

NEA ROUNDTABLE:

Creating Opportunities for Deaf Theater Artists



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By Martha Wade Steketee

**A report from the NEA Roundtable
held January 20, 2016,
at The Lark in New York City**



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Report on NEA Roundtable on Opportunities for Deaf Theater Artists
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A note regarding terminology and the use of Deaf vs. deaf in this report: Regarding the d/Deaf distinction, the rules are ever-evolving. Ideally, you would defer to whatever someone identifies as, and the markers are varied. There are general rules for usage: whenever referring to a person's identity, community, or culture, especially in connection with sign language, use the capitalized form, "Deaf." This capitalization has historically been used to emphasize the Deaf identity, a source of pride, and is distinct from the socially constructed pathological diagnosis of "deafness," which carries stigma. Whenever referring to hearing status, you will use "deaf." To further complicate things, there is no solid demarcation for where the capitalized marker "Deaf" came to be. It is generally accepted that Deaf culture began in America with the founding of the first Deaf schools in the early 19th century.



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Cover Photo: The Deaf West Theatre 2015 production of Steven Sater and Duncan Sheik's *Spring Awakening*, directed by Michael Arden and choreographed by Spencer Liff. Pictured (counter-clockwise from bottom left): Treshelle Edmond, Ali Stroker, Amelia Hendley, Lauren Luiz, Kathryn Gallagher, Krysta Rodriguez, and Alexandra Winter. Photo by Joan Marcus

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

More than fifty artists, administrators, academics, funders, and others invited by the [National Endowment for the Arts](#) (NEA) assembled in the BareBones® Studio of [The Lark](#) at 311 West 43rd Street in New York City on the afternoon of January 20, 2016 to discuss barriers, needs, and opportunities for American Deaf theater artists.

The primary focus of the discussion was the development and production of plays 1) written by Deaf playwrights, 2) featuring themes focused on the lives of Deaf individuals, and/or 3) that can expand meaningful employment opportunities for Deaf artists (e.g., actors, designers, directors, sign masters). All the sessions were plenary and featured real-time captioning and sign language interpreters from Sign Language Resources, Inc.

Facilitated discussions addressed several issues and a pre-established set of specific questions. Ensuing conversations occasionally moved beyond these categories.

Identifying barriers in the field.

Lack of infrastructure for home-grown work developed by Deaf artists. Lack of collective employment opportunities for Deaf artists. Perceptions and realities of financial obstacles and increased costs related to employing Deaf artists and accommodating audiences.

Identifying pressing needs. What strategies are there for increasing the number of opportunities for Deaf artists in mainstream theater? How do we encourage decision makers to consider using Deaf artists, creatives, designers, and staff?

Identifying conditions for growth, including audience development.

What is Deaf theater? Why Deaf theater? What are the optimal conditions for the development of new plays that qualify as Deaf theater? What are the ways that Deaf artists can collaborate with hearing artists? How can we increase funding opportunities for new plays, Deaf theater organizations, and artists? How can we develop audiences for Deaf theater? How can we increase access to all theater for both Deaf artists and audiences? What value does Deaf theater bring?

Next steps and action items. How can the theatrical community be inspired to support Deaf theater? What opportunities are there to develop new plays (e.g., pitch fests, workshop opportunities)?

“It’s as simple as going to your casting director and saying: I would like to have disabled or Deaf artists come in for every show in the season. Similarly, demand that our literary managers and directors of play development go out and seek those plays, find out where are they being, where are the centers, where are those plays being written?”

—Shirley Fishman, La Jolla Playhouse

“What is important is to bring the Deaf artist in the room at the point of originating the project, as part of the creative process. Invite us into the process at the beginning stages.”

—Alexandria Wailes, actor

“I would like to see us collaborating rather than competing against each other. Let’s start collaborative projects together. When festivals are compiled, why not have plays by Deaf writers? Instead of saying: you can’t be a part of us, include us.”

—Fred Beam, Invisible Hands

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Greg Reiner, director of theater and musical theater at the NEA, opened the proceedings referencing the energy and hopes for Deaf theater awareness inspired by Deaf West Theatre's production of *Spring Awakening*, set to close on Broadway January 26, 2016, and their production of *Big River* a dozen years before. In the decade since *Big River*, no Deaf actors had appeared on Broadway until the *Spring Awakening* production.

Ben Brantley contemplated the intertwined "nonhearing and hearing worlds" of *Big River* in his July 25, 2003 *New York Times* [review](#), and his analysis of the production as a moment "in which a bridge is crossed into a different realm of perception" between the hearing and Deaf theater worlds resonated throughout the day.

[T]his adaptation of Twain's epochal account of an American odyssey makes the crucial point that there's more than one way to tell a story and to sing a song. Though the coordination and integration of signed, spoken, and sung language are surely a matter of great complexity, you're never allowed to sense the effort.

Charles Isherwood mused about the possibly audacious choice of Deaf performers in a musical in his September 27, 2015 *New York Times* [review](#) of *Spring Awakening*, and affirmed for mainstream theater audiences the presence and importance of Deaf

performers on contemporary mainstream stages.

Deaf actors in a musical? The prospect sounds challenging, to performers and audiences alike. But you will be surprised at how readily you can assimilate the novelties involved, and soon find yourself pleurably immersed not in a worthy, let's-pat-ourselves-on-the-back experience, but simply in a first-rate production of a transporting musical.

Beth Bienvenu, director of accessibility at the NEA, provided some historical context to the Roundtable. The NEA hosted a [National Forum in 1998](#) and a [National Summit in 2009](#) on the topic of careers in the arts for people with disabilities, and supported 27 [statewide forums](#) between 2002 and 2013 to serve artists with disabilities in those states. The January 2016 Roundtable participants were asked to assess the time period between 2003's *Big River* and 2015's *Spring Awakening*. Were expectations for awareness and understanding of Deaf theater artists reanimated? What was the same, what was different, and how could the field harness the opportunity of attention upon a quality piece of theater created by Deaf and hearing artists for Deaf and hearing audiences?

