

A SHOW OF HANDS:  
THE FACTORS NECESSARY  
TO CREATE A SUCCESSFUL INTEGRATION  
OF AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE  
IN THEATRICAL PERFORMANCES

by

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## ABSTRACT

This project illustrates my analysis of the factors necessary when incorporating American Sign Language into a theatrical production. Moreover, my journey of directing the play *Watermelon Boats* by Wendy MacLoughlin while incorporating American Sign Language is also included. Specifically, I documented each step of the process from my initial research as to how American Sign Language has been incorporated into theatre in the past, to my experience in the rehearsal environment, and to the final presentation of the piece. I also analyzed the different obstacles that I encountered along the way, as well as depicted how I overcame them. Through this journey, I learned how to be a better overall artist of the theatre, as well as how to be a better communicator. I also learned the importance of valuing the process over the product. As important as it can be to focus on the final outcome, focusing on the final product can also lead to the underappreciation and true evaluation of specific parts of life and experiences.

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## INTRODUCTION: THE SPARK IGNITED

As a child, I loathed being bored. On rainy days when stuck inside, I was known to run around the house, twirling and creating plays to try and occupy my mind. My mother would become overwhelmed by my energy that could not leave the confines of our home. On such a day as this, my mother became exasperated by my behavior and, with a shout, ran into our home office. When she returned, she threw down a thick yellow book onto my table and simply stated “do this” before walking away. Thrilled that I finally found something to chase the boredom away, I looked at the book that had been placed in front of me: *Signing Exact English* by Gerilee Gustason, Donna Pfetzing, and Esther Zawolkow. Little did my mother know, she had opened up the door to what would become my true passion later in life. This book would soon become my Bible. I would carry it anywhere I went, trying to absorb the language as much as I was able. I soon found that I was more comfortable conversing in Sign Language than in standard oral English. My love of the language and of the Deaf community itself was growing as I began to immerse myself in the language. When doing research about the community, I was heartbroken to discover that more than five percent of the world lives in silence (“Deafness and Hearing Loss,” 2019). I soon began to think of how over five percent were unable to experience my love of theatre because of their disability. When I was accepted into the Theatre program at Texas Christian University, I knew I wanted to find a way to pursue my love of American Sign Language along with a degree in Musical Theatre and merge these two worlds. Luckily, I was able to do just this with a minor in Habilitation of the Deaf. Throughout my time at Texas Christian University, I have been able to explore my love of theatre and Sign Language and find ways to bring these two worlds together in order to allow all individuals that opportunity to enjoy

theatre as much as I do. Within my two departments, I wanted to explore further by analyzing the process of creating a production which incorporated Sign Language in some way.

## INTERPRETING AS A PROFESSION

### **Interpreting History**

Although Sign Language has existed as early as 1541, American Sign Language had only been recognized as a legitimate language in the 1960s by William Stokoe (Barnes DC10). Therefore, understandably, interpreting for the Deaf is a new profession in and of itself. It is important to understand this concept before moving on to the process itself. Since that is the case, specializations within the interpreting profession are predominantly absent. This situation is beginning to change as the number of interpreters continues to grow and opportunities to train in certain fields become more abundant.

Specifically, Performing Arts interpreters have tried to expand the field. In the 1970s, the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) proceeded to grant individuals with a Specialist Certificate: Performing Arts (SC:PA). Unfortunately, these individuals were the first and last to hold a SC:PA (Timm “Performing Arts Interpreting”). The training consisted of training in “acting, voice, movement, translation, role, and discussions of practical interpreting concerns”. It is conceivable that the specialty certificate did not continue due to the fact that in the 1970’s the idea of an interpreter was a new concept, much less of one with a specialty certificate (Timm “Performing Arts Interpreting”). Regardless, the need for interpreters within the performing arts field continues to grow over time.

