in general, it was the first time I had considered that d/Deaf people could be artists- it was probably the first moment I had ever contemplated d/Deaf people whatsoever. In the words of director Jeff Calhoun, this moment “put every hearing person in the shoes of a deaf person, and at that moment, in Huck’s shoes, at the climax of his journey” (Calhoun et al. 98). For those few moments, the entire audience is on equal footing, taking in the same information in the same presentation style.
Scholar Stephanie Lim also recognized DWT’s use of silence as a recurring thread in their work, noting this moment in *Big River* as well as another poignant moment in their 2009 production of *Pippin* (Lim 26-27). In an effort to subvert hearing and western cultures’ ideals that equate silence to subservience or weakness, DWT’s use of attention-grabbing and meaningful silences in their aesthetic demonstrates that “[s]ilence thus contains action and is not ‘silence’ in the traditional sense, but rather should be understood as a powerful and central act in and of itself” (Lim 26). The special illuminating moment in this production fell in the closing number. Karen Wada describes the action as a sort of music for the eyes:

> . . . the cast is facing front. They begin to sign en masse. The power of the whole—fingers and arms whirling in unison—is breathtaking. Even more striking is the beauty of the individual parts, everyone displaying his or her distinctive style of signing, embodying a now common language. Their motions blend like voices in a choir. (Wada *Pippin*)

This moment also supports the previous aesthetic criterion, number nine, the celebration of unique individual styles that inspire an environment of support and understanding.

Another poignant moment of silence occurs when Pippin is physically separated from his hearing counterpart who has been carried away and is to serve as a sort of sacrifice, “[t]he deaf Pippin is simultaneously left ‘voiceless’, unable to communicate with or sing to the audience at first, until he finally decides to sign the lyrics to a previous song. . .” (Lim 29). Due to internalizing the hegemonic culture’s misconceptions about the self-sufficiency of Deaf people, Pippin is left feeling momentarily disabled. Then, he realizes that he has had the tools he needs this whole time; embracing his language, Pippin regains his autonomy and confidence. Through this pivotal moment, Stephanie Lim identifies DWT’s powerful use of silence and its deeper significance:
Pippin is shown as finding his voice, though not in the normative sense of voice – that is, not a verbalized voice. This Pippin subverts the stereotype and notion that deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals have no voice, as Pippin defines himself as a Deaf character who is not only content with his ordinary life but able to exist without his ‘hearing’ half. The belief that deaf individuals should be seen as equal to hearing individuals is especially crucial for the Deaf community in this final scene. . . Pippin, as done by Deaf West Theatre, is thus an attempt to shatter the long-standing stereotype that deafness is a limitation to success in life and is also accordingly a demonstration of voice, power, and identity. (Lim 29)

These examples of silences in *Pippin*, as well as *Big River*, solidify the use of silence as a tenant of DWT’s aesthetic.

Through Deaf West Theatre’s aesthetic, “a legacy of deaf culture is created and preserved. In addition to benefiting members of the deaf community, these achievements greatly influence mainstream perspectives about the culture and ability of individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing” (John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts). This new aesthetic is a culturally and fiscally valuable resource, largely untapped by the mainstream U.S. theatre community. It has completely changed the theatre-going experience for both hearing and Deaf audiences. While Deaf Theatre has been produced for many years, most notably by the National Theatre of the Deaf (NTD) beginning in the 1960s, Deaf West Theatre’s work is the first to be so widely recognized. According to the Internet Broadway Database (IBDB), in the history of Broadway there have only been eleven productions that are identified as sign language productions. Of those eleven productions, two are productions by Deaf West Theatre. Of the non-Deaf West productions, the three longest-running productions ran for a mere ten performances each (IBDB *Sign Language*). In contrast, the Broadway Deaf West productions of *Big River* and *Spring Awakening* had runs of 67 performances and 135 performances respectively. This is a radical change for hearing and d/Deaf audiences to have such an influx of
accessibility to performances by Deaf artists that incorporate aspects of Deaf culture and Deaf stories. Notable exceptions from this list are the 1980-82 and 2018 runs of Mark Medoff’s play *Children of a Lesser God*\(^{16}\) and the 1959-61 and 2010 runs of William Gibson’s *The Miracle Worker*\(^{17}\). While these productions did incorporate some sign language, they still required the addition of ASL interpreters for full-access to the productions. The aesthetics are very different from that of DWT. Placing narratives like these on stage not only creates a new aesthetic, but will create change in the aesthetics of American Theatre overall. DWT’s aesthetic allows these marginalized histories to be brought to light, in a familiar way, and gives the opportunity for these marginalized groups and their allies to create new narratives, and thus, new perceptions in the hearts and minds of those ignorant to their stories and lives.

\(^{16}\) The 1980 Broadway production ran for 887 performances and the run for the 2018 production is yet to be seen (IBDB *Children*). The 1980-82 run had its own profound impact, bringing ASL into mainstream visibility. It also inspired a very successful film adaptation, in which Marlee Matlin became the first d/Deaf woman to win an Academy Award and Golden Globe in 1987 (IMDB *Matlin*).

\(^{17}\) The 1959-61 Broadway production ran for 719 performances and the run for the 2010 production ran for 28 performances (IBDB *Miracle*).
Chapter Two: Spring Awakening

An Introduction to Deaf West Theatre’s Spring Awakening

Michael Arden, a hearing actor featured in DWT’s Big River and Pippin, took on the role of director for DWT’s undertaking of Steven Sater and Duncan Sheik’s Tony Award-winning (2007) musical Spring Awakening, an adaptation of Frank Wedekind’s 1891 German play of the same name. After a successful 2014 run at Inner-City Arts’ Rosenthal Theater, the production was mounted again in 2015 at the Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts in Beverly Hills, California. The production then opened on Broadway at the 1,094-seat Brooks Atkinson Theatre on September 27th, 2015, running a limited time and then closing on January 24th, 2016 (IBDB Spring). The Broadway run was well-received by the theatre community, garnering three Tony Nominations, including: Best Revival of a Musical, Best Direction (Michael Arden), and Best Lighting Design (Ben Stanton). While none of the awards went to the Spring Awakening revival, Deaf West Theatre did seize the opportunity to perform at the awards show.

DWT’s interpretation of the story draws parallels between the rigidity and suffocating conservatism of 1891 German society with the educational oppression that the Deaf community underwent during this time-period. This production held up to its tradition of casting hearing and Deaf actors alongside one another. Interestingly though, director Michael Arden revealed that in this particular production, the character “Mortiz is deaf, and for the first time in Deaf West history of musicals, [they were] actually commenting on the fact that these characters are deaf, and these are hearing” (emphasis added, qtd. in D. Gordon 2). In most of Deaf West’s productions it isn’t clear whether the
characters are Deaf or hearing; they all just happen to sign. Rarely is the story about the characters’ deafness; they are characters, in unique situations, who may or may not be Deaf. The addition of ASL adds a Deaf aesthetic to the work and may cause the audience to make connections between Deaf and hearing culture, but this is generally a byproduct of the art form. It allows audience members to learn about people different from themselves while seeing how similar they are to themselves. It provides an educational environment without being didactic.

*Spring Awakening* employed double-casting of certain characters. Critic Charles McNulty analyzes the meaning brought about by this double-casting: “Splitting the role of Wendla between two performers evocatively expressee[d] the alienation of this confounded adolescent, whose body has become a perplexing stranger to her” (*Spring*). Wendla’s voicing counterpart also served as a member of the band, as did Moritz’s other half. These voicing counterparts also “occasionally accompany their characters on guitar, further dissolving the boundary between the acting company and the band” (McNulty, *Spring*). The rest of the band members are located both center stage and throughout the set itself.

**Responses to *Spring Awakening***

There have been varied responses to the work of DWT from hearing and Deaf audiences alike. DWT’s work has been well-received from hearing audiences and theatre critics overall. The ‘beauty’ of the sign language is one of the most praised aspects of DWT’s art form. This begs the question: Where is the line between appreciation and exoticization? Are hearing audiences excited about how ‘different’ or ‘cool’ or ‘new’ the
use of American Sign Language is for them? Is it a novelty? Are they in awe of Deaf actors that can perform just as effectively, if not more so, as their hearing counterparts? Or, do they find value in this Deaf aesthetic and the depth of Deaf talent they are experiencing for the first time? The dramatic increase of people learning ASL\(^{18}\) over the past decade or so suggest that a true interest and appreciation of Deaf performance forms has been cultivated in the hearts of some hearing audiences. For instance, according to Ticketmaster’s reviews for *Spring Awakening*, the Broadway production was rated 4.7/5 stars from 332 reviews. The majority of the reviews were written by hearing patrons. Comments that appeared most frequently had to do with how emotionally moved they were by the performance, the fascination with the aesthetic blend of signing and singing, and the intensity of emotion and deeper meanings brought up in the play by the addition of sign language (Ticketmaster).

When looking at the comments and show reviews for ticketing sites, such as Goldstar or Ticketmaster, you can see that not all hearing patrons are fans of DWT’s work. The main complaints, among those for *Spring Awakening* were that the use of ASL was distracting and that they experienced general disorientation in trying to track who is speaking and confusion about which roles are doubled. Some also felt that the addition of sign language negatively affected the pacing (Ticketmaster).

Of the reviewers on these sites that indicated that they were part of the Deaf community, the major complaints were about: the clarity of the hearing actors’ signing; the use of simultaneous communication (sim-com); the ASL translation not always being

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easy to understand; the lack of access to song lyrics; issues with the captioning synchronicity; and it not being fully accessible to Deaf patrons. In the article “Spring Awakening on Broadway: deaf viewers give their verdict”, writers Kayla Epstein and Alex Needham, of The Guardian, find out what five Deaf patrons and one hearing ASL-English interpreter thought about DWT’s Broadway production of Spring Awakening. Overall, these patrons enjoyed the production, but they mentioned many of the same issues brought up in the reviews written on Ticketmaster. For instance, while graduate student Kaj Kraus thought that “Deaf West’s Spring Awakening is worth seeing for its triumphant presentation of Deaf talent and language”, he also felt that there were problems with “the signing of some of the hearing cast members, who are given the unfair task of singing and signing their lines simultaneously” (qtd. in Epstein & Needham 2). As a student of ASL myself, I can attest that ASL is a difficult language to master on its own. Adding in singing or speaking in English, which has a completely different grammatical structure, seems nearly impossible to accomplish while maintaining the integrity of both languages. This would be extremely difficult for someone fluent in both languages, let alone people who have learned ASL in the course of rehearsal for a production. Months, and especially weeks, are simply insufficient amounts of time to firmly grasp the foundations of an entire language.

Actor, business consultant, and educator Maleni Chaitoo proclaimed that the “show was so intense and powerful”, but disliked the use of sim-com of “the hearing actor Austin P McKenzie as Melchior using both English and ASL”, describing the effect as “kind of off-key” (qtd. in Epstein & Needham 3). Max Graham-Putter agreed with Chaitoo’s issue with the sim-com, adding that sim-com “is widely regarded in the Deaf
Community as an inefficient form of communication that winds up compromising ASL in favour of English” (qtd. in Epstein & Needham 3). Graham-Putter described how this ineffective form of communication affected his experience:

I definitely struggled to understand some of the sim-com and found myself wishing that the hearing actors had Deaf shadows the same way the Deaf actors had hearing shadows. In this way, it was very clear that the play was designed for a hearing audience with a secondary intention of being accessible to the Deaf. (qtd. in Epstein & Needham 3)

Here, Max expresses feeling like an afterthought in DWT’s plan for creating inclusion and accessibility. Other issues that Max Graham-Putter found with the production included: some issues with blocking that interfered with visibility; other times when lighting failed to direct attention to the next person signing, resulting in missed information; an inequality of skill with ASL among actors made some parts difficult to understand; the inaccessibility of one particular scene where the actors donned gloves in which only the fingertips were illuminated, causing the ASL to be completely incomprehensible, which led Max to feel as if this piece was only for the benefit of the hearing; and “multiple instances where [he] could tell that much more was conveyed in English than was translated into ASL – instances where actors could be seen speaking full phrases but only signing one or two words” (qtd. in Epstein & Needham 3-4).