DJ Kurs, Deaf West artistic director, moderated the event and provided context and background to start off the gathering. The focus of the conversation was to "ensure the success of Deaf people within the theater," he noted. In



The Mark Taper Forum produced Mark Medoff's *Children of a Lesser God*—starring Phyllis Frelich (who won a Tony for her performance) and John Rubinstein—as part of its accessibility initiative, supported by the NEA. Photo courtesy of the Mark Taper Forum

particular, participants were directed to focus on the development and production of plays with several shared attributes: 1) written by Deaf playwrights, 2) featuring themes focused on the lives of Deaf individuals, and/or 3) that can expand meaningful employment opportunities for Deaf artists (e.g. actors, designers, directors, sign masters). DJ reflected that these attributes are “interconnected in a ball of wax and it’s hard to differentiate and separate these issues.” The group task was to assess how to encourage

the American theater community to advance these goals, bring new plays to diverse audiences, and engage the larger theater field consistently to embrace the contributions from Deaf artists at the highest levels.

Tyrone Giordano of dog & pony dc and a stage and film actor outlined a brief history of Deaf artists in theater, distinguishing the concepts of “Deaf in theater” and “Deaf theater.” The first documented performance of Deaf people in theater was a pantomime performance in 1884. References in Plato’s *Cratylus*, a dialogue about language, address the fact that if humans couldn’t speak they would use signs or gestures used by deaf people, documenting that deaf people were visible in society and had a version of sign language. A 1783 poem “On Seeing David Garrick” refers to a deaf audience member attending a highly physicalized performance. The substantial institutional expansion of Deaf students in theater, Giordano outlined, occurred at Washington DC’s Gallaudet University, with drama events documented as early as 1884, a drama club established in 1892, and a drama department founded in 1957 with Deaf scholar Gilbert Eastman as its first chair.

The play *The Miracle Worker* ran on Broadway in 1959 featuring a main character played by actress Anne Bancroft. Following this production Bancroft helped found the National Theatre of the Deaf in 1967 with David Hays, Bernard Bragg, and Dr. Edna Simon Levine. From there, several categories of Deaf work in theater were identified and

evolved. “Deaf theater” addresses Deaf issues and is typically developed for Deaf audiences. “Sign language theater” utilizes signing to present any sort of theater, whether or not they concern Deaf issues, to both Deaf and hearing audiences. Giordano proposed using “Deaf in theater” as the broadest term where Deaf characters or actors, designers, and other creatives are involved in theater. Most plays involving Deaf in theater are usually originally written

in English and then translated into sign, “putting a Deaf face on it.” These translated works involved Deaf actors and oftentimes hearing actors voicing for Deaf characters to allow access for hearing audiences. Deaf West’s *Spring Awakening*, Giordano continued, with some characters played in pairs of Deaf signing actors and hearing speaking actors, may present the most highly sophisticated “Sign language theater” work model yet, “because they brought in Deaf and hearing people for a



The Roundabout Theatre Company/Deaf West Theatre production of *Big River*. Photo by Joan Marcus

specific reason and there is dramatic tension between these characters. It's not just a Deaf face layered on a character but a specific ideological choice."

In the 21st century, Deaf theater artists have benefitted from social media and increased awareness. For example, the Twitter hashtag #DeafTalent, was originally inspired in early 2015 by the casting of a hearing actor in a Deaf role, to raise awareness of the Deaf talent available for work in film, TV, and theater. The hashtag is both celebratory and an admonishment, Giordano noted, and has been expanded to #POCDeafTalent, to highlight talented Deaf artists of color. Giordano created an evolving DeafTalent database that includes a variety of actors, performers, writers, and producers who are Deaf because he "was so sick and tired of the hearing world saying 'we can't find any Deaf people of talent.'" This database now includes over 400 people.

Funding for theater involving Deaf people has traditionally come from earned income, private donors, foundations, and federal sources. The US Department of Education invested heavily in Deaf theater for many years, but after that funding source was cut in 2004—the primary support for significant development in Deaf theater at the National Theatre of the Deaf, Deaf West Theatre, and other theaters for nearly three decades—organizations have struggled to replace this support from other sources. The NEA funds Deaf theater programs through its theater and musical theater grants, including a 2014 grant to Deaf

West Theatre Company to support the development of its production of *Spring Awakening*, and grants to several theaters for productions of the play *Tribes*.



Marlee Matlin in the Deaf West Theatre 2015 production of Steven Sater and Duncan Sheik's *Spring Awakening*, directed by Michael Arden and choreographed by Spencer Liff. Photo by Joan Marcus

IDENTIFYING BARRIERS IN THE FIELD

Agenda Framing Questions + Issues

- Lack of infrastructure for “home-grown” work developed by Deaf artists.
- Lack of collective employment opportunities for Deaf artists.
- Financial obstacles/increased costs related to employing Deaf artists and accommodating audiences.