## **Interpreting Within Theatre**

Before the performance even begins, many factors are necessary to analyze before interpreting a performance. The interpreter must analyze what visual information presented on stage is necessary for a Deaf audience member to focus on versus when they can follow the interpreter alone to understand the message. The interpreter must also be aware that sometimes the speech time of the actors may go faster or slower than the time it might take to sign the same sentence (Horwitz 4). Consequently, many weeks of rehearsal are often necessary for the interpreter before they feel confident enough to interpret for a Deaf audience (Horwitz 6).

In a typical non-theatre setting, an interpreter would sit across from the Deaf individual or at the front of a stage to communicate the message to the Deaf individual. Within the theatre world, however, there are multiple options on how to communicate the words onstage to the Deaf audience members.

The most common option is the one described above. At least two interpreters will stand next to or on the corner of the stage interpreting the actors during the performance. This form of interpreting is the most traditional and common one presented. This method works fairly well but comes with its own challenges. In this option, the Deaf audience members must choose where to look during the performance: at the interpreters or to the stage itself to watch the action unfold. The interpreters can help audience members make this decision by throwing focus to those performing either by looking at the stage while folding their hands or simply by shifting their gaze in the direction of the action (Horwitz 5). This form of interpreting sometimes causes the audience members to miss some of the action or the message of the production. The audience members are unable to fully enjoy the production with this method. Problems also arise in that the audience members who require sign language interpreters are often unable to bring the

theatre to full capacity, permitting theatres to allow interpreters for only a limited number of performances or, in some cases, not at all (Autumn “Shadow Interpreting”).

An equally separative idea is to place a screen above the stage and provide captions. However, not only does this option pull focus from the stage, but most theatres do not have the funds or technology to provide these supertitles.

The final option, and my personal favorite, is to provide shadow interpreters in the production. These interpreters will follow (or “shadow”) the actors while providing the interpretation. This method of interpretation allows the Deaf audience members to not have to choose between watching the interpreter or the action on the stage. The most notable theatre to incorporate this form of interpretation is the “Deaf West” Theatre in Los Angeles, California. There is a smoother integration of sign language into the production with this option (Autumn “Shadow Interpreting”).

However, it is important to acknowledge that this route might not be the most feasible for every production. The shadow interpreters must have costumes and make-up that match the characters they are interpreting whereas a traditional interpreter is not required to. This form often requires the shadow interpreters to be part of the production from the very beginning, a feat not many are willing to take on. Therefore, in the short term, a traditional interpreter is the best option. However, for the Deaf community, I believe the more seamless option is to incorporate shadow interpreters into the production to allow the Deaf community to fully experience the production.

### **Why American Sign Language?**

Within the Deaf community, there are many methods of sign language used. There is the Rochester method, which only uses fingerspelling, as well as Cued Speech, which uses hand

signals to communicate the phonemes to the Deaf, to name a few. Two of the most common ones are Signing Exact English (also known as SEE-2) and American Sign Language (or ASL). While these two languages are equivalent in communicating the message, they are not the same and there are pros and cons to each form.

SEE-2 is a method that communicates every spoken word to the Deaf community. If one were to Gloss (or write out what exactly is being signed) the sentence “I’m going to the store today” to SEE-2, it would look like this: I AM GO-ING TO THE STORE NOW DAY I. This method is helpful in ensuring that no message gets left out of the translation. However, when translated, the messages often become too long as unnecessary words are included (such as “to” or “the”). There is also no personal or visual context given to the audience members, so they must visualize the concepts themselves.

To contrast, ASL is a much more visual and conceptual language. Unnecessary words are omitted, and an emphasis is placed on communicating the visual message. The primary difference is that ASL has its own sentence structure; it does not use typical English Sentence structure. The ASL sentence structure is: Time Location Topic Comment Verb. If we were to follow this sentence structure when Glossing the same sentence above, it would look like this: NOW DAY STORE I GO I. There is no word-for-word translation within ASL; instead, there is an emphasis on discourse structure and grammar to communicate the nuances of the language.

American Sign Language has become the primary form of translation for traditional events and is the one used when interpreting performing arts events.