Overall, Max enjoyed the musical and expressed an excitement at the greater significance of the work: “I believe it showed the hearing audience that musicality can exist as something other than an audiological experience” (qtd. in Epstein & Needham 4).

ASL professor Carmen King also shared her appreciation of the incorporation of Deaf history and praised the Deaf talent onstage. King expressed that “[a]s a Deaf theatergoer, I am pleased that it shows some familiarity with Deaf culture, and the
oppression that Deaf people have faced” (qtd. in Epstein & Needham 4). King also pointed out issues with the hearing actors’ lack of fluency in ASL, explaining that “[t]he hearing actors, who perhaps haven’t learned the foundations of ASL, don’t fully understand the importance of non-manual signal markers – facial expressions – to convey tone” (qtd. in Epstein & Needham 4). ASL-English interpreter and actor Craig Fogel also shared his concerns about the use of sim-com in the production, detailing that:

. . . when hearing actors did this, nuance was lost in their signing because the grammar of the languages doesn’t correspond. Speaking while signing following English grammar puts lexical items out of order in ASL and can make the signing seem disjointed. Not only that, but the critical facial grammar of ASL was often lost because the actors’ faces naturally inflect and emote to match the English they’re speaking. (qtd. in Epstein & Needham 5-6)

Mr. Fogel also praised the amazing talent onstage and the incorporation of Deaf stories, such as the relationship between the character Moritz and his father. Since the storyline of the play reflected a major event in Deaf history, the “travesty” that was the Milan Conference, his major hope for the production was that “audiences will walk away seeing the dire effects of denying Deaf children access to education in a language they can clearly understand” (qtd. in Epstein & Needham 6). The battle for ensuring access to ASL for all deaf children is still waging in the educational and medical sectors of U.S. Society (Callis, Rights 2-3/Buckley 3-7).

James Guido, artistic director for the New York Deaf Theatre company, was very pleased at the beautiful incorporation of ASL into the choreography, the casting decisions made, and the obvious attempts to make the production as accessible as possible to both hearing and Deaf audiences. However, he did have quite a few questions about the difference in proximity of the voicing actors for each character, which caused confusion,
as to each character’s personal struggles and story in the production. In regard to sim-com, which seems to be the biggest problem for many Deaf patrons, Mr. Guido found it “. . . a little distracting to follow both actors who only sign and actors who use sim-com . . . The actors who have to use sim-com lose their facial expression by having to speak. So it is a little difficult to follow their emotions, especially when they’re singing” (qtd. in Epstein & Needham 7).

Overall, we can take away from all this feedback on *Spring Awakening* that there was a general consensus that there were problems with clarity for those relying on ASL for the bulk of their information. Sim-com could be construed as being disrespectful to the Deaf community, as American Sign Language is usually the language that loses more of its accuracy and depth in the process. In addition to the sim-com, there has also been dissatisfaction with the theatricalized ASL that DWT creates to fit the rhythms of the music or pacing of the scene. At times, the translations can end up being very confusing for the Deaf audience members. There also seems to be accusations of DWT overly-catering to hearing audiences.

My own feelings about this production, as I am a hearing individual with conversational skills in ASL, were positive overall. My beginner level of fluency in ASL did not allow me to assess whether the information being disseminated to Deaf audiences was an accurate translation of meaning or if the translation chosen was as rich and expressive as the English. However, in a few key moments I could understand the ASL being used along with the English translation and the result was insightful and rewarding. For instance, in one particular scene, Wendla (Sandra Mae Frank) asks her mother how babies are made. Her mother (played by Camryn Manheim) fumbles through an
explanation. She tells her something along the lines of “A woman must. . . in her own personal way, she must. . . love her husband. As only she can love him”. While thinking how to explain the process to her young daughter, the ASL sign for “vagina” hovers above her lap as she considers telling her the details. She decides against it and transforms the vagina sign into a heart-shape that is held in front of her heart. This moment received laughs from audience members all around the spacious Brooks Atkinson Theatre. The line was funny based on Manheim’s tone of voice and nervous demeanor alone. Adding in the shift in signs made it even more comical. This leads me to believe that a hearing audience member fluent in ASL would have the greatest opportunity for access to and enjoyment from this production, as the two languages work together to enhance the storytelling.

*Spring Awakening* Analysis & Conclusions

Considering the theatrical reviews by hearing critics, the feedback given by members of the Deaf community, and the feedback provided by d/Deaf and hearing audience members on ticketing sites and online forums, we can assess the overall quality of each group’s theatre-going experience. As in DWT aesthetic criteria one, two, and seven, the integration of ASL, spoken and sung English, and dance heightened the level of storytelling, adding new dimension and layers to the story being told. Signing occurred simultaneously with spoken/sung English. This was accomplished with DWT aesthetic criterion three, the double-casting aesthetic that allowed for shadow interpreting. However, the non-doubled roles employed sim-com, which was a point of contention in the reviews for Deaf audience members. These modes of communication seemed to
merge together for many hearing audience members, however this may not have been the case for Deaf audience members. The sim-com affected the clarity of the ASL. If Deaf audience members cannot fully understand the details of the story being told in ASL, they likely cannot be immersed enough in the production to gain understanding from other modes of communication, such as dance, body language, or facial expression. Facial expression is particularly a problem when using sim-com since the actors are torn between displaying the appropriate grammar for ASL and emoting according to the English lyrics being sung or lines being spoken.

This production presents lines of difference that invites the audience to cross into different realms of perception. The lines of difference presented are that of Deaf and hearing culture and adolescence and adulthood as well as ability-privilege, sexual orientation, and gender identity. The presence of an actor in a wheelchair, Ali Stoker\textsuperscript{19}, undoubtedly brings to light the various levels of ability within the audience. Likewise, the portrayal of two homosexual characters, Ernst and Hanschen, brings in another line of difference that the audience may cross into an understanding of ‘the other’. The portrayal of both male and female characters offers yet another crossable line of difference. The possibility of implementing new ways of understanding across these lines seem possible.

Through the story-layering aesthetic (criterion one) employed in \textit{Spring Awakening}, a deconstruction and reassembling of social orders along the lines of marginalization occurred. The social orders being reassessed are that of children vs adults, Deaf vs hearing, and institutionalized oppression in society. Academic Stephanie

\textsuperscript{19} Ali Stoker, who played the part of Anna, was the first actor that required the use of a wheelchair to appear in a Broadway production.
Lim identifies the social order of children vs adults as a “generation gap” (Lim 33). She notes an example including Wendla and her mother, as described by Linda Buchwald:

. . . the deaf Wendla comes from hearing parents, so that the show’s beginning – in which Wendla asks her mother where babies come from (‘Mama, who bore me’) – presents an even steeper barrier to communication. Not only does her mother struggle emotionally with explaining sex; she also has difficulty with the sign language. (Buchwald Awakening 47)

This relationship demonstrates the difficulty that many Deaf children face, as over 90% of Deaf children are born to hearing parents (NIDCD), “many of whom do not know how to sign or failed to establish an effective communication system at home” (Holcomb qtd. in Gertz 165). Thomas Holcomb, a well-known writer on Deaf culture, identifies that “. . . most deaf people have hearing parents, which often means a long and difficult journey in reaching a comfortable place for themselves in terms of acceptance, communication, and identity” (qtd. in Gertz 166). This social order is further broken down by the scene with Mortiz, a Deaf character and his Deaf father (Herr Stiefel, played by Russell Harvard). Craig Fogel, an actor and ASL-English Interpreter who saw the production, love[d] the way a Deaf father/Deaf son relationship [was] portrayed, especially when the choice was made not to dilute their performance with a hearing actor’s interpretation of their lines. What we got to see is that Deaf families are complex and can be difficult and are therefore not so different from the hearing families most of us know” (qtd. in Epstein & Needham 5).

Fogel refers to the fact that this scene wasn’t interpreted vocally. This allowed hearing audiences to see the true struggle between the characters without the voicing character’s interpretation putting anything on the situation whether from interpretation or vocal tone. Furthermore, the dynamic between Deaf parent and Deaf child is rarely depicted on the stage or on screen. According to Holcomb, “While the desirability of having a Deaf child
is emblematic of the culture [Deaf culture], some deaf people hope for hearing children due to their difficult childhood experiences and do not want their children to ‘suffer’ in the same way” (qtd. in Gertz 166). It is possible that Herr Steifel came from this school of thought and experience, resulting in a harsher treatment of his son.

Both familial depictions cast doubt on the assumption that parents (whether Deaf or hearing) are always right. In the course of the play, Wendla has a sexual experience that results in pregnancy. Was her mother right to withhold the truth about sex? In an attempt to acquire an abortion for Wendla, her mother is left to grieve the loss of her child’s life, as Wendla dies from the botched procedure. Perhaps the truth would have been more valuable than the mother’s ability to avoid embarrassment. It could have saved her daughter’s life. Likewise, had Mortiz’s father expressed his disappointment in his son differently than threatening to beat and disown him, perhaps Moritz wouldn’t have chosen to take his own life.

The social order of Deaf vs hearing is represented by the forced compliance of d/Deaf children to learn through audio-centric methods, such as oralism, enforced by hearing members of society who feel they know what d/Deaf people need better than they do themselves. Cutting the children off from their natural language is a major exercise in discrimination and oppression. This social order also brings up the examination of institutionalized oppression. For the play, the education system and the hearing people who make decisions for it are engaging in audist discrimination and are the oppressors of Deaf individuals. The production addresses the effects and consequences of educational oppression endured by Deaf people but also opens the door for audiences to consider other institutions in everyday life that abide by discriminatory practices such as: law
enforcement, medical institutions, government, the judicial and penal system, etc.

As described by Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren, the presence of a third space does not guarantee use of the third ear, but merely grants access to it. It seems that a third ear has been acquired by some audience members that have made connections across the lines of difference presented by the production. Hearing academic Stephanie Lim found meaning in the silences presented by the production as well as the through-line of the generation gap. As well, New York Times critic Charles Isherwood was able to take in the characters’ “sense of alienation from the dominant culture” (Isherwood Spring 4) and use it to form a hypothesis about the experiences of the Deaf actors. This shows connection to Deaf culture across the hearing and Deaf line of difference presented by the production.

Insights of the deeper meanings within the production were not noted as often within Deaf reviews, however. It seems that they came close but were not able to make the full connection, likely due to the lack of clarity in the ASL being used or how it was presented (e.g. sim-com). This sector of the audience seemed engaged by the sheer fact that they were being represented onstage along with stories familiar to them. For instance, directly after mentioning the difficulty found in understanding the signing of the hearing actors, Deaf ASL professor Carmen King expressed that “[t]here were connections between [Deaf actors] and their hearing counterparts which [she] was not able to grasp” (qtd. in Epstein & Needham 4). It is this issue in clarity that is keeping the Deaf audience members from accessing and utilizing the third ear, thus limiting the fullness of their theatre-going experience. If the Deaf audience does not have access to information, such as the production’s plot and characters, they also will likely miss out on the lines of difference and social reordering presented by the production. This removes
important opportunities for Deaf audience members to cross into other areas of 
perception and to consider the experiences of those with identities different from 
themselves.