Discussion + Themes

Loss of Deaf community gathering places. “Deaf clubs, Deaf schools, all the gathering places where our culture thrives are places of engagement, but as we see, those physical spaces are diminishing in theater. We’re seeing Deaf individuals being lost in society, not able to find a place where the rest of their culture thrives.” —Ethan Sinnott, Gallaudet

Training opportunities. Artists often need to obtain services, including interpreting, on their own dime. Deaf West’s summer school is one accessible source of ongoing professional acting training. —Alexandria Wailes, actress

Support Deaf artists’ play and exploration. “We need a venue to play, to experiment, to discover. I need theaters who are willing to sponsor readings that are written by Deaf

writers.” There is a glass ceiling for Deaf playwrights. “I can’t grow because I can’t play. I need experimentation to grow.” —Garrett Zuercher, playwright

Modeling normalcy and providing support for arts in education. The next generation needs role models to help Deaf students engage in the arts. “The Deaf are somewhat devalued, not seen as important within the system of education, not supported by the government. There’s a push for normalcy. They forget about our history, about Deaf people being as normal as any other people, and the only thing that we can’t do is hear. But with the support of access, we can certainly function just as well as anyone else in this country or world.” —Harvey Corson, National Theatre of the Deaf

Self-organizing and the role of the institution. “There does not seem to be institutional support for the overall outcomes that would create a different world. There has to be a power base, a nonprofit. The individual problems that people suffer are very hard to address as individuals. Ultimately, there have to be carefully articulated common goals and some kind of institutional system to try to achieve them.” —Jack Viertel, Jujamcyn

One show can change a theater’s culture. Roundabout Theatre Company has integrated content for Deaf audiences into their subscription programming since 1996. When Roundabout produced *Big River* in 2003, the additional costs of interpreters and other adaptations for Deaf performers and artists were “minimal compared to producing a big musical.” The show impacted the theater company profoundly. “It changed our house staff, the administrative staff, our union staff who worked backstage side-by-side with Deaf actors and production team members, and everyone else who makes up a production. How do we express in our not-for-profit community how profound this experience can be, how exciting it can be, how it can change a lot of people very easily?” —Julia Levy, Roundabout Theatre Company

Attitude and commitment versus expense. *Spring Awakening*, one of its producers shared, bore some additional expenses as a result of its choice to use Deaf actors, but they were relatively minimal. “It’s more the attitude towards it than the money itself. I don’t hear the same resistance when importing a play from the UK and we have all British actors and they require housing and transportation. The amount of money that costs, versus interpreters, or ASL masters, or any of the additional staff, required so much less.

It’s about attitudes within the hearing culture and my fellow producers.” —Ken Davenport, producer

For smaller organizations, on the other hand, there is competition for resources of money, expertise, and time. “We’ve had a number of opportunities trying to make things happen with Deaf artists, and those are very real barriers for us.” —Jim Nicola, New York Theatre Workshop

For hearing directors, Deaf artists require additional time and personnel to convey instructions and observations (director to interpreter to cast to interpreter to director). “One moment may take longer, but once that was explained to me, it seemed like such a small obstacle to overcome for the end result, incredible art.” —Ken Davenport, producer



A performance by top New York artists whose primary language is American Sign Language, created by Other Voices for the After Sunset: Poetry Walk event by Friends of the High Line. Photo by JD Urban

Claims of expense are really fear, another participant noted. “We are afraid to do what you all do and we’re afraid because we were brought up to be afraid. We’re alarmed in the presence of something that’s deemed strange.” —Jack Viertel, Jujamycyn

Build community. The National Theatre of the Deaf has a history of creating excitement by building community around Deaf culture and Deaf expression, engaging people from the hearing community in deep conversation, reinforced by the Connecticut summer programs for artist education where failure is part of the process. “Every morning for the entire two years I acted in that company, we had a six a.m. warm-up session where we exercised together and threw out ideas. You have to look at the way in which you build community around stories and ideas that becomes a model for how people look at the stories that turn into these other things. Otherwise, we’re talking about the barriers, problems, and the larger exigencies of dollars and cents, but we’re really not trying to get inside the integral relationships.” —John Clinton Eisner, The Lark

Resources. Resources include time and expertise, reflected New York Theatre Workshop Artistic Director Jim Nicola. “When we take on these challenges of inviting in a new community, of building and sustaining that, it’s building infrastructure and expertise.” Nicola, inspired by NYTW’s plans for building renovations, noted that there is money for ramps and elevators. “Maybe we need to figure out how we make interpreters a presence in the infrastructure, as a

capital expense, or we say that the whole staff at New York Theatre Workshop learns ASL. But we have to remove that sense that this is an extra burden. This is actually capital that we need to invest in to have a fairer art form.” —Jim Nicola, New York Theatre Workshop

ASL translation availability. A playwright was surprised that she had to push to specify in a publishing contract that both her new play’s ASL script and her English language script would be available. She sees the parallel texts as integral and clearly of a piece. “We’re so smart, we’re so committed, there are so many stories about the community that we have to get past some of that fear and really push out there.” —Tsehaye Gerlayn Hébert, playwright

Leadership commitment to inclusivity. “It’s as simple as going to your casting director and saying: I would like to have disabled or Deaf artists come in for every show in the season. Similarly, demand that our literary managers and directors of play development go out and seek those plays, find out where are they being, where are the centers, where are those plays being written?” Change requires focused attention to the issue. “It takes a certain kind of mindfulness and commitment and consistency, and there has to be an artistic mandate.” —Shirley Fishman, La Jolla Playhouse

Filling seats is a net-sum game. “We as a field are at our weakest when we try to justify our existence as an economic engine,” Jack Reuler noted. There are strategies to reach out and fill seats that build audiences that address other goals. “People like to see themselves on stage reflected in a positive manner. If we’re

doing it in the work we produce and solicit those audiences that would like to see themselves and fill the otherwise empty seats with those people, it actually is a net-sum game.” —Jack Reuler, Mixed Blood Theatre

Balancing equity and quality of interpreting. Howie Seago, an actor who is Deaf, disagreed with producers and administrators about the effects of interpretation costs. In his experience, inequities existed in pay scales (e.g., he found in one case that a young rehearsal interpreter was earning twice what he was as an actor) and perceptions of relative costs (e.g., a friend used him once and provided a rehearsal interpreter and then reported that he couldn’t consider Howie for another role that season because they couldn’t afford the interpretation costs). Seago also noted that skimping on the budget can decrease the quality of interpretation provided. “I’m the one that suffers, right? I’m getting interpreters who aren’t qualified and I had to say to him, ‘I’m sorry I don’t understand’ and it left me looking inept.” —Howie Seago, actor

Designers who are Deaf need support too. Annie Wiegand, a Deaf lighting designer, outlined the range of resources she learned to rely upon in her graduate design program and found difficult to access in the working world. She works more hours than the actors, and

also needs interpreters. The interpreter pay often comes out of her stipend. She doesn’t know who to ask for support.