### **From English to American Sign Language**

To interpret any kind of oral language to sign language is not as simple as that. As the Deaf cannot hear vocal inflections, the tone of voice, or even understand some common phrases

(such as puns, word play, etc.), those who are interpreting must not only use linguistics but also paralinguistics to fully communicate the vision of what is being communicated. This multi-phase task takes countless hours of preparatory work in order to deliver what the message is to those who are Deaf. When communicating a meeting or speech, the interpreter must communicate only what is being spoken or happening in the environment. When interpreting theatre, the interpreter must also take into account the lighting, songs, dances, and theatrical effects when communicating the vision to their audience.

Typically, the process begins by delivering the script to those interpreting weeks in advance. Within the theatre, this process involves not only translating the words on the page but requires script analysis, interpreter team rehearsals, and live interpretation during the rehearsal process. There are some challenges within this process, including the inability to interrupt speech during the performance, conveying the auditory information created by musical instruments and sound effects, understanding when viewing the stage action is more important than the words, finding the time for the interpreters to process what is being said without falling behind, and interpreting the subtext within the text to fully convey the message (Alison “The Do’s and Don’ts of Sign Language in Theatre”). One of the most helpful tools when interpreting a theatrical production is to attend rehearsals to learn more about the characters and the production’s interpretation of the script.

### HELP GETTING STARTED

One helpful study analyzes the process of interpreting for theatre, specifically for the Broadway production of *Mary Poppins*. While this interpreting group uses the traditional form of interpreting, it was still beneficial to understand their process of interpreting.

The study highlights that interpreting includes the use of "...pre-determined language..., script analysis, interpreter team rehearsals, and live interpretation" (Horwitz 1). This study alone was helpful in understanding the steps necessary to complete the interpreting process for the play I would eventually select. The study emphasized throughout that the goal was to "...achieve equivalence" (Horwitz 2). This means that the Deaf audience receives the same quality of production and communication as the hearing audience does.

The interpreting team watched the performance five times before interpreting for the first time (Horwitz 6). The first two times were to observe the production as a whole and pay attention to details and to their own experience as an audience member. The third was to stand in the back and experiment with different interpretations while analyzing how the characters physically behave and how they respond to one another. The final two observations were to consider the pace of the dialogue and note when it was vital to interpret and if there were moments to sign to one another or not (Horwitz 7)

Throughout their observation process, the interpreters analyzed when to sign the verbatim text or to sign the subtext, a concept that takes time and constant practice within the interpreting field. However, interpreters understood that the meaning of the text always takes precedence over the verbatim text (Horwitz 9). By the end of the rehearsal period, the interpreters had created a "dynamic equivalent interpretation" (Horwitz 7). The interpretation was not word-for-word but instead focused on the ASL structure as well as communicating the underlying message of each line of text (Horwitz 7).

The study provided valuable techniques on how to address the stage action going on behind the interpreters. If there is important visual information, the interpreters can throw focus to the action on the stage either by simply looking at the action quickly or by folding their hands

and turning toward the action (Horwitz 12). The interpreters would often delay the start of their interpretation to allow the audience to start the performance by focusing on the actors (Horwitz 13). Each of these tactics could potentially be useful as the rehearsal process began. If I ran into any problems, I knew I could always go back to these tools for potential fixes.

Having completed hours of research and analyzation of my chosen text, I knew that for my project I wanted to explore the newer version of interpreting that is “shadow interpreting” and analyzing the differences and benefits when interpreting with this method as opposed to a traditional format.

## CREATING THE PRODUCTION

### **Developing the Concept**

When deciding that my project would consist of creating a production incorporating ASL interpretation, I first had to decide what text would be the perfect vessel. I knew I wanted a small cast of two or three characters as I knew each character would have a shadow interpreter which would double the number of actors. I also knew that I wanted the two/three characters to be female as the Texas Christian University Theatre Department is predominantly female; I knew my casting pool would be easier to pull from if my characters were female.

I debated between taking an excerpt from a play or musical but soon decided against that. While an excerpt might have been a viable option, I knew that providing the overall story-arch that I wanted to present in my piece might not be feasible with this option. Therefore, I started to look at ten-minute plays as options for my text. There were many different topics and subject matters to choose from: realism to non-realism, serious to comedic, ones that were straightforward to ones that relied heavily on subtext. At first it was overwhelming to look at all

the different options and choose. Eventually, however, I landed on a piece that I immediately fell in love with.