Through this assessment, we see that the hearing audiences had greater access to 
the narrative and the characters involved than Deaf audiences. While DWT used aesthetic 
criterion number six, the integration of technology, to aid the non-signing audiences with 
access to solely signed moments, they did not make the best choices to assist in the 
accessibility for Deaf audiences. They did not adhere to aesthetic criterion number eight, 
the provision of equitable access through theatrical, creative, and technical decisions. The 
use of sim-com and the lack of clarity in some of the signing shows that this criterion was 
unmet, resulting in an imbalance of the overall experience and a significant lack of 
accessibility to the production’s narrative and characters for Deaf audiences. This not 
only resulted in missing critical information to fully understand the narrative, but it also 
prevented Deaf audience members from crossing into alternate realms of perception, 
which would allow them to consider the experiences of characters with different 
identities than themselves.
Chapter Three: *At Home at the Zoo*

An Introduction to Deaf West Theatre’s *At Home at the Zoo*

In March of 2017, DWT mounted Edward Albee’s *At Home at the Zoo* at the Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts’ 150-seat Lovelace Studio Theatre (thewallis.org). Albee’s *At Home at the Zoo* is the combination of two of his one-act plays: *The Zoo Story* (written in 1958), and its prequel *Homelife* (written over 40 years later). In the first act, *Homelife*, we observe two characters, Peter and Ann (played by Deaf actors Troy Kotsur and Amber Zion, respectively), in the living room of their upper middle-class home. This playing space is surrounded by the bars of a cage. Outside of the cage, to the far stage right, is where the voicing actors are positioned. When I saw this production, I could not help but wonder in seeing this arrangement if the purpose of this, along with the zoo theme, is to portray how Deaf individuals may feel looked upon/stared at by hearing society, like animals in a cage. This arrangement allows for the audience to be completely focused on the Deaf actors’ performances. For Deaf audience members this a huge change, both due to the rarity of Deaf stories and featured Deaf performers onstage as well as the fact that DWT’s previous productions, particularly the musicals, have had more of a give-and-take of focus between Deaf and hearing performers. The musical element makes it more difficult for the focus to remain on Deaf performers. This isn’t particularly new for Deaf West’s plays, but this production seemed to accomplish this change in focus better than previous productions. For hearing audience members, this arrangement still provides the interpretation for the ASL being used onstage. After a time in this environment, the voices of the hearing actors and the bodies of the Deaf actors
meld into one person. At many points during the performance that I attended, I, personally, forgot that the voices and bodies were separate whatsoever.

In the second act, *The Zoo Story*, the location shifts from Peter and Ann’s living room to a couple of park benches in New York City’s Central Park. Peter, who has come to the park to read, is joined by an off-kilter stranger named Jerry (played by Tyrone Giordano – and played earlier in the run by Russell Harvard, both Deaf) and a couple of other park patrons, who provide the voices for Peter and Jerry. The cage bar borders of the stage remain, only this time the voicing actors have joined the Deaf actors onstage.

As Peter’s animal nature is aroused by Jerry’s incessant storytelling and pushy nature, we are reminded that down deep we are all animals and that we will always result to that nature to protect ourselves. Bringing the voicing actors into the ‘cage’ with the Deaf actors, following the earlier line of thinking, shows us that we are far more alike than we are different. This production continued DWT’s aesthetic of double-casting and story layering, but seemed to pull focus in more on the Deaf actors than in recent productions.

**Responses to *At Home at the Zoo***

There were conflicting theatrical reviews of this production. *Theatermania*’s Evan Henerson praised DWT’s take on the monologue-heavy “tricky” playwright’s work: “Talk may be key in Albee’s landscape, but the fact that Ann, Peter, and Jerry communicate through sign language is neither hindering nor at all ironic. . . Deaf West’s blending of deaf and hearing performers is consistently effective and quietly inventive” (Henerson 2). And in response to the change in staging configuration from act one to act two, of the voicing and signing actors, he continued, “[t]he side-by-side configuration is
never distracting, and our focus always remains where it belongs: on the deaf performers” (Henerson 2). Here, Henerson picks up on and celebrates the focus being directed to the Deaf actors’ performances. On the other hand, LA Times’ writer Charles McNulty critiques the work of both the voice actors and some of the Deaf actors:

. . . Jake Eberle and Paige Lindsey White provide the voices of Peter and Ann. They speak as Kotsur and Zion play and sign the roles, in a division of labor that fails to find the synergy between listening and seeing that was achieved in ‘Spring Awakening’. . . Kotsur’s body language and facial expressions seem at times too large for such a self-editing character. The general outline was right but the fine points of Peter get lost in translation, especially for those in the audience not conversant in ASL. (McNulty, Zoo 2)

McNulty adds, regarding the act two change in voice-actor positioning, that “[t]heir physical distinctiveness from their counterparts and their close proximity (they’re stationed at a nearby bench) blur the stage picture” (Zoo 3). Both of these critics saw the early part of the run and both are hearing critics. However, what worked for one didn’t necessarily work for the other; Art is truly subjective.

What was agreed upon by many critics was the power of Deaf West’s aesthetic to make the audience draw new connections and appreciate the talent being offered by the Deaf performers. Stage Scene LA’s Steven Stanley expresses his appreciation of the signing actors’ skill in expressing emotion through ASL:

What I can say without hesitation is how truly eye-opening a theatrical experience it is for a hearing, non-signing audience member to see Edward Albee’s At Home at the Zoo Deaf West-style. Not only does simultaneous spoken translation allow entry into an otherwise impenetrable linguistic world, ASL signs add visual power beyond even the most emphatic gestures that might accompany a speaking actor’s work. (The Zoo 1)

Similarly, People’s World contributor Eric A. Gordon identifies a specific moment in the play that provided a moment of discovery for him: “When Jerry says to Peter, that he
seeks ‘to understand and be understood,’ my heart stood still as I realized this must also be the feeling of deaf people. . . It is a tremendous gift to all of us, hearing or not, that Deaf West Theatre provides” (E. Gordon 3). DWT’s artistic director, D.J. Kurs, believes that this adaptation’s audience, “more than ever, is unified in an understanding and appreciation of what deaf actors bring to the material” (qtd. in E. Gordon 3). Each of the aforementioned theatre critics’ comments confirm this assertion.

Unfortunately, the Goldstar reviewers did not identify themselves as Deaf, so it is difficult to know how this show was received by the Deaf community. However, the Deaf Professional Arts Network (DPAN), an online sign-language news and entertainment channel, conducted interviews with the cast and director of At Home at the Zoo on Media Day at the Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts. After seeing samples of the show from each act, Deaf reporter Karla Gutierrez expressed that she “was truly impressed because it was sign language, no sim-com at all. They actually signed throughout the play. [She] enjoyed and understood everyone clearly” (Gutierrez 4:45). Gutierrez continued on to express her curiosity and excitement at seeing the play in its entirety on opening night. Gutierrez’ excitement in the video is palpable. This is a major change in accessibility, based on the Deaf reviews of Spring Awakening.

In an effort to incorporate another Deaf perspective of the production into the analysis, insights provided by Deaf actor Troy Kotsur, who played the role of Peter, can also be considered. For Kotsur, this was a reprisal of the role of Peter, as he played Peter in Deaf West’s Production of The Zoo Story in 2007. In Los Angeles Times reporter Karen Wada’s conversation with Kotsur, he shared that he “ha[s] a much better understanding of [Peter] today. [He] see[s] many parallels between what happens
between Peter and Jerry and Peter and Ann. They both try to get him to figure out who he really is. They’re trying to say, ‘You are an animal.’ Everyone is an animal. We are all in a zoo” (qtd. in Wada, *The star 2*). It seems that having the opportunity to work alongside hearing actors and other Deaf actors has allowed Kotsur to access a *third ear* of his own. For him, the story’s deeper meaning is that we are all the same deep down. Human nature is the great equalizer.

*At Home at the Zoo Analysis & Conclusions*

Considering the theatrical reviews by hearing critics, the feedback given by members of the Deaf community, and the feedback provided by audience members on ticketing sites and online forums, we can assess the quality of the experience and levels of enjoyment by both hearing and Deaf audience members. The integration of ASL, and spoken English, heightened the level of storytelling, adding new dimension and layers to the story being told, as established by DWT aesthetic criteria one and two. Signing occurred simultaneously with spoken English. This was accomplished with the double-casting aesthetic that allowed for both zone and shadow interpreting, fulfilling DWT aesthetic criteria two and three. These modes of communication seemed to merge together for many hearing audience members. For instance, audience member Martin Zimmerman’s review on Goldstar for the production raved about the incorporation of the voicing along with the signing. Zimmerman exclaims “It is magically done and adds a layer of compassion and expression I found uniquely moving and elegant” (Goldstar). It is unclear whether the two languages merged for Deaf audience members, since reviews by Deaf audience members are not readily available. Furthermore, depending on the
individual’s level of deafness, the spoken language may not have any effect whatsoever, if it cannot be discerned. The body language of the hearing actors could be the only aspect accessible to profoundly Deaf audience members. With the exclusion of sim-com from the production, Deaf audience members had full accessibility to the story being told in ASL (DWT aesthetic criteria four and eight). However, the way in which the double-casting was employed for this production (with the voicing actors far from the action for the first act and mainly in profile for the second), would have limited the Deaf audience’s accessibility to the body language and facial expression displayed by hearing actors.

This production, like Spring Awakening, presents lines of difference that invites the audience to cross into different realms of perception. This production presents lines of difference by way of class and economic privilege, gender, and deafness and hearing. The class distinction between Peter and Jerry opens opportunities for the audience to see outside of their own situation and examine how they view those outside of their social environment. Gender roles and expectations may be explored and understood through the depictions of Ann, Peter, and Jerry. Each character presents their own contradictions in behavior in contrast to what is expected of them. The normalization of seeing Deaf actors onstage will possibly assist both hearing and Deaf audience members in re-adjusting and broadening their expectations for modes of performance.

One particular line of difference that I feel was missed out on in this production was the line of racial/ethnic identity. This production featured an all-white cast. The lack of visual diversity has been somewhat typical throughout the production history of DWT, as the amount of actors of color employed throughout their 27 years have been few and far between. However, DWT’s more recent productions have begun incorporating more
visually diverse casts, particularly *Our Town* which will be discussed in chapter four. With that said, *At Home at the Zoo* could have incorporated a more visually diverse cast. There isn’t any story content that would have made such a decision inappropriate. On the contrary, introducing this line of difference could have facilitated a number of intersectional identities being portrayed onstage, depending on which characters were cast in this way.

Thematically speaking, the social orders being reassessed in *At Home at the Zoo* are that of human vs animal, deafness vs hearing, male vs female, and social class. The animal within is a theme present throughout the play. Ann attempts to get her husband, Peter, to unleash his animal nature and spice up their love life. Jerry pushes Peter to revert to his animal instincts: protecting his territory (the park bench) and later his life, when Jerry reveals his knife. Jerry manipulates Peter into holding his knife and then runs at him, thrusting himself upon the knife, committing suicide. After doing this, Jerry is thankful to Peter. He seems like an animal that has been put out of his misery. Each of these characters are shown inside the caged perimeter of the stage, furthering the message that down deep, we are all animals and that we will always revert to our animal instincts when our lives are threatened.

Deafness and hearing isn’t reflected in the usual Deaf West way of story layering, finding parallels between d/Deaf oppressions and other marginalized experiences. However, there was certainly an overall theme of communication that each character struggled to achieve in their own ways. In this production, the centering of the Deaf actors’ performances subverts the theatrical norms of defaulting to the hearing person’s experiences and stories. Though Deaf and hearing people are similar in more ways than
they are different, the expectations for mainstream audiences are always of hearing experiences and stories. The experiences regularly shown onstage aren’t ever identified as ‘hearing stories’, but that is because these stories are the default expectation – the norm for mainstream society.