Pooling resources for interpretation. Throughout the day, many creative solutions were proposed for pooling money or expertise to make interpretation less of a barrier. An actor who has worked in the UK referenced the Access to Work program which provides accessibility support for theater companies that hire artists who are Deaf. Participants wondered if there might be a US equivalent.

“Start with a pilot city to see if it could support some of our disabled artists in that way, to make it easier for them to work, so that the onus would not be on the theater company itself.” —Christine Bruno, Inclusion in the Arts



Christine Ellison Dunams and Gwen Stewart in the Roundabout Theatre Company/Deaf West Theatre production of *Big River*. Photo by Joan Marcus

TOPIC: IDENTIFYING PRESSING NEEDS

Agenda Framing Questions + Issues

- What strategies are there for increasing the number of opportunities for Deaf artists in mainstream theater?
- Do we want to encourage persuadable decision makers to consider using more Deaf artists and staff?
- Do we want to build a larger base of relevant plays and Deaf-identifying playwrights?

Discussion + Themes

Cultural barriers. When hearing theater companies work with a Deaf actor, even when there's an interpreter, there are still challenges. "Deaf theater and hearing theater function differently," described playwright Garrett Zuercher. Companies need ways of educating themselves in what Deaf actors actually do. "We become the teachers, explaining all the things that we need. For example, if we're still on book, we can't necessarily hold the book in our hands while we sign." Deaf actors translate from English into sign language. "When I get a script, I have no clue what it's going to look like, so my work is actually greater than a hearing actor who is learning the script." "Most theater companies expect the Deaf actors to meet the

hearing company on their level. I'd love the hearing companies to meet the Deaf actors in the same way, so that our cultures can connect." —Garrett Zuercher, playwright

Deaf artists need to be full collaborators. To move past symbolic Deaf involvement, projects should ensure that Deaf artists are part of the artistic team from the outset. "What is important is to bring the Deaf artist in the room at the point of originating the project, as part of the creative process. Invite us into the process at the beginning stages." It makes everyone's lives easier. "Maybe it isn't all about interpreting. Maybe we bring someone in fresh out of a university program who can help us through the rehearsal process, someone to transcribe, take notes for us. We can be creative about ways to work together. I think it's a mind shift more than a logistics shift." —Alexandria Wailes, actor

Deaf artists of color feel isolated. People of color should be considered "for any role, in every audition, and not just a role that's designated for a person of color," commented Fred Beam from *Invisible Hands*. How can we change our approach to be more inclusive when we're selecting Deaf artists?

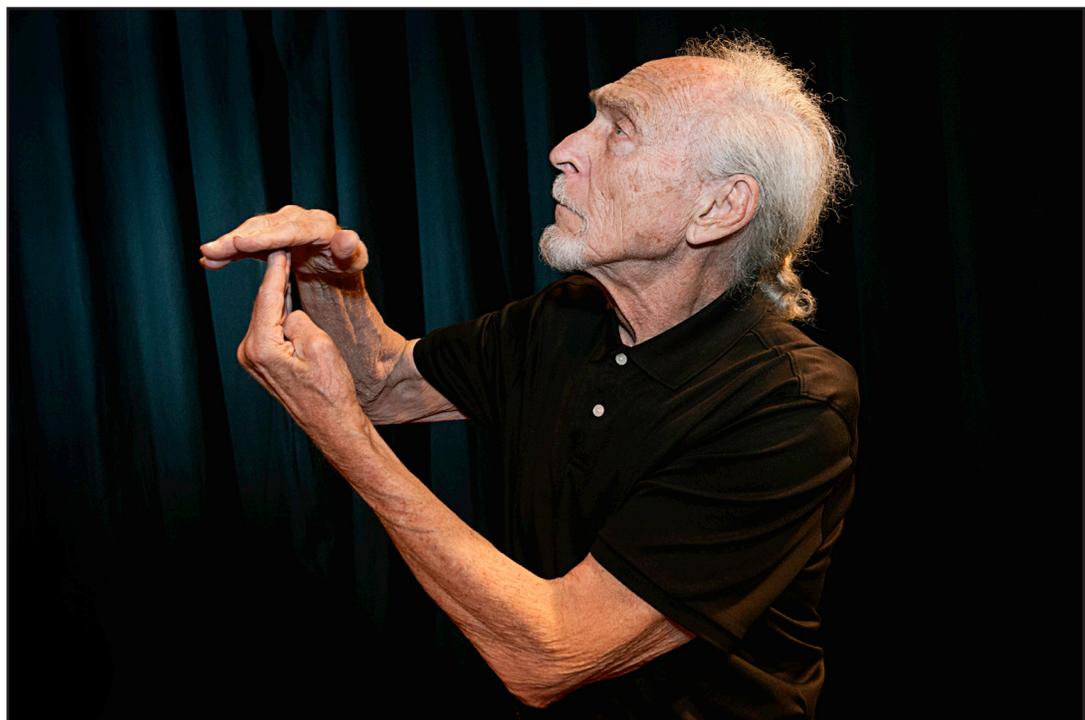
“Are we looking at the role, or are we looking at the natural talent? We need to do something different and creative to bring in more actors of color onstage. Think outside of the box. We want to respect the community - the talented actors of color. The audience members, especially blacks, would like to have connection and identify with the actors on the stage. If black audience members are seeing more white actors onstage, it’d be harder for them to relate to the characters they portray. So we need to include more Deaf actors of color.”—Michelle Banks, Mianba