The play I selected is called *Watermelon Boats* by Wendy MacLoughlin. The play takes place in one location, which was beneficial since I would not have to worry about changing the set throughout the piece. The two characters are female classmates which I knew would be easy to find shadows for. The plot follows their friendship from the age of eleven to sixteen to twenty-one. Throughout the play, the change in time is indicated by a change in hairstyle or a change in costumes; however, the characters never leave the stage. The play itself is mainly realistic with some elements of non-realism that I thought would be fun to tackle. The topics are relatable, and the script is primarily straightforward, but there are moments where the subtext is louder than the words on the page. With this part of the process complete, I was much more relaxed and felt ready to take on the project.

### **Meeting with the Advisors**

Being someone who thrives on organizing and creating check lists, I wanted to meet with each member of my board before continuing with the process. When meeting with Alan Shorter, we mainly focused on the paper portion of the process- that is, tying in what I am doing academically. This connection was beneficial to me as it put my project into perspective when looking at the overall picture. This was also the meeting where I solidified which method of interpretation that I would be using. We both agreed that while the traditional method of interpretation was the most common, it did not feel personal enough for the piece. I was striving to create a production that integrated interpretation as opposed to making it feel like two separate entities.

My next meeting was with Jennifer Engler. After presenting my script to her, we started to discuss the actual production. As the method of interpreting was decided, the discussion began to circle around how this choice would affect the staging of the play. Initially, it was inferred that the “vocal” characters would be primarily in the front while the “signing” characters would be shadowing behind. However, I struggled with this as my goal was to create a performance opportunity that would be equally meant for the Deaf community as well as the hearing one. Jennifer then asked, “Well why not have the ‘vocal’ character shadow the signing one?” For a moment, I was silent. That thought had not crossed my mind as, traditionally, the signers shadow the vocal characters. However, I began to think about the theatre company “Deaf West” and their recent production of *Deaf Awakening*. In this production, some of the Deaf characters had oral shadows while some oral characters had Deaf shadows. I thought this would be a great opportunity to put the translation from English to ASL at the front of the project with this option. We also discussed performing the piece in one of our theatres for the Deaf Community in the DFW area.

### **Miscommunication**

My last meeting would be with my American Sign Language instructor. In this meeting, I wanted to focus on the Glossing from English to ASL as well as the Deaf Community to make sure, culturally, that I would not step on any toes throughout my process. I spoke of how I would have two sets of characters, one “Deaf” and one “hearing” for each character, and that the hearing characters would shadow the “Deaf” one. My professor looked at me, her eyes suddenly widening, and stated that this would not be an option.

I was shocked. When I asked her what she meant, she stated that the Deaf community would not be happy that two hearing individuals would be those characters; I would need to have two Deaf actors to be the signers in my production.

I was overwhelmed. The planner in me had already figured out which actors I would like to ask to be part of my production and now I might have to find two Deaf actors? I was unsure that I would find the time, or quite frankly the resources, to find two qualified actors. I also was aware of the communicative challenges that might come up if I had to direct two Deaf actors. I am in no way fluent in ASL so I knew that could present a challenge when communicating. I also am aware of how directors often have to present something in multiple ways sometimes in order for the actors to understand what is being asked of them. With the communication boundary, as well as understanding that the Deaf community do not understand some of the metaphors that we as a hearing community use often, I found myself thinking that I would be struggling to create the piece and that this would become my main focus as opposed to the text.

With my plan seemingly abandoned, I took a night to not think about this project and instead focused on anything but sign language. The next morning, I scheduled a meeting with my Sign Language professor and my theatre advisor. Once we were together, I presented my fears to my advisors, acknowledging my limits with sign language as well as my fear of the presentation portion. I did not want to focus on the end product so much as the process of getting there. I also admitted that my schedule would be overwhelming my senior year as a theatre major, so it would not be plausible to find two Deaf actors whose schedule would easily match my own. My ASL teacher acknowledged these difficulties but further emphasized that it would not be acceptable within the Deaf community to have the two hearing ladies play these characters. When I asked

for clarification, she stated that the Deaf community would not be happy with a hearing person playing a Deaf character.