The social order of men and women or male and female are explored within act one as well as between the two acts. Ann makes the move to discuss their love life, which moves into a sort of seduction. In this act, Ann is the aggressor and Peter, the hesitant and bashful counterpart. The stereotypical gender roles have been reversed. Within this act, the audience has the chance to examine their thoughts regarding the swapping of roles. Do they find Ann to be a seductress (the archetypal wanton whore) or a wife frustrated with the mundanity of her life? There may be some assumptions made about Peter as well. Does the audience find him to be a ‘strong manly man’ when he turns down his wife’s advances? Or do they find him weak for not fulfilling his ‘duties’ as a man?

Furthermore, the second act homes in on the relationship between two male strangers. Their conversation ends in an altercation and the assumed death of one of the men. How does this compare to the audience’s expectations? Is the violence acceptable and reasonable because they are men? Perhaps the audience will consider how they might feel differently if this were played by women or a combination of men and women. Taking it even further, how might the audience have felt differently if one or more of the characters were transgender or had a gender identity outside of the male/female binary? The variations of the two acts allows the audience to examine and re-evaluate their expectations and possible biases based on gender.

Social order according to class is apparent in this production as well. The upper
middle-class apartment and clothing of Peter and Ann in the first act is a stark contrast to
the shabbily-dressed Jerry, who lives in a Westside rooming house. Jerry brings up their
difference in class in the play, highlighting the comforts and privileges of Peter’s life: his
wife, children, pets, location of his home, etc. Jerry paints a vivid picture of his own life:
his crummy apartment, the drunken landlady that constantly suggest that they engage in
sexual acts, his colorful neighbors, and the loss of his family. Though each man is from a
completely different world, they are both lonely in their own ways. While Jerry’s
incessant ramblings, shifty nature, and overall appearance may cause one to expect
violence or misdeeds of some kind, it is Peter who becomes angry at Jerry’s pestering and
overly protective of ‘his’ bench, though it is public property. Peter’s sense of entitlement
comes into focus throughout the second act. He is comfortable in his life, doesn’t have to
worry about paying bills, and has a family to come home to at night. Jerry basically has
nothing in his life. He seems to want to connect to another human being. Peter, who has
come to the park to read for pleasure, is irritated but gracious to Jerry’s intrusion at first.
Instead of Peter returning to his comfortable existence, he decides to fight over ownership
of the park bench. The collision of these two rungs of the social ladder allow the
audience to consider what they really have in their lives and how they treat others less
fortunate than them. It opens possibilities for examining biases of other groups.

It seems that a third ear has been acquired by some audience members that have
made connections across the lines of difference presented by the production. For instance,
Troy Kotsur found parallels between the relationship between Ann and Peter as well as
Jerry and Peter and the meaning lying beneath the text. He found that both counterparts
were pushing his character, Peter, to know himself, to find out what he is capable of, and
to understand who he really is. They nudge him into understanding that he, and the rest of humanity, are animals at heart.

Critic Eric A. Gordon had a profound realization through the portrayal of Jerry via the talents of a Deaf actor. When Jerry explains to Peter that what he really wants is to be understood and to understand others, Gordon made a connection to the possible desires of d/Deaf people that are so often marginalized from mainstream society. This moment of discovery allowed Gordon the opportunity to empathize with the character and with d/Deaf people in general. Being understood is a universal desire. This connection between d/Deaf and hearing provided a bridge for Gordon to cross into the experience of the other community providing insights that will possibly change how he looks at marginalized groups for the rest of his life.

Through this assessment, we see that the theatre-going experience for Deaf and hearing patrons was similarly equitable and enjoyable for each group overall. The lack of sim-com and more organic ASL used in this production supports DWT’s aesthetic criterion number eight, the provision of equitable access for Deaf and hearing audiences provided by the theatrical, creative, and technical decisions of the production. While technology wasn’t required in this production to make it more accessible for hearing audiences, DWT ensured this group’s access to the narrative and characters through implementation of aesthetic criterion number three, the double-casting of characters, as well as aesthetic criterion number two, the layering of multiple modes of communication (ASL and spoken English, in this case). Furthermore, the choices made in staging the voicing actors for each act (criterion five) not only ensured accessibility, via clarity of ASL and visibility of the signs, to the signed dialogue for non-signing members, it also
assisted the signing audience members in maintaining a focus on the action of the production and removed the likelihood of signing mishaps through the utilization of fluent native signers. Additionally, both Deaf and hearing audiences were given ample opportunity to cross into alternate realms of perception, through the lines of difference and examination of various social orders within the narrative.
Chapter Four: Our Town

An Introduction to Deaf West Theatre’s Our Town

In October 2017, DWT produced their interpretation of Thornton Wilder’s 1938 Pulitzer Prize-winning meta-theatrical play Our Town in collaboration with Pasadena Playhouse. The play was put on at the 658-seat Pasadena Playhouse (TCG). In following with the tradition of the show, the set was minimal, the props were mimed, and all the actors remained onstage throughout the entire performance. The play was performed in three acts separated by two intermissions. Act one, entitled “Daily Life” shows us a day in the life of the small-town Grover’s Corners, New Hampshire. The stage manager (voiced by Jane Kaczmarek and signed by Troy Kotsur, Russell Harvard, and Alexandria Wailes) introduces the audience to each member of the town and the goings-on that day. We are introduced to two prominent families in the town, the Gibbs and Webb families. These families live next door to each other and each have a teenage child: George Gibbs and Emily Webb, respectively. The audience quickly learns that a romance is budding between the two teenagers.

The second act, entitled “Love and Marriage”, brings us to George and Emily’s wedding day three years later. The families and the town prepare for the big day, Emily gets cold feet, and the two finally marry with the entire town as their guests. We also see flashbacks of George and Emily’s courtship. The third act, entitled “Death and Dying”, takes place nine years later in the Grover’s Corners’ cemetery. The stage manager catches the audience up on what has happened in the town and in the lives of George and Emily. Emily has died in childbirth. In this act, she must come to terms with her death and desires to look back on her life, against the advice of other deceased townspeople in the
cemetery. She does so and regrets it quickly, as she sees how much of life was wasted not enjoying every moment.

The play is funny and poignant. It seems so simple but the core message strikes the heart of the audience. The play reflects the cycle of life and urges us all not to take life for granted. In my experience watching the production, much of the audience exited the playhouse in tears and sniffles at the end of the night, myself included. As noted in the artistic director’s note in the program, Deaf West’s interpretation recalled the . . . signing communities of New England in the 17th and 18th centuries such as Chilmark in Martha’s Vineyard and Henniker, New Hampshire. Deafness was genetically dominant in these areas, spurred along by the common practice of intermarriage between deaf and hearing people. Scholars hypothesize that deaf people in these communities were not class conscious; that is, their colleagues and neighbors would, more often than not, know sign language. Communication access was largely unfettered. (Kurs Our Town P1)

The idea of full access to communication among hearing and Deaf people along with the visually diverse cast portraying this tight-knit community represents a sort of cultural utopia. The cast, in regard to visual diversity, more accurately reflected the multi-cultural nature of the Deaf community than ever before in Deaf West history. It also more accurately reflects the world that we live in today, in terms of diversity. Unfortunately, in terms of language access, this is still a battle being waged by the Deaf community (Callis, Solutions 1-6). DJ Kurs paints the picture of the Deaf community’s continued ache for inclusion:

. . . these signing communities took on mythical significance to the deaf community because full communication access in our daily lives remains very rare. Perhaps that is what we want more than anything else: to be heard. To belong. To be part of a vital, living community that respects and understands our differences” (Our Town P1).
The overall message of embracing life and one another shone brightly through the framework of Wilder’s American classic and the aesthetics of Deaf West Theatre.

Responses to *Our Town*

*Our Town* was well-received overall by theatrical critics. The production adhered to DWT’s traditional aesthetic of double-casting roles. Steven Stanley, of *Stage Scene LA*, points out that the pairing of voice and sign was:

. . . accomplished so seamlessly under Sheryl Kaller’s direction that it is often hard to remember which half of the cast is which. Not only does this blur the lines and bridge the gap between communities not always in communication, doing theater the Deaf West way provides deaf and hearing impaired actors the opportunity to play roles they might otherwise not be offered and deaf audiences the opportunity to experience theater that speaks directly to them, in their own language, seated beside hearing theatergoers sharing more or less the same transformative experience. (Stanley, *Our Town* 1)

There was one area of the production where DWT expanded their double-casting aesthetic (criterion three). For the character of the Stage Manager (voiced by TV’s Jane Kaczmarek), three Deaf cast members (Troy Kotsur, Russell Harvard, and Alexandria Wailes) alternate as her signing half. They change when one is required for their other role(s). Stanley praises Sheryl Kaller’s direction for this choice, saying that it “could not be more inspired, spiced with tasty twists along the way” and gives an example of the juicy results manifested when the Kaczmarek-Kotsur pairing “inquires about the whereabouts of Grover’s Corners expert Professor Willard only to have Kotsur morph into the role in the blink of an eye with Kelly-Young providing his speaking voice” (*Our Town* 1). Ellen Dostal, of *Broadway World* acclaim, also picked up on this new extension of the aesthetic and identifies that “[t]he result of all the various combinations is that it
establishes an underlying sense of community that resonates far beyond what you see and hear on stage” (Dostal 1). The sense of community is indicative of both the combined community of U.S. society as well as the Deaf community itself.

Similarly, Charles McNulty, of the LA Times, comments on DWT’s history of role-splitting, as it pertains specifically to Our Town, and identifies an extension of their casting aesthetic. He receives the double- and multi-casting as “seem[ing] quite natural in a work that ditches realistic scenery and props, incorporates mime and picks up the narrative wherever and whenever it likes. . . The pairing of deaf and hearing actors is integral to Deaf West’s aesthetic. . .” (McNulty, Our Town 1-2). He then adds on, noting a new change in DWT’s aesthetic: “. . . but the inclusiveness extends beyond this. The casting turns Grover’s Corners at the turn of the 20th century into a multicultural utopia” (Our Town 2). Critic Erin Karll, who also picked up on this change, found much pertinence and meaning in the multicultural casting: “The diversity of this cast and the political tone in some scenes makes this a very timely production. Witnessing this bilingual version with a cast that looks like America today shows how much we’ve grown as a country and how far we have to go” (Karll 1).

Among the critics, there seemed to be a consensus that DWT’s aesthetic has had a great impact, and is continuing to develop throughout each production. While the majority of the reviews boast praise for this specific work by DWT, there were some problems identified, such as: a lack of precise “calibration” (McNulty, Our Town 2) for the blocking and playing styles, resulting in an aesthetically busy first act; the lack of energy from speaking actors (in comparison to their signing counterparts); an excessively slow pacing in parts; and some minor line-fumbles by headliner Jane Kaczmarek.
While I was provided anecdotal evidence by colleagues that are part of the local Deaf community that the sim-com used in show proved to be problematic for some Deaf audience members (resulting in their leaving early out of frustration), written accounts of this conflict were not available. Also, the Goldstar reviewers did not identify themselves as Deaf, so it is difficult to know how this show was received by the Deaf community.

However, DPAN’s TruBiz reporters conducted interviews with the cast of Our Town after the show on opening night. Reporter Melissa Yingst is Deaf and led the interviews. She also gave her own thoughts on the show and its deeper meaning, sharing that the show is “about a community united, both deaf and hearing people coming together. And I can see that already happening right now. After the play, both hearing and deaf people [were] mixing it up and sharing their thoughts about the play. It’s a powerful thing” (Yingst 6:55).

For some of the Deaf cast members, the show’s deeper meaning was about human connection, communication, and community. Natasha Ofili, an ensemble member, provided her insights about how the show reflects today’s society:

I think today we live in a time where we’re focused on phones, where there’s no communication, no eye contact, no sense of community, so this town – Our Town shares the message of being connected together with people face to face, empathy, compassion, and just communicating with each other with open arms” (Yingst 3:23).