Professional theater interpreter training. “The National Theatre of the Deaf was established as a professional school for Deaf and hard of hearing artists, as well as interpreters for theater, which is quite special, not just regular interpreting. We need to make these changes permanent.” — Harvey Corson, National Theatre of the Deaf

Increasing Deaf playwright and actor pools. “How we get more writers, get more work for actors, rolls up into the pressing need in this community for more playwrights. If you’re planting a garden and you want more cucumbers, you don’t put

something on the leaves, you go to the roots of the garden and plant a different seed. New playwrights today lead to so much more work and so many more productions tomorrow.” Quality will lead to productions. “Great work gets done. That’s the simple end to it.” The need simply stated: “The most pressing need I see as I look at this from the hearing world is more Deaf plays.” —Ken Davenport, producer

The importance of trust. Creating original work requires “using a core group of people who trust each other.” Inspiring new work involves trusting experimentation. “If you’re trying to bring Deaf artists into hearing theater, or bringing hearing artists into a world of Deaf culture, we have to come up with a strategy where at a very



Andy Vasnick at the 2010 Deaf Emerging Artist Festival (D.E.A.F.) at IRT Theater in New York City. Photo by Beth Dixon

basic level people feel comfortable and relaxed around each other. Whether that's a play lab or a program developing plays that allows people to experiment and fail." Theater creation at dog & pony dc, noted Tyrone Giordano, starts with a concept. "We have people in a room together, and eventually at some point we create a play. It's not just about it being play-centered; it could be the end result not the beginning. The beginning could be a collaboration."

Captioning and looping. Looping systems, which enable amplification in auditoriums and other public spaces for hearing aid or cochlear implant users, are required by some jurisdictions, but they only address the hard of hearing. Current regulations, then, are limited and limiting. "We should have captioning or some other system that allows if you are hard of hearing or if you are deaf to come to our theaters. If a play is written and nobody comes, or your play is on stage and nobody comes, did the play happen? We need audiences." —Julia Levy, Roundabout Theatre Company

On the other hand, there's the example of a small theater that included closed captioning without consulting the local Deaf community, frustrating Deaf audiences because they took away the sign language interpretation and projected the captioning too far from the action on the stage. "Are we becoming script readers in the theater?" —Harvey Corson, National Theatre of the Deaf

Marketing Deaf dramas and musicals. Lessons learned throughout the production of shows like *Big River*, *Spring Awakening*, and *Tribes* need to be documented. With *Big River*, Roundabout wrestled with defining and promoting a Deaf musical, and participants saw the need to capture the *Spring Awakening* story as it was happening. "What can we do now that it's fresh in our minds to understand the specific efforts of marketing these shows, so that the next time there is a show, we understand how to attract audiences." —Julia Levy, Roundabout Theatre Company

For Deaf theaters and hearing theaters building relationships with the Deaf community, "You need to have a Deaf staff person to advertise the show." Theaters need Deaf people involved in developing sales strategies. "It's a mutual relationship. It's not just enough to advertise to say you should come to us. There has to be a reason." —JW Guido, New York Deaf Theatre

Leadership of Deaf theater. Healthy organizations like dog & pony dc and Deaf West lead to the proliferation of artistic directors and leaders in all aspects of the field, who then populate the staffs and stages of other theaters. "Validation by mainstream theater should not be the end all. It should be healthy Deaf theaters creating work that other theaters clamor to do, rather than people looking for a handout," stated Jack Reuler. One long-term strategy is to create future leaders through mentoring.

“People at the top also need to be responsible to break down the barriers instead of us, from the community, doing all the work to educate those people that make decisions. It’s from the top down as much as from the bottom up.” —Fred Beam, *Invisible Hands*

Compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act. There needs to be full compliance and enforcement of the Act, passed twenty-five years ago and still not followed by many

in the theater industry. “So many of the provisions of the Act are still not only not being followed, they are actively being avoided within the theater community by many, and in some cases the only way it gets implemented has been through lawsuits.” —Howard Sherman, *Inclusion in the Arts*

What do we say?



Russell Harvard and Daniel N. Durant in the Deaf West Theatre production of *Spring Awakening*. Photo by Joan Marcus

TOPIC: IDENTIFYING CONDITIONS FOR GROWTH

Agenda Framing Questions + Issues

- What is Deaf theater? And why Deaf theater?
- What are the optimal conditions for the development of new plays that qualify as Deaf theater?
- What are the ways that Deaf artists can collaborate with hearing artists?
- How can we increase funding opportunities for new plays, Deaf theater organizations, and artists?
- How can we develop audiences for Deaf theater?

Discussion + Themes

Developing Deaf talent. Playwright Garrett Zuercher provided examples from his own experience: “We cannot only sit in a classroom and listen to a professor.” One also must learn by doing. He mentioned a hearing theater company that has a program called “Shots,” drawing from a core group of thirty people who invited him in as the sole Deaf person. He’s now written three plays for them. In monthly meetings they develop pieces over a period of weeks toward a final show. He suggested that the Deaf community could assemble similar programs.