Of course, I would never disrespect the Deaf community in that way. Shocked by her statement, I clarified that I understood her fully but that this would not be happening in my production. I stated that both characters were hearing characters, but I would have two people signing with these characters. My professor simply looked at me and stated that of course that was fine! The problem came from the fact that my professor believed that the characters themselves were Deaf.

This miscommunication reminded me of one project that we did in ASL-1. I went to interview a Deaf individual, simply asking about her life and experiences. During one question, I used an incorrect sign. This one miscommunication led to a completely different conversation, one that did not answer my original question. It reminded me the importance of being deliberate with my language when communicating with other individuals. I knew that this lesson would be beneficial later on in my process.

The meetings that I had with my advisors were constructive in solidifying my concept as well. I learned that I wanted my focus to be on the process of creating the production, not on presenting the production. I did not want to be focused on lights, sound cues, or any other technical elements. Instead, I wanted my focus to be on expressing the English text through ASL as well as playing with the different physical ways to present the text to the audience. It was through this discovery that I decided to not present my piece on Theatre TCU's stage but instead in one of our intimate classrooms. With this portion of my project solidified, it was time to start Glossing my piece.

## GLOSSING THE SCRIPT

### **Analyzing the Script**

The first step when glossing the script is to understand what is being said. Often, in productions as well as in life in general, what is being said is not always what is meant. Understanding the subtext of what is being communicated is vital when communicating the play's message to the audience. I also analyzed the characters themselves. Both named Katherine, these characters appear similar at the start but soon begin to display their differences as they experience life in different ways. Kitty is the book-smart best friend yet does not see her own self-worth in how boys see her. Kate is the one who presents herself as "picture perfect," yet she as well struggles to find her self-worth in her aspiration to be a writer. I knew I wanted these two to be differentiated not only in costumes but how they sign. I wanted Kitty to be blunter her signing while Kate would use more signs.

Horwitz states in his study that interpreting must include "...purposeful word choices and writing of the theatrical dialogue and the need for the nuances of the dialogue to be examined thoroughly by interpreters" (Horwitz 2). I also knew that there would be potential challenges such as not being able to interrupt rapid speech, conveying any auditory information, mitigating stage action as visual information, negotiating the impact of time progressing, as well as interpreting nuances in the script; I knew that while I might be facing these challenges only in the future, I did not want to forget these as I began the translating, or glossing, process. As many fixes that I could make on my own would be beneficial in the long run in creating a smoother rehearsal process. With all these factors in mind, I began to Gloss.

## Glossing the text

Before beginning, I took an extra sheet of paper and wrote:

TIME LOCATION TOPIC COMMENT VERB

This cheat sheet would help me remember the sentence structure when converting the English text to ASL. The process was quite simple. I took a specific chunk of text and looked at the section as a whole before breaking it down into sentences. Is there a time clarification? Who was doing the action? What was the action? For instance, the paragraph “When I’m close to a boy...really close, I feel important. For a time, someone needs me. I’m connected to someone, part of the same thing. Afterwards, though, at home in bed...I feel more alone” soon became: WHEN I NEAR BOY, REALLY NEAR I FEEL IMPORTANT I. WHY? SOMEONE NEED ME. I FEEL CONNECT TO-HIM. SEX FINISH, HOME I GO. IN-MY-BED ALONE I FEEL.

We see the time clarifications “When I’m close to a boy” and “Afterwards” communicated first in their respective sentences. Whereas “when I’m close to a boy” is communicated in a straight-forward fashion, “afterwards” must be clarified as the audience is not sure what happened first, thus the clarification of SEX before the time clarification FINISH. Then comes the location and who did the action (I and HOME) and the verbs (FEEL IMPORTANT or I GO). The dashes connecting certain words indicate that one sign conveys these words. The rhetorical “why?” in the sentence allows the character to explain why she feels important, something that is implied in the English text.