Sandra Mae Frank, who played Emily Webb, also recognized this connection to today’s world, our infatuation with technology, and the time that is wasted with our loved-ones from being too busy (Yingst 7:38). Sharon Pierre-Louis, a hearing actor and active member of the Deaf community, who voiced for Sandra Mae Frank, found that working so closely with Sandra fostered the opportunity for her to learn from Frank and to build
empathy, a concept noted previously by Ofili. Pierre-Louis added that this empathy allowed her to “really open [her] heart and [her] mind. . . to connect with [Frank]” (Yingst 5:51). It is clear that Deaf West’s aesthetic not only affects the audience, but the actors involved as well. When a third space is constructed, it includes everyone involved, not only those in the audience. This means that a third ear is accessible to the artists as well.

One major issue that I found when watching the production was that there seemed to be a heavier focus on certain hearing cast members than in past productions. In the production immediately before this, At Home at the Zoo, DWT focused on the signing actors. It helped that the voicing actors were off to the side in the first act and were usually turned a different direction, even though closer to their Deaf counterparts, in the second. This staging makes the most sense since hearing patrons can still hear and understand the voicing actors even if they aren’t looking at them. Then, they can watch the actions and facial expression of the signing actors simultaneously. For those hearing patrons that understand ASL as well, they would be able receive the double storytelling layer of the additional communication style. Those relying on ASL must be able to see the language to understand what is occurring onstage.

Something changed with Our Town. While most of the signing cast seemed to be the focus, it felt as if the stage manager character had a greater focus on the speaking actor. Was this because the production had TV-mom Jane Kaczmarek headlining the show? Jane Kaczmarek is best known for playing the role of Lois in Macolm in the Middle. For six consecutive years, Kaczmarek was nominated for Primetime Emmy awards. She has also been nominated three times for Golden Globe awards. Her resume is
extensive and she brought in over $100,000 per episode while on Malcolm in the Middle (IMDB Kaczmarek). To say that she has star power would be an understatement. Did the director feel pressure to make their Hollywood star feel special, whether Kaczmarek expected it or not? This didn’t seem to be a problem in Spring Awakening with headliners Marlee Matlin and Camryn Manheim. Of course, their parts were not so central to the story as is the part of the Stage Manager. Camryn Manheim signed her own lines, so there was never a chance for the focus to be uneven in her situation (except for the possible lack of clarity caused by sim-com). Marlee Matlin was without a doubt the focused-upon actor for her part, but again, maintaining focus on the Deaf actor is easier to do when the voicing actor can be placed further away.

Was it because three different actors (Troy Kotsur, Alexandria Wailes, and Russell Harvard) served as Kaczmarek’s other half? Was there a connection lacking between Kaczmarek and her counterparts? Goldstar reviewer Garry Bormet felt that “having several different cast members shadow and speak for the stage manager only muddies the role that is written to be our clear, concise guide” (Goldstar). However, Broadway World theatre critic Ellen Dostal and Onstage Blog writer Erin Karll expressed quite the opposite. Karll felt that the stage manager’s “group of four work[ed] so smoothly together while moving the production along as a stage manager should” (Karll 1). Dostal found the deeper meaning in this instance of multi-casting: “The result of all the various combinations is that it establishes an underlying sense of community that resonates far beyond what you see and hear on stage” (Dostal 1). In comparison to the more relationship-oriented, high praise given to other character pairs, such as Spring Awakening’s Ernst and Wendla or Our Town’s Emily Webb, this feedback seems to
comment more on the convention than the connections established between actors. For instance, Ernst’s Josh Castille and Daniel Stewart have been highlighted by Out writer James McDonald’s comment “[w]atching the way that the two actors interact, the little intimacies, is really beautiful, and it’s really effective” (McDonald 5). Likewise, the connection of Emily Webb’s Sandra Mae Frank and Sharon Pierre-Louis has been identified as being “particularly sweet and intuitive” (Dostal 1). Despite positive reviews of the multi-casting for the stage manager, one could still argue that the personal connections among the actors weren’t perhaps as strong as they could have been.

Could the feeling of focus on the hearing actor have been the placement of Kotsur, Wailes, and Harvard in relation to Kaczmarek’s position? She was almost always faced directly downstage, toward the audience, whereas the signing counterparts were often slightly turned toward her and seemed to follow behind her slightly as she crossed the stage. It was not an inequality in acting skill; Each of the talented signing actors held their own against the natural abilities of Ms. Kaczmarek. It doesn’t seem to be due to any change in the company’s philosophy either, as the production mounted soon after Our Town returned to DWT’s usual aesthetic of keeping the focus on the signing actors. Though difficult to put a finger on, there was something about Our Town that seemed to tip the scales in Kaczmarek’s direction.

Perhaps the change was due to Sheryl Kaller’s direction? In 2014, DWT’s Tyrone Giordano commented in response to Ariel Baker-Gibbs’ HowlRound article, Where Do

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20 According to The Columbus Dispatch, DWT’s remounted production of David Mamet’s American Buffalo, performed at Columbus, Ohio’s Riffe Center Studio One Theatre in December of 2017, located the voicing actors offstage, leaving the signing actors center stage (Grossberg 2).
We Look? Going to the Theater as a Deaf Person, that “Deaf West Theatre has always made sure that the signing characters are given focus, and the speaking actors are giving that focus to them by ‘lending’ them their voices” (qtd. in Baker-Gibbs 6). In October 2017, The Frame’s interview with Sheryl Kaller quoted her saying:

[The dual casting] is about community – which is kind of what ‘Our Town’ is about. When you have to pair two people to play a singular unit, necessity becomes the mother of invention. You are completely reinventing the way that you’re presenting these characters. And, as a director, sometimes you want to pay attention to the voice and sometimes you want the voice to disappear. (The Frame Staff 3)

This sentiment seems to be the disconnect. Kaller, as a director, may want to focus in on the voice at times, but for Deaf West Theatre, they, in the words of Tyrone Giordano, “always” ensure focus on the signing characters. Jeff Calhoun, director of DWT’s Pippin, confirmed the organization’s tradition of keeping signing actors at the center of the story.

LA Times critic Karen Wada, in her review for Pippin, quoted Calhoun who divulged that DWT’s productions require “an ensemble in the truest sense of the word. Actors, who usually want to be down center, must be selfless enough to stand in the shadows and supply someone else’s voice. . . or be trusting enough to let someone supply their voice for them” (qtd. in Wada, Pippin 3). With Kaller’s direction, it seemed as if the aesthetic tradition was flipped. Could Kaller have felt pressured to feature the renown Kaczmarek or hesitant to ask her to shadow Kotsur, Wailes, and Russell? Regardless of the reason, this shift was problematic, throwing DWT’s mission slightly off course.

Our Town Analysis & Conclusions

Considering the theatrical reviews by hearing critics, the feedback given by members of the Deaf cast, and the feedback provided by audience members on ticketing
sites and online forums, we can assess the overall experiential quality for Deaf and hearing audience members. The integration of ASL, and spoken English, heightened the level of storytelling, adding new dimension and layers to the story being told (aesthetic criteria one and two). As well, taking on the original conventions of the play, such as miming props and minimal set pieces, further heightened the performance, elevating the level of emphasis on the characters and their relationships to one another (criterion nine). Signing occurred simultaneously with spoken English (criterion two). This was accomplished with the double-casting aesthetic that allowed for shadow interpreting (criterion three). However, some of the non-doubled roles employed sim-com, which has been a point of contention in the reviews for Deaf audience members in past productions. Apart from anecdotal evidence, there is no written proof of this problem for this production specifically. These modes of communication seemed to merge together for many hearing audience members, however this may not have been the case for Deaf audience members. Sim-com has been known to affect the clarity of the ASL in use. If Deaf audience members possibly cannot fully understand the details of the story being told in ASL, they likely cannot be immersed enough in the production to gain understanding from other modes of communication employed by actors using sim-com, such as body language or facial expression. Facial expression is particularly a problem when using sim-com since the actors are torn between displaying the appropriate grammar for ASL and emoting according to the lines being spoken.

This production, like *Spring Awakening* and *At Home at the Zoo*, presents lines of difference that invites the audience to cross into different realms of perception. This production presents lines of difference by way of race/ethnicity, gender, hearing and
deafness, addiction, and age. The lines of hearing and deafness, race/ethnicity, and intersectional identities offers audience members a chance to consider the oppression experienced by the characters onstage, the actors themselves, and by extension, people that fall into these categories in daily life. This production offers lessons in empathy and self-analysis of various types and degrees of privilege (e.g. white privilege, hearing privilege, etc.). The story of addiction in the play allows theatre patrons to develop empathy for those who suffer from this disease and to consider their treatment of others that live with such diseases.

There is a broad range of age and experience in this production. The passing of time and aging of characters provide spectators the insight and reminder that life is too short, regardless of age. It is too short not to enjoy each moment and/or to neglect spending our time with the ones we love most. This theme of the passage of time reminds the audience of their own mortality and could possibly influence people to reassess how they are spending their lives.

The social orders being reassessed in Our Town are along the lines of hearing and deafness, addiction, and race/ethnicity. The convention that everyone in this town magically knows ASL provides the opportunity for Deaf and hearing audiences alike to conceive of such a cultural utopia, adding a story-layering effect as in aesthetic criterion one. Furthermore, it allows hearing people to then think about what it is like for Deaf people on a daily basis, not having full accessibility to language and the aspects of life that are controlled by the dominant hearing culture. Likewise, the visual diversity of the cast, and therefore of the townspeople of the play, offers a similar opportunity across the lines of race and ethnicity. In this fictional cultural utopia, not only does everyone know
ASL, but all of the people of the community live in harmony with one another. Racism does not seem to exist. This allows all audience members to both imagine a world in which racism doesn’t exist and at the same time consider the current state of our nation, where racism and many other –isms are running rampant.

Addiction becomes a valid line of marginalization through Troy Kotsur’s character Simon, the town drunk. Alcoholism and other forms of addiction are often treated in society with disdain, rather than empathy. *Our Town* allows the audience to see addiction through the life of this character and gives them the opportunity to find empathy for him. This empathy can then resonate in the daily lives of the audience, many of whom may know an addict or have addictions of their own.

It seems that *a third ear* has been acquired by some audience members that have made connections across the lines of difference presented by the production. For instance, hearing theatre critics Charles McNulty and Erin Karll found underlying parallels to today’s U.S. Society. Karll discovered the play’s timeliness reflected in the current political realities: lack of connectedness and community, while McNulty found significance and reflection of today’s multi-cultural society in the visually diverse casting employed by the production. DPAN’s TruBiz reporter Melissa Yingst found the sense of community in the show to be reflective of the community being formed in the theatre itself by hearing and Deaf patrons. She witnessed that the play facilitated the intermingling of Deaf and hearing audiences and fostered conversations among them about the production.

Members of the Deaf community that took part in the production, such as Sandra Mae Frank, Natasha Ofili, and Sharon Pierre-Louis, found deep connections through
working alongside other Deaf and hearing actors (aesthetic criterion nine). Community, connection, and communication were the focus of the production for these cast members. Frank found reflections of the Deaf community through the story of a small-town community. As well, she found the parallel to today’s distractions, such as technology, that prevents people from connecting to their families and being present in their lives. Ofili also mentioned technology as being a major culprit of what keeps people from connecting and communicating. For her, the play encourages togetherness, empathy, and compassion. Pierre-Louis found empathy for others and her signing counterpart, through the intimacy of developing the role of Emily Webb with Sandra Mae Frank.