“I think the Deaf theater community isn’t working enough together to develop this kind of new work and new opportunities. We need a core group of Deaf theater people who once or twice a month, or once every three months, get together and create a new work, look at it, talk about it, and move on and do something else. It’s how we can learn and grow and develop our skills together.” —Garrett Zuercher, playwright

Least restrictive environment (LRE) does not address all concerns.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990, updated in 2004, governs the provision of services to students with disabilities in the American educational system, and refers to providing a “[least restrictive environment \(LRE\)](#)” for learning and integration with students without disabilities through the use of assistance or aids. This act encourages “mainstreaming” rather than “isolating” children with disabilities in education settings, but this language in the act assumes that assimilation and integration are the best of all possible outcomes for Deaf children. This assumption leads to the framing of “least restrictive environment” only from this limited sense, and does not address all concerns in connection with Deaf people, who may be better off in ASL-rich environments. For many

Deaf artists who use ASL, a true “least restrictive environment” would be more direct collaboration with other Deaf artists in our own language. “We’re being isolated from one another in mainstreamed environments within our educational system.”—Tyrone Giordano, theatermaker

Changing times, changing technologies. The younger generation has a different way of working than older generations. Often they tell stories through multimedia, film, and projected images. When new projects are developed, the community has to keep this new way of working in mind. “It’s not exactly the same or business as usual.” —Aaron Kelstone, National Technical Institute for the Deaf



Our Voices Three-Day Generative Storytelling Workshop with students from PS 347, the American Sign Language and English Lower School in New York City. Photo by Nina Wurtzel

Accessibility as a design

challenge. “A lot of what we call access, accessibility, is sort of the mole on the face, not seamlessly integrated into the show. It’s so apparent; it’s outside and stuck onto the existing show. Accessibility shouldn’t be an access problem, it should not be a service problem, it should be a design problem. How can we lure access into a show, how can we integrate it? That starts with the original design meetings.” —Tyrone Giordano, theatermaker

Mixed Blood captions every performance, and weaves the captioning into their scenic design. “It’s part of the entire process.”
—Jack Reuler, Mixed Blood Theatre

Developing and enhancing the catalogue of Deaf theater works.

- **Translation of existing work into ASL.** To build the catalogue of scripts for Deaf artists and provide ongoing work for Deaf writers, one could look at scripts that have already been written but need additional development, working with hearing theater companies.
- **Playwriting fellowships.** Apothetae, a company dedicated to exploring and illuminating the disabled experience, has a playwriting fellowship to support a disabled writer in creating a new work over several years. “Where are the disabled writers? We need to find them, we need to develop them, we need to support them,” noted Gregg Mozgala. Apothetae is in conversation with The Lark

to develop a second phase of the vision, to include the fellowship and also convenings. The full spectrum of disability will be sought and at any stage in the artistic process. Participants called for more institutions to support this work.

- **Writers groups.** “We want to create a writer’s group where the great writers with disabilities that we have found will be supported, will be given the infrastructure and the space at The Lark to develop their work, learn how to become writers.” —Gregg Mozgala, Apothetae
- **The double script.** “It takes a long time for a play to be born, and there is nothing that substitutes for being able to sit at a table with actors, with dramaturgs, with a director, and interpreters. When you’re sitting there with them in the development process, you are literally crafting a double script. The product is so much richer with interpreter voices at every step of the development process.”
—Tsehay Gerlayn Hébert, playwright

Funding possibilities and trends.

- **NEA funding.** Greg Reiner reminded the group that the NEA funds the work of non-profit organizations and Beth Bienvenu added that organizations can apply for funding for interpreters or captioning, and can also include these in their grant budgets. Greg Reiner extended an invitation for folks to participate in grant

review panels, to take a hand in distributing funds to projects around the country, all of which are required to comply with the ADA.

- **State funding.** The New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) has an individual artist program that issues theater commissions, training programs for defined

special communities, and a literary translation grant funding program that would allow for consideration and refinement of ASL scripts. Kathleen Masterson from NYSCA noted that a script in ASL or a proposed translation into ASL has never been seen by the NYSCA grant panels and that there would be great interest. NYSCA



Lewis Merkin, Alexandria Wailes, and Terrylene Sacchetti in *A Kind of Alaska* by Harold Pinter, produced by NY Live Arts/Live Ideas and directed by Kim Weild. Photo by Ian Douglass

has “re-grants and partnerships” for consortia of theater groups (e.g., Lark, NYTW, Playwrights Horizons, Roundabout, New York Deaf Theatre, that could apply for interpretation resources, etc.)

- **Private funding.** The Doris Duke Charitable Foundation funds theaters to work with playwrights on new plays.

Funding trends and diversifying sources. Racial and gender equity, not disability, are the current big issues in the arts funding community. “Fundors get really interested in an issue and follow it, and it can be a great thing, affecting the flow of money. But it can be a dangerous thing because, when the money goes away, what happens?” —Katie Steger, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation

There are many funders who will respond to a cohesive, coherent, and inclusive plan, which should lead to multiple funding sources. Bill O’Brien from the NEA reflected, “One of the biggest problems for Deaf theater right now is that it was so dependent on one source of funding [US Department of Education] and then it just went away.” A change in mindset from *asking for* to *creating an opportunity for* is important, he argued. One must make a funder see you’re providing them an opportunity to succeed on their existing commitments to carrying out their mission.

Unexpected consequences: diversity initiatives tend to focus on changing dominant cultural institutions. “I’d like to understand what happens to the Deaf organizations when that starts to happen. I’d like to make sure they’re included in the conversation, that they are true partners when the other institutions start to try to become more inclusive of Deaf theater.” —Katie Steger, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation

Tsehaye Gerlayn Hébert offered some reflections on this point. When good work is produced, “something really weird happens, other communities begin to take it over.” In Chicago, the smaller black theater organizations are not getting the money anymore, they never got the equitable dollar. “Now the larger majority institutions are doing the black play, or doing the Latino play, or doing the Deaf play, and the small organizations that are specific to a culture are folding. We hope to speak to the authenticity and the whole community, because we are about sustaining that community.” —Tsehaye Gerlayn Hébert, playwright

The long view. Sustainability happens through long-term solutions, through building collaborations where organizations can mutually benefit. For example, The New Black Fest has found an organizational home at The Lark. “We’ve had a set of serious complicated conversations over the last couple of years about what it means for that voice and that culture to have its own leadership in the resources we can provide.” —John Clinton Eisner, The Lark

Take a gamble on Deaf

playwrights. Hearing theater companies should be more willing to produce plays by Deaf playwrights. “What we hear is, oh our hearing audience won’t connect with this material. It’s time to take a gamble. We’re a theater community. And we need to support each other in creating a new direction.”