While most of the script was easy to translate, there were some places that I struggled to find the right sign to convey the message. The most notable sentence was a simple one; when Kate asks Kitty if she knows her I.Q., Kitty simply responds with “That’s not my business.” I started to translate:

YOUR IQ(fs) NOT MY

But I suddenly stopped. It wasn't her what? Not her legitimate business, which would use the sign for "work" or "job." I then thought about what the phrase "not my business" really means. Eventually, I landed on "it's not my place to know." Finally! I started to translate again:

YOUR IQ(fs) NOT MY

I stopped once more. I couldn't say "place" as in location because that is not the concept that was being used; that would not communicate the message. I also did not want to use the word "rank" or "position" as that would not communicate the message either. Eventually, I landed on the phrase "it doesn't matter to me" with the translation:

YOUR IQ(fs) DOESN'T-MATTER ME

While this translation might not be like my original concept, it certainly communicated the message of this line in a clearer fashion to those who would be watching the production.

### GETTING IT UP ON ITS FEET

#### **The First Rehearsal**

To say I was nervous before that first rehearsal would be an understatement. It was not that I felt underprepared; rather, I felt that my glossing was intellectually sound and felt comfortable with the blocking that I had come up with. What was nerve-racking to me was that I had never been in a play that merged both ASL and English. I was not quite sure how to efficiently direct a piece which had these two aspects living together. However, I was confident that my actors would be willing to work with me throughout the process, and I knew this learning process would be one that I would enjoy and treasure.

Candace Broecker Penn wrote that "the bedrock, or framework, of all theatrical interpretation has to be the creation of a good translation that captures the essence of the play in a way that is directly understandable and enjoyed by Deaf audiences" (Timm "Performing Arts Interpreting"). In my head, this sounds a lot like how performers are tasked to present a piece of theatre to an audience. Therefore, it made sense for me that my four actors would also be my interpreters. I picked two actors that knew some sign language to be the signing characters. I then picked two more actors who I knew would be up for the challenge of presenting this bi-lingual piece. With my actors picked and my script glossed, I was ready to begin the rehearsal process.

That first rehearsal was just a read-through. I wanted to have the entire cast together and focus on the words that were present. During the read through, I had my two cast members who would be signing sign as much as they could. Afterwards, I talked through the text with my cast to go over any aspects that might have been confusing to them. My cast members immediately began asking questions about the glossing that was presented. They wanted to learn why it was written this way in this specific order. They also wanted to know about Deaf culture and any nuances that they could add into the performance. I was touched by their enthusiasm; all of my initial fears left as I saw that they were as excited about this production as I was.

The most important part of this rehearsal to me was emphasizing that this project would not be about the final product. I was more interested in the rehearsals and the journey rather than what an audience would think at the final performance. Our motto during this journey soon became "process over product."

### **Finding the World**

Before any rehearsal process as a director, I always try to have an outline of the blocking for the production. This blocking is by no means set in stone, but I like to have a general

guideline. This was helpful as the rehearsal process went on, yet I soon found that the blocking was just what I intended it to be: a guideline.

Initially I struggled with how I wanted the actors to be placed on stage. I was unsure if I wanted the two signers and the two speakers to be in two separate parts of the stage or if I wanted the two ladies playing the same character to live in the same space. At first, I wanted to have a specific choice to set the tone for the entire piece. However, I soon found that there were moments that I wanted the speaking character to be separate from the signers and others that I wanted the shadows and characters to be separate. Rather than sticking to the rigidity of my initial plan, I allowed myself to branch out and live in both of these worlds. I soon found that this decision allowed for different nuances and moments in the script to pop out depending on how the text was staged.

There was one moment that stands out to me. At the very beginning of the text, the two characters talk of how their boats are better than everyone else's. Initially, I had staged it that the two signing characters would be seated below the two speaking characters. However, as the scene went on, I did not like how the two worlds seemed disconnected. I needed to remind myself, and my future audiences, that these four ladies were playing only two characters. So instead I had my two signers seated stage right and the two speakers stage left. However, I had the two ladies playing the same character seated on the same level to cue the audience that these are the same characters.