While the sim-com may have provided clarity issues for some Deaf patrons, there is still quite a bit of evidence that several hearing and Deaf people found access to the third ear. The problems with sim-com, which shows a failure to adhere to DWT’s aesthetic criterion number eight (provisions for equitable access for Deaf and hearing audiences), seemed to occur a little less than in Spring Awakening, likely because it was used so much less often in this production. If we take into consideration the anecdotal evidence provided by members of the Deaf community that the signs chosen for some moments of this production did not reflect the accurate meaning of what was being communicated in spoken English, a problem with aesthetic criterion number four (theatrical sign language tailored to reflect the meaning of the spoken text) can be identified as well. While problems in clarity were less common for this production, there are still areas that could be improved in DWT’s aesthetic and execution (an editing of their third language, if you will) of the aesthetic criteria to ensure greater accessibility for their patrons. Greater access for both Deaf and hearing groups facilitates opportunities for
positive change in the minds of the audience and, by extension, growth and transformation in the world of theatre and society itself.
Chapter Five: Balancing the Deaf West Theatre Experience

It is evident from the previous examinations of Deaf West’s productions of *Spring Awakening*, *At Home at the Zoo*, and *Our Town* that aspects of these productions fell short of the full potential of Deaf West’s aesthetic. Keeping in mind the strides that this company has made already, we must still ask the difficult questions. What can be done to balance the quality of experiences for Deaf and hearing audiences? It is evident how DWT’s aesthetic can easily facilitate a sort of special environment that is conducive to communication occurring through various means: storytelling via ASL, English, choreography, body language, stage composition, and design elements. Even the placement of people from various cultures alongside each other (both in the audience and among the performers), taking in/telling the same story raises up the possibility of inspiring new communication among communities. As Kochhar-Lindgren notes, even when this environment, which she refers to as the *third space*, is set up perfectly, there is only “the possibility of chance understanding” (emphasis added) between groups (*Hearing Difference Across Theatres* 423). Nothing is guaranteed. So, adding in lack of clarity of the information being disseminated, DWT is making this possibility even less likely. Returning to the difficult questions that must be asked: How might DWT improve their work? There are several possibilities, some of which have already been suggested or the desire expressed by audience members and other theatre practitioners.

Simultaneous Communication (Sim-Com) & ASL Fluency Standards

The Deaf patrons that gave feedback regarding DWT’s performance of *Spring Awakening*, can be applied to any production that they put on from now on. Max
Graham-Putter, in discussing his difficulty understanding some of the sim-com used in the show, was “wishing that the hearing actors had Deaf shadows the same way the Deaf actors had hearing shadows” (qtd. in Epstein & Needham 3). In a Facebook review of Spring Awakening, writer Megan Perkins-Luke echoed this desire for shadow interpreters for the Deaf actors because the “SimCom got a little fuzzy”, meaning that the signing was not clear. Is sim-com necessary when you have both Deaf and hearing actors to work with? If there is a way, such as reciprocal shadowing, to continue performing in dual languages while maintaining the integrity of each language, why not incorporate that instead? It doesn’t seem that the effect of sim-com is very positive for Deaf patrons who rely on the clarity of the ASL to fully understand the production. It may be visually stunning for hearing audiences (unfamiliar with the specifics of the language), but they will still get this benefit from the signing of the more-fluent members of the cast. This would also alleviate the problems raised by Deaf patrons, Carmen King and Kaj Kraus, about the inability to understand the signs of the hearing actors (that learn ASL for the production). This is not to say that hearing actors fluent in ASL shouldn’t perform in ASL, but maybe they should only perform in one language at a time. With that said, a higher standard of fluency seems to need to be set as well. The clarity of the ASL is so important for facilitating communication among the cultural groups represented. This is a necessary step for DWT to take for the maximization of their Deaf patrons’ experience.

Original Works, Deaf Writers & Deaf Criticism

Several of the Deaf patrons interviewed mentioned the talent and signing skill of DWT’s Treshelle Edmond. Max Graham-Putter, representing the group of Deaf patrons,
described her artistry as follows: “The other Deaf people in attendance agreed: she signed beautifully and was one of the easiest to follow. She made me feel like I was watching organic ASL, not something that was translated from English” (qtd. in Epstein & Needham 4). This is significant because from it one can ascertain that these Deaf audience members desire to watch “organic ASL,” which would come from seeing original works about Deaf stories and experiences, instead of always trying to make Deaf stories fit into the framework of mainstream theatre, which is written largely by hearing writers.

This suggestion brings up several ideas for improving DWT’s work. DWT should consider mounting more original works, perhaps written by Deaf company members or as a collaboration between hearing and Deaf company members. This suggestion also brings up the issue of the lack of Deaf writers in theatre. According to Linda Buchwald, Deaf actors Howie Seago and Russell Harvard “both say that what’s still missing in the theatre is Deaf writers telling their own stories,” (Deaf Talent 75). Mr. Seago attributes the disinterest by workshops in hosting Deaf-accessible events to the cost of providing interpreters (Buchwald Deaf Talent 75). Lack of training for Deaf writers does seem to be problematic. DWT is very aware of this issue. Artistic director DJ Kurs brought up the deficit of Deaf writers in the theatre and its impact on representation for Deaf culture:

You also have to take in consideration the paucity of deaf playwrights: Mainstream theater is not an art form that is normally made accessible to our community. There is a need for a real infrastructure that will find and nurture new voices from within our community so that they may compete on a level playing field. I would like to create an environment where deaf writers pound out original plays and musicals on camera, in our first language, American Sign Language (ASL), without having ever touched a pen” (qtd. in Gelt 3).
Kurs’ idea is innovative and powerful. What keeps DWT from moving forward on this plan? This seems like a natural fit for DWT’s organization, having provided actor’s training and other workshops in the past. Investment in developing new or undiscovered writing talent would only help themselves in sustaining their theatre-making machine and provide them a wealth of new source material. This new source material could provide both the elevation in enjoyment for Deaf audience members as well as new opportunities for hearing audiences to see the world from a new perspective. Likewise, these original works could include musicals, but in this case, the music could be written to fit the organic sign-language instead of adapting the signs to fit the mood, rhythm, rhyme, and emotion levels of the music.

While reimagining or adapting known works must bring people into the theatre that maybe wouldn’t normally venture out to see a Deaf West play, perhaps now that DWT is more established, people would be open to seeing new works by Deaf writers, basing their decision to attend on Deaf West’s reputation for innovation, quality, and professionalism. The movement toward more original works by Deaf artists is deeply supported by HowlRound writers Annie Wiegand and JW Guido. Aptly put, they paint a vivid picture of the dearth of Deaf stories: “A French book translated into English still tells a French story and a hearing play performed in ASL, still tells the story of the hearing world. We must nurture, support, and encourage the burgeoning Deaf voice” (Wiegand & Guido 2). Representation is important for everyone, but especially marginalized communities that deserve to be seen and respected for the incredible human beings that they are. This includes representations of people as well as their stories. If DWT could incorporate a playwriting training program for Deaf artists, theatrical
criticism would be a logical extension of such a program. A diversity in criticism and the stories being told will only serve to elevate the art of theatre, as well as every other art form, to higher levels of excellence.

More Inclusive Representations of the Deaf Community

Representation in media and the arts plays an important role for all people, but especially marginalized communities. Dr. Eric Anthony Grollman, scholar and assistant professor for the University of Richmond, identifies that “[s]pecifically for the members of minority groups, seeing oneself reflected in the media is crucial, particularly in the face of prejudice, discrimination, and the constant barrage of invalidating comments and actions (Grollman 2). He goes on to specify that the “positive portrayal of women, people of color, immigrants, LGBT people, same-gender couples, interracial couples, working-class people, people with disabilities, fat people, and so on is crucial so that people are aware of diversity, but also appreciate and celebrate that diversity (2). Filmmaker Pratibha Parmar identifies the importance of images produced by representation and identifies a more personal effect of representation: “Images play a crucial role in defining and controlling the political and social power to which both individuals and marginalized groups have access. The deeply ideological nature of imagery determines not only how other people think about us but how we think about ourselves” (qtd. in hooks 5). For the Deaf community, the importance of representation is no different.

Deaf West artistic director DJ Kurs understands the importance of representation. In fact, he frequently brings it up in his articles and interviews, such as in his interview with LA Times reporter Jessica Gelt, entitled “Deaf West artistic director David Kurs:
Why deaf actors should be cast to play deaf characters”. In his statement, he explains exactly what is at stake for the Deaf community in regard to representation:

The deaf community understands that our social and political standing as a community depends in large part upon representations of deaf people in media and the arts. Theater, film, and performance have become essential means of expression and a key driver of standing for our community. (qtd. in Gelt 2)

In essence, without representation the Deaf community remains invisible to the hearing world. Gallaudet University President I. King Jordan, identifying the long-term absence of the Deaf community in arts representations, supports Kurs’ statement:

If art mirrors life, for years mainstream theatre goers must have been left with the impression that deaf people do not exist. The professional stage rarely portrayed deaf characters, and even less frequently included deaf actors in plays that were not thematically based on deaf culture.” (Zachary xxiii)

It wasn’t until the 1960s that Deaf people were regularly portrayed onstage outside of Gallaudet University and other deaf school/college performances, which was primarily carried out by the National Theatre of the Deaf (NTD).

These facts only work to further urge the continued representations of the Deaf community and to improve the accuracy of representing this diverse group by incorporating visual diversity and intersectional identities into the narrative and into the characters portrayed. An intersectional identity describes a person’s identity that is made up of more than one marginalized identity and lived experience of oppression (e.g. African-American and d/Deaf, d/Deaf and Transgender, d/Deaf and Disabled, economically disadvantaged and d/Deaf, Asian-American, d/Deaf and cis-gender female, etc.). Each of these lived experiences change the way a person sees and experiences the world. Because of the multitude of identities present within the Deaf community, “[w]hen
discussing identity, one needs to consider the ways in which race, class, gender, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, and other intersectional layers contribute to the meaning of one’s deafness” (Woodward & Horejes 286). Likewise, presenting characters with multiple identities provides the wide variety of people that attend DWT’s productions the opportunity to see themselves reflected onstage. This ability for people to see themselves reflected in the theatre (and other modes of representation) is both validating as human beings and reinforces confidence in one’s sense of self.

People of color, people with disabilities, LGBTQIAAP members, those of minority gender identities and lower class-privilege are already marginalized by mainstream society. Those that belong to these groups and are Deaf are doubly-marginalized. To experience further marginalization, via under-representation, by the Deaf theatre and arts communities only oppresses them further. There is no room for marginalization within already marginalized communities, though it is all-too-common. While DWT has made strides to incorporate greater visual diversity and more intersectional representations of the Deaf community recently, there is still a lot of growth needed and possible in this area. While this company is continuing to strive for greater inclusion and break through societally-imposed restrictions and expectations, greater improvements can be made in casting with more-balanced demographics on the stage and a wider range of stories. Representation is a huge opportunity to present accurate and relatable pictures of marginalized groups. It is a chance to de-colonize our minds and rewire our internalized images and stereotypes of others. Furthermore, accessibility and enjoyment for DWT patrons should also include the ability to see reflections of themselves and familiar stories onstage along the vast spectrum of
diversities present in humanity.