—Ethan Sinnott, Gallaudet



Annie Funke, Nancy Robinette, Michael Tolaydo, Richard Gallagher, and James Caverly in *Tribes* at Studio Theatre. Photo by Teddy Wolff

TOPIC: NEXT STEPS AND ACTION ITEMS

Agenda Framing Questions + Issues

- How can the theatrical community be inspired to support Deaf theater?
- Brainstorm opportunities to develop new plays (pitch fests, workshop opportunities, etc.)

Discussion + Themes

How can we achieve what we've identified and want? What can we immediately do? What are our action items that are going to be the result of this dialogue?

Collaboration. "I would like to see us collaborating rather than competing against each other. Let's start collaborative projects together. When festivals are compiled, why not have plays by Deaf writers? Instead of saying: you can't be a part of us, include us." — Fred Beam, *Invisible Hands*

Community accountability. "It's very hard to hold the community accountable without having a place where people can come. Who are the people that are going to keep track of this list to set priorities and convene the group again and measure progress?" —John Clinton Eisner, *The Lark*

More face-to-face time. Long-time advocates noted that with this meeting there are "so many new faces here that it's overwhelming. We need more sessions like this." Existing regular convenings are organized by several organizations including TCG, the Black Theatre Network, and the Dramatists Guild.

Graduate theater program support. It's crucial to think about the graduate acting and theater programs to develop a national leadership training strategy around Deaf theater and Deaf theatermakers. John Clinton Eisner asked, "What does it take to get ten leaders of those programs together to figure out how they can be funded in big universities, to actively engage in this community, this conversation, early enough in their training that they will continue the work in their professional lives?" Existing training programs such as Deaf West, National Theatre of the Deaf, and Gallaudet offer core expertise to be tapped.

Interpretation expertise, capacity, and costs. The professional interpreter community often feels put in a bind because theaters in need ask for discounted or free services, and thus as professionals they must balance their commitment to serving the Deaf community with paying their bills. "We all recognize

that it's our place within the Deaf community to give back to the community," noted Beth Prevor from Hands On interpretation. She shared the following anecdote. "One Deaf performer went into an audition that wasn't meant for a Deaf performer, and the playwright was so enraptured by the performer that they changed the part to accommodate the Deaf performer." That was fabulous, she noted, but the theater wasn't prepared for the additional services they needed to provide for the performer.

How can we expand the pool of professionally trained interpreters? Right now demand exceeds capacity. "We get the question of interpreters every day, all day. People say, 'I can't afford interpreters—will they be willing to work for free? Will they be willing to work for less?'" —Christine Bruno, Alliance for Inclusion

"At the same time that Deaf artists are learning, they're developing skills. But then you have the issue of interpreter costs. It's not fair to put the onus solely on colleges and universities to provide interpreters for professional companies," noted Gallaudet's Associate Professor Ethan Sinnott. The university can't always be called upon to shoulder interpretation costs without compensation. In the long term it's not sustainable; it's not a position that can be maintained. As a possible solution, small theater companies who are interested in working with Deaf artists could co-write applications with other organizations to assemble a funding pot from which they could pay for interpreting services for apprentices or other Deaf artists.

Policies and legislation. Harvey Corson recalled an effort in 2004-2005 through Connecticut Senator Christopher Dodd's office to reinvigorate federal funding for the National Theater of the Deaf in Connecticut and Deaf West in Los Angeles, through a provisional amendment to the Education of the Deaf Act of 1992, which at that time was going through reauthorization. The proposal, which would have provided five hundred thousand dollars to each program, didn't succeed at the time, but perhaps it is time to revisit that plan.

Tyrone Giordano remarked that other countries have models for supporting Deaf artists that could be studied to see if similar policies might be incorporated in the US.

Best practices. Examples should be collected of best practices for working with Deaf artists, Deaf artists introducing shows and making the shows themselves inclusive, and working with interpreters. The Alliance for Inclusion offered to host a best practices and stories archive.

Tribes case studies. For its production of *Tribes*, La Jolla Playhouse created a liaison staff position with the Deaf community, added ASL-interpreted performances, provided captioning, taught sign language to Playhouse staff, and hired Deaf ushers. For Deaf actor Russell Harvard, who played the lead Deaf character, La Jolla hired the same interpreter he'd used in the Center Theatre Group production of the play for the full La Jolla rehearsal process. Excitement

over the production was high. “There are different ways to expand our thinking about communities served. It takes a certain kind of mindfulness and commitment to sustain the inclusivity aspect of what we’re trying to do.” — Shirley Fishman, La Jolla Playhouse

When Studio Theatre in Washington DC produced *Tribes*, they used community resources and production lessons from other theaters that had produced the show. “We really relied on the expertise from other theaters, asked them as many questions as you could possibly imagine, from who did you cast and who did you *almost* cast, to how many interpreters do you need in a tech process. Having the support of a community was hugely helpful and necessary for us to undertake what was a large process. The depth of this production was more than we had done in the past. We relied on other hearing theaters who had done the show before and we also relied on a partnership with Gallaudet to help us from the back end. It was really a group effort and it took many dedicated generous people looking at that production, a generosity of spirit for hearing theaters.” —Lorna Mulvaney, Mosaic Theater Company of DC

Ken Davenport’s action items to bridge communities, encourage playwrights, enlarge the interpreter pool:

- Join the Dramatists Guild. Start a coalition within other coalitions. Bridge the two worlds. You need to bridge the Deaf playwright world and the hearing playwright world.
- Have a contest for the best play by a Deaf or hard-of-hearing playwright and provide a staged reading. Davenport commits to donating a thousand dollars to Deaf West to have a Deaf West playwriting competition for Deaf artists. The goal is to inspire people who are not writing plays but who are itching to write. The incentives are money and exposure. The more people there are writing plays, the quicker all of the larger goals are achieved.
- Create a pay scale for interpreters based on experience. Incorporate interpreting interns and students willing to donate time to learn from masters, who could then assist smaller companies. They used such a pay scale on the *Spring Awakening* production.