I also found that it was helpful to have my speaking actors record themselves saying the text for my signing actors to rehearse with. Just as interpreters go to multiple rehearsals to get a feel for the show, this recording allowed my signing actors to rehearse without the actors present and work on the speed of the signing.

## Merging the Two Worlds

By the fifth rehearsal, I felt stuck. I was unsure how to merge the speaking world and the ASL world more congruently in my piece. I knew there were moments that I was missing in order to connect the two. So, I did what I do best: I put the piece to bed for a couple days. In between rehearsals, I did not look at it and instead let my subconscious work on it. At our next rehearsal, I had my actors working on the Second Age. In this scene, Kitty talks about why she chooses to sleep around and the connection that she feels. While she was giving this speech: “When I’m close to a boy...really close, I feel important. For a time, someone needs me. I’m connected to someone, part of the same thing. Afterwards, though, at home in bed...I feel more alone” the lightbulb hit me. I was looking for a concept that the hearing world would be able to understand and I had found it. The glossing for this paragraph was this:

WHEN I NEAR BOY, REALLY NEAR I FEEL IMPORTANT I. WHY? SOMEONE NEED ME. I FEEL CONNECT. SEX FINISH, HOME I GO. IN-MY-BED ALONE I FEEL.

I knew that my hearing world would understand this feeling of being connected to someone emotionally. I had my actors try something: when my Signing Kitty got to the sign CONNECT, I would have my voice actor stop speaking. Then all my actors would look at my Signing Kitty at this one sign. When they tried it, the impact was exactly what I was looking for. It was a way to make the hearing world feel included in the signing. The hearing audience members may not understand exactly what the sign is, but they would be able to understand the concept.

After this epiphany, it was as if I had given myself permission as a director to allow the words to become more entwined. I started finding other moments to pull out in the text: a part where the Speaking Kitty gets the attention of Signing Kitty to prevent her from telling the Kate’s something she probably shouldn’t, a moment for the Kates to interact and share their

confusion at something my Kitty's had just said. The play really started to fall into place after this rehearsal, and my actors became more connected to the characters as the play progressed.

### **Continuing to Tweak**

One of the more challenging (and most rewarding) parts of this process is how the piece constantly changed throughout the process. Each rehearsal, my actors and I would come in with new ideas on how to make the piece even better than it was the last rehearsal. For example, there are numerous names that are referenced in the play that I picked. In Deaf culture, your name is finger-spelled until you are given a Name-Sign (that is, an individual sign that represents your name). Initially, I was having my actors finger-spell all of these names for my audience. As rehearsal progressed, I soon realized that this choice was slowing down the pace of the play. This was in no way the fault of my actors; to sign each letter of a name just takes longer than doing one simple Name-sign. I sat down one evening to try to think of solutions to fix this. Do I schedule a rehearsal just to practice the finger-spelling? Do I change the names to shorter ones? Or do I simply let it be and ask my speaking actors to slow down their speech pace during this part? However, the most simply fix came when thinking about Deaf culture and the context of the piece. These characters would have given Name-signs to all their teachers long before this play started. So why not simply have my actors give a Name-sign to the majority (if not all) the names presented in the play? The only one I decided to leave finger-spelled was "Katherine Mansfield" because these characters would not have a personal relationship with this author.

Another continuous tweak was the glossing of the script. My signing actors would often ask "Why is it glossed like this?" to try to understand the context and subtext of why each sign was chosen. When the choices were explained the actors understood and we would move forward with the rehearsal. Other days, the actors would offer other glossing because their

interpretation of the line was different than mine. This was extremely beneficial thing because the actors and I were able to have a conversation about the line; with this conversation, we each would develop a stronger understanding of the lines, characters, and the signs necessary to communicate effectively to the audience. While stressful because the play kept changing around me, it was also enlightening and empowering to watch this piece that I had been dreaming of for two years grow up in front of me.