**Analysis of Audience Accessibility & Experience**

Upon examination of these areas calling for improvement (sim-com, ASL fluency standards, original Deaf stories, Deaf writers, Deaf criticism, and diversity and intersectionality in character representations and stories), we return to the main question of this thesis: are Deaf and hearing audiences benefiting equally from DWT’s performances? Deaf audience members benefit from the ASL translations, stage pictures, design elements, the layered stories, choreography, and any music that can be felt or heard (depending on their levels of deafness), whereas hearing audiences benefit from the music, singing/speaking, choreography, stage pictures, design elements, the layered stories, and the visual beauty of the sign language. If the hearing audience members are knowledgeable in ASL, then they have the benefit of that added mode of performance as well, leading to a double-telling of the story. Probing further, how effective is the theatricalized sign language for Deaf audience members? As reflected in the reviews and Deaf patrons’ feedback, the ASL is often difficult to understand, either because of the lack of skill of the hearing signers, deterioration of the ASL because of the use of sim-com, or because of the choice of signs for the translation. If the Deaf patrons cannot understand the ASL used, they cannot understand the story being told. How is this remotely an equivalent experience to that of hearing audiences? How can DWT be creating an environment where different cultures can communicate with one another if one half of the audience isn’t receiving all the information being conveyed?

One Deaf audience member in particular, by the name of Jehanne McCullough,
wrote an article in response to her disappointment and frustration with Deaf West’s production of *Spring Awakening*. This spurred a conversation on *The Daily Moth*, an online ASL news channel with reporter Alex Abenchuchan. During an episode of the show, Abenchuchan took the time to discuss McCullough’s feelings about the production with her and then followed up on her concerns via interviews with DWT’s artistic director DJ Kurs and ASL master Linda Bove. McCullough’s major areas of contention were the use of sim-com, the invention of new signs, and general inaccessibility for the Deaf community. McCullough felt that the sim-com was difficult to understand. As a result, the themes, symbolism, and plot of the show was incomprehensible— or in her words, “lost in translation” (McCullough 1). She also points out that “[t]here is obviously a communication breakdown when hearing viewers are laughing during one scene and Deaf viewers are clueless about what is so funny” (McCullough 2). McCullough’s frustration with the production’s inaccessibility to Deaf audiences is precisely what Abenchuchan discussed with DJ Kurs and Linda Bove.

Both Kurs and Bove emphasized the overall importance of the positive effects of their work. The inclusion of both hearing and Deaf audiences has great benefits for the Deaf community, as a whole. A spotlight has been put on ASL and the Deaf community in hearing media, bringing attention and awareness that ceased to exist previously. Deaf actors are starting to be seen, within mainstream theatre, as equals to hearing actors, opening up employment opportunities within mainstream theatre. As well, the hearing

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21 Please note that this episode of *The Daily Moth*, entitled “Spring Awakening: Accessibility for Deaf,” was interpreted for me by CSUN’s Emily Mota, a student in the interpreting program that is on track to graduate this semester (Spring). Conclusions drawn from the interviews were based on her interpretation of *The Daily Moth* video.
audience’s interest has been peaked by the Deaf community, leaving them with the desire to learn more, which only helps the Deaf community in establishing autonomy and value within the minds of mainstream society.

It seems that Kurs and Bove consider the compromises that must be made by Deaf patrons worth the overall benefits for the community at large. In fact, Kurs urges the Deaf audience to let go of the need to understand every single word of the performance and instead to focus on the overall experience: the mood, emotions, feelings, and intent. He attests that the dialogue is not the most important aspect of the productions (Abenchuchan). Kurs admits that he, himself, must see DWT’s shows two or three times before he understands everything. He also asserts that this is the similar experience of hearing audiences, particularly in comprehending the abstract concepts and lyrics present in *Spring Awakening*’s music. Kurs’ point is somewhat accurate – it does take multiple viewings for anyone to fully take in the sensory overload created by musicals, especially those that adhere to Deaf West’s aesthetic. However, the difference here is that Deaf audience members sometimes cannot even get enough information to identify the plot in the first viewing (as in McCullough’s case), whereas hearing audiences can ascertain far more information than that within their first experience. It may take multiple viewings to pick up on each of the details and deeper meanings of the production, but that is vastly different than not having clear enough translations to decipher plot and general action.

Regarding a question gauging the equality of experiences by Deaf and hearing audiences, DJ Kurs emphasized that each audience has different experiences that are basically equal. Deaf audiences see and understand the signs, but do not get the dialogue and music. On the other hand, hearing audiences hear the music and see the signs, but do
not understand the signs. His comments seem to infer that there is give and take for both sides of the audience and that equity in access does not necessarily equate to the same type of access. Linda Bove’s comments focused on the difference between the rules of education and the rules of theatre. She notes that the rules are different for each and they are not interchangeable. Bove, wholeheartedly, is against the use of sim-com in educational settings, but has strong convictions about the freedom and artistic license granted in theatre, which allows for experimentation with all languages. While DWT has worked to decrease the use of sim-com in their productions (eliminating it entirely in some plays), Bove feels that sim-com cannot just be done away with completely because they want to provide a welcoming environment for all people (Abenchuchan).

What is not clear to me is why sim-com is needed to be inclusive to hearing people. The double-casting aesthetic allows for both languages to be employed simultaneously, without the need for singular actors to sign and speak at the same time. It is because of this that I am left with the feeling that hearing audiences still have an advantage when seeing the work of Deaf West Theatre. Increasing accessibility to Deaf audience members, through clarity of language, will improve the theatre-going experience for Deaf audience members and improve the overall quality and accuracy of information being disseminated to hearing audience members as well.

Deaf and hearing audiences of Deaf West Theatre are not currently being provided with equitable accessibility to the productions’ narratives and overall experiences. However, there are ways to improve the experiences on all sides. While some cross-cultural communication has certainly occurred in the environments created by DWT, some productions have facilitated more opportunities than others. It is difficult to
say if an absolutely balanced, 50/50 beneficial audience relationship is possible, but they can certainly get close to that ideal. It is the disconnect with their Deaf audiences that causes the inequality in accessibility and experience. Without the language barriers created by some of the theatricalized ASL, the use of sim-com, and the lack of clarity by less-than-fluent hearing cast members, the Deaf audience will be able to connect more to the productions and feel that their accessibility is important. These changes would not interfere with the hearing audience’s enjoyment, as their accessibility wouldn’t change. For the signing hearing audience member, the accessibility would only improve, allowing for understanding of the narrative in two modes of communication. Deaf West’s aesthetic would still be multi-layered and powerful. In making some arguably minor changes to their aesthetic and approach, a more-balanced experience is possible.
Conclusions

Throughout this thesis, we have considered the question of equity in theatre-going experiences for Deaf and hearing audiences in the work of Deaf West Theatre (DWT). We established that this equity would be measured by the level of accessibility afforded to Deaf and hearing audiences, respectively, to the productions’ plot, themes, conflicts, and characters. A synthesis of the overall experience, obtained through reviews, articles, interviews, and comments on public forums, would also be considered. We established a list of 11 aesthetic criteria from which DWT bases their productions, which later gave us insights into the theatrical practices to which hearing and Deaf audiences responded either well or poorly. Through a close examination of responses by Deaf and hearing audience members, critics, and theatre artists to DWT’s productions of *Spring Awakening*, *At Home at the Zoo*, and *Our Town*, we have garnered the general overall responses to these works and gained specific insights into what is desired by each group to make their theatre-going experiences more enjoyable and accessible. Once the level of accessibility to the productions’ narratives and overall enjoyment was gauged for these more recent DWT productions, we developed a list of ideas for potential areas where improvements can be made to better balance the levels of accessibility and enjoyment for Deaf and hearing audience members. We concluded that it is difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish if a true 50/50 balance may be achieved among the experiences of Deaf and hearing audiences, but there are certainly avenues to get closer to achieving such equity.

In streamlining the presentation of ASL in their productions through the elimination of sim-com (by a singular actor) and incorporating more original works using purer ASL, not only will DWT be able to draw their Deaf constituents further into the
fold and attract new Deaf audience members (and possibly talent), but it will also expose hearing audience members to their language, stories, and culture in a more accurate and authentic manner. The audience members will feel equally valued and catered-to, resulting in happier and more involved spectators as well as a higher number of repeat customers. Furthermore, once other mainstream, particularly Broadway, theatres observe the benefits and magic that DWT’s work creates and witness the level of talent present in the Deaf community, perhaps they will strive toward more inclusive practices and see Deaf talent as an untapped resource. As well, they might begin to see diverse and multicultural theatre-making as a lucrative and meaningful undertaking.

It is the adherence to DWT’s 11 aesthetic criteria, discussed in chapter one and throughout the analysis of this thesis, that ensures each group to feel equally valued and to build equity within the theatre-going experience for both groups. These aesthetic criteria provide a collaborative environment for Deaf and hearing artists to create theatre that reflects that intercultural group dynamic. These criteria also ensure the audience access to language and other modes of communication that convey the plot, themes, conflicts, and characters of the narrative. This access to pertinent information affords additional opportunities for self-reflection and exploration of the experiences of those outside of an audience member’s lived experience via the lines of difference and social orders presented by each production.

Through more accurate representation individual identities are changed. Seeing reflections of their lives onstage forever changes the way people think about themselves, their communities, and the issues affecting their communities. Self-worth increases, as does the feeling of having a network of support, resulting in happier, healthier, more
socially (and possibly politically) active members of society. As each individual identity changes, the collective identity of these marginalized groups is modified as well. Changes occur, too, within the hegemonic communities. The normalization of ‘the other’ in mainstream American society creates a unity and understanding that wasn’t there previously.

With increased representations of marginalized groups and the growing understanding of one another within the larger American community, discourses are altered. Symbolically speaking, accurate and plentiful theatrical representations begin to replace the plethora of stereotypes programmed into the psyche of both the hegemonic and marginalized communities. By substituting symbols of oppression with symbols of truth and hope, the minds of people are changed, which then alters the verbal discourse in a culture. The verbal discourse of a community comes from cultural attitudes, relationships among and within groups, an overall understanding of the world and people that surround them, and the conversations happening in scholarly circles as well as in institutions of higher learning. Verbal discourses can completely change the face and attitudes of an entire community, both positively and negatively. These immediate influences and greater long-term impacts are why plentiful and accurate representation is so important for all people, and especially marginalized groups.

This power of representation wielded by theatrical entities, like Deaf West Theatre, can be used to build up marginalized groups and expand the thinking of those encountering these groups within an artistic space (a space that allows people to assess and re-evaluate their own perceptions from a safe distance). For DWT, this power of representation (through acting talent, characters, and stories) brings the Deaf and hearing
communities face to face and fosters the opportunity for bridges to be built between these distanced communities. However, with the power for positive change also comes the power to do more damage than intended. Failure to make changes to ensure accessibility for both hearing and Deaf audiences could inadvertently perpetuate audist beliefs. Overly catering to their hearing patrons, thereby leaving their Deaf patrons to struggle with language accessibility, mirrors the privilege reinforced for hearing people through the daily discrimination experienced by the Deaf community in fighting for accessibility to public services and events as well as the basic right for access to language. To avoid this tragedy, DWT must work to find a greater balance for their productions.

Deaf West Theatre has taken major strides in representing the Deaf community in a positive light. Their development of the ‘deaf musical’ seems to be a contradiction in terms, but it is changing attitudes about the capabilities of Deaf people both within the Deaf community as well as for those outside of it. DWT’s positive representations of the Deaf community work to break the tradition of oppression through control of the information that is transmitted by representation. While the work has already positively affected the thoughts and feelings of many people, they can accomplish so much more. Implementation of the suggestions by their Deaf and hearing constituents could radically transform the theatre-going experience for Deaf and hearing audience members alike. As well, through implementing training programs for Deaf writers and theatrical critics into their organization and incorporating more visually diverse and intersectional representations of marginalized communities into their adaptations and original works, a greater understanding of the Deaf community and culture could be shared with the world.
Works Cited


Frame Staff, The. “‘Our Town’ director says ASL is a language made for theater.” The Frame. 04 October 2017. Web. 28 February 2018.