Jack Reuler’s action items to promote Deaf voices in new plays, actor training, and develop artistic directors:

- Exposure through an annual showcase. As Vice President of the National New Play Network, Reuler offered to see if one or more of the six plays in the annual showcase of new plays could be designated to be by a Deaf playwright.
- Examine MFA program admission policies. Reuler offered to talk to ten MFA actor, director, and playwriting training programs to deal with admission policies and barriers to Deaf applicants.
- Progress through leadership and artistic directors. Reuler offered to

gather artistic directors willing to mentor aspiring artistic directors who happen to be deaf, to change the leadership decision makers in the field. “I still believe that leadership is at the core of faster progress.”

Accountability and maintaining the momentum. In the course of daily events, priorities easily can shift. “Unless it’s in your DNA to be in the pursuit of social justice and inclusion, it needs to be a learned habit to broaden your thinking. Somebody has to hold the people accountable for this. And that’s been my job, happily and unhappily.” —Shirley Fishman, La Jolla Playhouse

From the commercial perspective, the costs of interpreters are not the problem. “A Broadway producer specifically cares about what’s great, and then what’s going to sell tickets, to be perfectly honest.” The way to inspire great work is to encourage playwrights to write about what they know. “The more we inspire Deaf artists to become playwrights, or Deaf playwrights to produce more work, the more we increase the chance of this culture being more exposed to mainstream America.” —Ken Davenport, producer

Make Deaf voices part of the conversation. The fear factor – fear and anxiety around working with disabled people – is pervasive. Mozgala doesn’t see disability and Deaf culture as part of the cultural conversation about equity and equality, and he argued that it should be. “Write write write write. HowlRound

is a national platform. TCG has a diversity and inclusion blog. Make your processes transparent and visible so you can start to demystify and allay the fears. Coming from your voice, from producer, or artist, or designer. Just start the conversation. No one else is going to start it for us. I feel like, as a community and as individuals, and collectively we have to initiate that.” — Gregg Mozgala, Apothetae

APPENDIX 1

ROUNDTABLE ATTENDEES

Roundtable Steering Committee

Michelle Banks, Mianba Productions

John Clinton Eisner, The Lark, Artistic Director

Tyrone Giordano, dog & pony dc and Gallaudet University

DJ Kurs, Deaf West Theatre

Julia Levy, Roundabout Theatre, Executive Director

Beth Bienvenu, National Endowment for the Arts, Accessibility Director

Greg Reiner, National Endowment for the Arts, Theater and Musical Theater Director

Bill O'Brien, National Endowment for the Arts, Senior Advisor for Innovation to the Chairman

Roundtable Participants

Fred Beam, Invisible Hands International, Inc.

Harvey J. Corson, National Theatre of the Deaf

Ken Davenport, Davenport Theatrical Enterprises, Inc.

Shirley Fishman, La Jolla Playhouse

Adam Greenfield, Playwrights Horizons

Rachel Grossman, dog & pony DC, Audience Engagement

JW Guido, New York Deaf Theatre

Tsehaye Gerlayn Hébert, playwright

Sharon Jensen, Inclusion in the Arts, Executive Director

Aaron Kelstone, National Technical Institute for the Deaf

Lorna Mulvaney, Mosaic Theater Company of DC

Jim Nicola, New York Theatre Workshop

Jack Reuler, Mixed Blood

Howie Seago, Oregon Shakespeare Festival

Ethan Sinnott, Gallaudet University

Jack Viertel, Jujamycn Theaters

Alexandria Wailes, Senses Askew Company

Garrett Zuercher, actor, playwright, director, ASL consultant

Roundtable Observers

Devon Berkshire, Theatre Communications Group

Christine Bruno, Inclusion in the Arts, Disability Advocate

Orin Chait, New York State Council on the Arts

Jamie Gahlon, HowlRound, Senior Creative Producer

Kimberly Kale, New York Deaf Theatre

Kathleen Masterson, New York State
Council on the Arts, Director of Literature
and Theatre

John McGinty, Sense Askew Company

Gregg Mozgala, Apothetae

Sara Nović, author

Lillian Osei-Boateng, Doris Duke
Charitable Foundation

Jane Preston, New England Foundation
for the Arts

Beth Prevor, Hands On, Interpreter
Coordinator

Michael Robertson, The Lark

Kori Rushton, IRT Theater

Howard Sherman, Inclusion in the Arts,
Senior Strategy Consultant

Katie Steger, The Andrew W. Mellon
Foundation

Martha Wade Steketee, HowlRound,
Consultant

Natalie Stringer, Theatre
Communications Group

Kim Weild, Our Voices Theater

Marete Wester, Americans for the Arts

Annie Wiegand, New York Deaf Theatre

ROUNDTABLE AGENDA

Roundtable on Theater By and Featuring Deaf Artists | January 20, 2016

12:00 - 1:00pm

Check-in and lunch

1:00 - 1:30pm

Welcome and introductions

DJ Kurs, Artistic Director Deaf West Theatre, Facilitator

Beth Bienvenu, Accessibility Director, National Endowment for the Arts

Greg Reiner, Theater Director, National Endowment for the Arts

1:30 - 1:45pm

Historical overview of the field

Tyrone Giordano, dog & pony dc

1:45 - 2:15pm

Facilitated discussion: Identifying barriers in the field

2:15 - 2:45pm

Facilitated discussion: Identifying pressing needs

2:45 - 3:00pm

Break

3:00 - 4:15pm

Facilitated discussion: Identifying conditions for growth, including audience development

4:15 - 5:00pm

Next steps and action steps



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