### THE FINAL PRESENTATION

The day of the public presentation came much quicker than I was anticipating. After a full day of work and classes, I ran up to the classroom where we would be performing. I stepped inside with my actors to run through the lines one final time and make sure the room was set up correctly. As they finished, I congratulated them on a wonderful process and told them again how proud I was to have gone on this journey with them, regardless of what others would think about the piece. We shared a hug, then I opened the doors.

I was expecting a crowd of ten people to come watch my project. I was astounded when thirty-five people all walked through the doors to take a seat and witness what we had been working on for the past three months. While the majority of the faces were fellow theatre majors or theatre faculty, I was surprised to see new faces that were not part of the theatre department. Excited yet nervous, I briefly introduced the play and my concept, then allowed my actors to do their part.

The response after that last line was unlike anything I expected. The audience members in-front of me were smiling and applauding the same way I had seen audience members react to a full-fledged performance. I was humbled that my simple honors project could have that same

effect on people. After the applause died down, I thanked them all for coming and opened up the floor to any questions. The questions were mostly about the Deaf community and culture, such as “Why did the Signing actors hit the box to get the other’s attention?” or “How is their sentence structure different to our own?” Some asked how the process was different to that of being in a “regular” show; my actors stated that it wasn’t really, we just had the extra challenge of signing and adding in culture aspects of the Deaf community.

At the beginning of the play, I handed out a form to all the audience members. This form was simply, asking if the ASL incorporation added or detracted from the performance, if they enjoyed the overall performance, and if they had ever seen a production with ASL incorporated. Out of the thirty-five forms I handed out, twenty were turned back in to me. Looking at the questions, I tallied that: twenty stated that they enjoyed the performance overall; twenty stated that the incorporation of ASL added to the performance (with zero stating it detracted); and that only nine had ever seen a performance with shadow interpreting, and eleven had either never seen a performance with ASL incorporated or had only seen a performance traditionally interpreted.

On the forms, some had also chosen to write additional notes. I was taken aback by the amount of people who stated that “they wished more theatres incorporated sign language like this” or that “this performance made [them] want to learn ASL and learn about the Deaf community”. All stated that in no way did the ASL detract from the performance. In fact, those that chose to write notes stated that the incorporation added another layer to the performance and captivated them into the story. One person even wrote that they had seen this performance once without the signing- this time they actually liked the play.

Overall, the biggest praise that I got was my choice to make the Speaking actors the shadow of the Signing actors. Many came up to me after saying that this is the way ASL should be incorporated into theatre and that this experience was unique to them - even to those that had seen a performance with ASL incorporated. Many came up to me stating that this was the most moving piece of theatre that they had seen in a long time. I was humbled that my simple project was able to evoke this much response out of an audience. I felt pride that I was able to show others my two passions and that they can be presented in the same medium effectively. The smile on my face after that performance stayed well into the rest of the week.

#### CONCLUSION: A WORK IN PROGRESS

I would be lying if I said the play that presented to the public was a finished product. I could have spent another month with my cast and this piece, and I could have continued to find new pieces to play with and bring out. However, the point of my project was not to have a finished product but instead to focus on the process of creating a piece of theatre with Sign Language incorporated. However, I believe that art should imitate life and nothing about life is ever a finished product. To me, this process was similar to what I imagine raising a child is like: I held my child (the script) in my hands on that first day and imagined the life I wanted it to live, I watched my child come to life before my eyes as my actors began to bring the words on the page to life, I watched as there were some obstacles that my child experienced and was proud when we collectively overcame those obstacles. When the piece was presented to an audience, I can only imagine that it felt similar to watching my child leave for college, knowing that I have done everything that I can to prepare them for that moment.

Life is not about the destination, it is about the journey. This process has taught me that theatre does mimic life in that regard. This process has been one of the most fulfilling that I have experienced in my four years at Texas Christian University. I have been reminded of learning to love the journey and understanding that, while it is good to have goals and strive to achieve those goals, it is more important to simply live and enjoy the journey in front of you.

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