Works Consulted


Appendix: Deaf West Theatre Production History

Under Artistic Director Ed Waterstreet (Deaf):

May 1991  
*The Gin Game* by D.L. Coburn  
Directed by: Linda Bove (Deaf) & Stephen Sachs (Hearing)  
Venue: Fountain Theatre, 5060 Fountain Ave., Hollywood

Feb. – March 1992  *Shirley Valentine* by Willy Russell  
Directed by: Ed Waterstreet (Deaf)  
Venue: Fountain Theatre, 5060 Fountain Ave., Hollywood

Oct. – Nov. 1992  *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, Adaptation by Dale Wasserman  
Based on novel by Ken Kesey  
Directed by Stephen Sachs (Hearing)  
Venue: Fountain Theatre, 5060 Fountain Ave., Hollywood

Oct. – Nov. 1993  *Am I Paranoid?* by William Moses (Deaf)  
Directed by William Moses (Deaf)  
Venue: Fountain Theatre, 5060 Fountain Ave., Hollywood

1993  *Cinderella* – Unknown Author  
Directed by: Unknown  
Venue: Unknown

1994  *Night Mother* by Marsha Norman  
Directed by: Stephen Sachs (Hearing)  
Venue: Deaf West Theatre, 660 N. Heliotrope Dr., Hollywood

1994  *His Wife* – Original Play by Unknown Author  
Directed by: Unknown  
Venue: Unknown  
*Alternatively listed as My Wife*

May 1994  *Sign Me a Story* by Linda Bove  
Directed by: Freda Norman (Deaf)  
Venue: Deaf West Theatre, 660 N. Heliotrope Dr., Hollywood

Oct – Nov 1994  *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck  
Directed by: Stephen Rothman (Hearing)  
Venue: Deaf West Theatre, 660 N. Heliotrope Dr., Hollywood

1995  *Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp*, Adaptation by James Norris  
Directed by: Unknown  
Venue: Unknown
Feb-March 1995  
*Sleuth* by Anthony Shaffer  
Directed by: Dennis Erdman (Hearing)  
Venue: Deaf West Theatre, 660 N. Heliotrope Dr., Hollywood

Sep. – Oct. 1995  
*Medea* by Euripides  
Directed by: Kenneth Albers (Hearing)  
Venue: Deaf West Theatre, 660 N. Heliotrope Dr., Hollywood

1995 – 1996  
*Sign Me a Story* by Linda Bove  
Directed by: Freda Norman (Deaf)  
Venue: U.S. Touring Production (Oct ’95 – Connecticut, Jan ’96 – Boston, MA, Other Dates/Locations Unknown)

1996  
*A Christmas Carol: The Ghost Story of Christmas*  
by Charles Dickens  
Directed by: Unknown  
Venue: Deaf West Theatre, 660 N. Heliotrope Dr., Hollywood

March 1996  
*Equus* by Peter Shaffer  
Directed by: Andrew Shea (Hearing)  
Venue: Deaf West Theatre, 660 N. Heliotrope Dr., Hollywood

1996  
*Alice in Wonderland: Ears, Hands, and Hearts* – Unknown Author  
Directed by: Unknown  
Venue: Unknown

Dec. 1996  
*Orphans* by Lyle Kessler  
Directed by: Unknown  
Venue: Deaf West Theatre, 660 N. Heliotrope Dr., Hollywood

Feb. – March 1997  
*Saint Joan* by George Bernard Shaw, Adaptation by Ken Albers  
Directed by: Kenneth Albers (Hearing)  
Venue: Deaf West Theatre, 660 N. Heliotrope Dr., Hollywood

Feb. – March 1998  
*Brilliant Traces* by Cindy Lou Johnson  
Directed by: Phyllis Frelich (Deaf)  
Venue: Deaf West Theatre, 660 N. Heliotrope Dr., Hollywood

April – March 1998  
*Romeo and Juliet: Circus Verona*, Adaptation by Elina deSantos  
Directed by: Elina deSantos (Hearing)  
Venue: Odyssey Theatre, 2055 S. Sepulveda Blvd., West Los Angeles
Oct. – Nov. 1998  *Hand in Hand, Foot in Mouth: An Unmusical*  
by Bob Daniels (Deaf)  
Directed by: Pamela Hall (Hearing)  
Venue: Ventura Court Theatre, 12417 Ventura Ct, Studio City

May – June 1999  *The House of Bernarda Alba* by Frederico Garcia Lorca  
Directed by: Larry Arrick (Hearing)  
Venue: Ventura Court Theatre, 12417 Ventura Ct, Studio City

March – April 2000  *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams  
Directed by: Deborah LaVine (Hearing)  
Venue: Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood

May – June 2000  *Oliver!* by Lionel Bart, Adaptation by Jeff Calhoun  
Directed by: Jeff Calhoun (Hearing)  
Venue: Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood

Coordinated by: Liz Raci  
Venues: Barnes & Noble, 16461 Ventura Blvd., Encino:  
Oct. 19, 7 p.m.; Oct. 24, 10:30 a.m.  
Barnes & Noble, 13400 Maxella, Marina del Rey:  
Oct. 21, Nov. 18, Dec. 16, Jan. 20, 10:30 a.m.  
Barnes & Noble, 731 San Fernando Road, Burbank:  
Oct. 28, Nov. 11, Dec. 9, Jan. 13, Feb. 10, 11 a.m.  
Border’s, 3700 Torrance Blvd., Torrance, Nov. 8, 7 p.m.

Nov. – Dec. 2000  *The Gin Game* by D.L. Coburn  
Directed by: Phyllis Frelich (Deaf)  
Venue: Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood

April – May 2001  *Road to Revolution* by Mark Medoff  
Directed by: Mark Medoff (Hearing)  
Venue: Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood

Oct. – Dec. 2001  *Big River: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*  
Adaptation by: William Hauptman & Roger Miller  
Directed by: Jeff Calhoun (Hearing)  
Venue: Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood
May – June 2002  
*True West* by Sam Shepard  
Directed by: Deborah LaVine (Hearing)  
Venue: Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood

Nov. – Dec. 2002  
*Big River: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*  
Adaptation by: William Hauptman & Roger Miller  
Directed by: Jeff Calhoun (Hearing)  
Venue: Mark Taper Forum, 135 N. Grand Ave., Los Angeles

July – Sept. 2003  
*Big River: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*  
Adaptation by: William Hauptman & Roger Miller  
Directed by: Jeff Calhoun (Hearing)  
Venue: Broadway, American Airlines Theatre, 227 West 42 Street

June 2004–June 2005  
*Big River: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*  
Adaptation by: William Hauptman & Roger Miller  
Directed by: Jeff Calhoun (Hearing)  
Venue: Touring Production (U.S. & Japan)

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Oct. – Nov. 2005  *Open Window* by Stephen Sachs,
Directed by: Eric Simonson (Hearing)
Venue: Pasadena Playhouse, 39 S. El Molino Ave., Pasadena

Jan. – Feb. 2007  *Contemporary Classics: A Night of One Acts*
*Krapp’s Last Tape* by Samuel Beckett
Directed by: Jevon Whetter (Deaf)
*The Zoo Story* by Edward Albee
Directed by: Coy Middlebrook (Hearing)
Venue: Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood

April – May 2007  *Sleeping Beauty Wakes* Book by Rachel Sheinkin, Score by Brendan Milburn & Valerie Vigoda (of GrooveLily)
Directed by: Jeff Calhoun (Hearing)
Venue: Center Theatre Group, Kirk Douglas Theatre, 9820 Washington Blvd., Culver City

2008  *Aesop Who?* by David J. (DJ) Kurs
Directed by: Troy Kotsur (Deaf)
Venue: Unknown

Jan. – March 2009  *Pippin* by Stephen Schwartz
Directed by: Jeff Calhoun (Hearing)
Venue: Mark Taper Forum, 135 N. Grand Ave., Los Angeles

Sept. – Nov. 2009  *Children of a Lesser God* by Mark Medoff
Directed by: Jonathan Barlow Lee (Hearing)
Venue: Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood

April – May 2010  *My Sister in This House* by Wendy Kesselman
Directed by: Michael Unger (Hearing)
Venue: Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood

March 2011  *Pinocchio* by Carlo Collodi, Adaptation by Lee Hall
Directed by: Stephen Rotham (Hearing)
Venue: Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood

Under Artistic Director DJ Kurs (Deaf):

April – July 2012  *Cyrano* by Stephen Sachs
Directed by: Simon Levy (Hearing)
Venue: Fountain Theatre, 5060 Fountain Ave., Hollywood
Oct. – Nov. 2013  
*Flowers for Algernon* by David Rogers  
**Directed by:** Matthew McCray (Hearing)  
**Venue:** Whitefire Theatre, 13500 Ventura Blvd., Sherman Oaks

Sept. – Nov. 2014  
*Spring Awakening* by Steven Sater and Duncan Sheik  
**Directed by:** Michael Arden (Hearing)  
**Venue:** Inner-City Arts' Rosenthal Theatre, 720 Kohler St., Los Angeles

Feb. – March 2015  
*American Buffalo* by David Mamet  
**Directed by:** Stephen Rothman (Hearing)  
**Venue:** CSULA, State Playhouse, 5151 State University Dr., Los Angeles

May – June 2015  
*Spring Awakening* by Steven Sater and Duncan Sheik  
**Directed by:** Michael Arden (Hearing)  
**Venue:** The Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts, 9390 N. Santa Monica Blvd., Beverly Hills, CA

*Spring Awakening* by Steven Sater and Duncan Sheik  
**Directed by:** Michael Arden (Hearing)  
**Venue:** Broadway, Brooks Atkinson Theatre, 256 W 47th St, New York, NY 10036

March 7 – 26, 2017  
*At Home at the Zoo* by Edward Albee  
**Directed by:** Coy Middlebrook (Hearing)  
**Venue:** The Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts’ Lovelace Theatre, 9390 N. Santa Monica Blvd., Beverly Hills, CA

Sept. – Oct. 2017  
*Our Town* by Thornton Wilder  
**Directed by:** Sheryl Kaller (Hearing)  
**Venue:** Pasadena Playhouse, 39 S. El Molino Ave., Pasadena

Nov. - Dec. 2017  
*American Buffalo* by David Mamet  
**Directed by:** Stephen Rothman (Hearing)  
**Venue:** Riffe Center Studio One Theatre, Columbus, OH

96
Special/Invited Performances:

Nov. 2-3, 1991  *The Gin Game* by D.L. Coburn  
**Directed by:** Linda Bove (Deaf) & Stephen Sachs (Hearing)  
**Venue:** Gallaudet MSSD Auditorium, Washington D.C.

Nov. 10, 1991  *The Gin Game* by D.L. Coburn  
**Directed by:** Linda Bove (Deaf) & Stephen Sachs (Hearing)  
**Venue:** Westchester Community College Academy Arts Bldg., Valhalla, New York  
**Invited by:** The New York School for the Deaf, Manhattan, New York

June 6, 2004  *Big River: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*  
**Adaptation by:** William Hauptman & Roger Miller  
**Directed by:** Jeff Calhoun (Hearing)  
**Venue:** 58th Tony Awards, Awards Show

Nov. 18, 2015  *Spring Awakening* by Steven Sater and Duncan Sheik  
**Directed by:** Michael Arden (Hearing)  
**Venue:** The White House Convening on Americans with Disabilities and the Arts: A Celebration of Diversity and Inclusion (25th anniversary year of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the 40th anniversary year of the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA))

June 12, 2016  *Spring Awakening* by Steven Sater and Duncan Sheik  
**Directed by:** Michael Arden (Hearing)  
**Venue:** 78th Tony Awards, Awards Show

Sept. 2016  “Hell No” by Ingrid Michaelson  
Music Video

April 13, 2017  *Spring Awakening* by Steven Sater and Duncan Sheik  
**Directed by:** Michael Arden (Hearing)  
**Venue:** UCLA Disability as Spectacle International Conference & Panel Discussion