

Does theatre meet the needs of the Deaf community?

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In the UK, approximately 151,000 people communicate using BSL and of those 8,700 BSL users are Deaf (1). Deaf with a capital 'D' refers to people who are deaf and see themselves as within the Deaf community. They are those who use sign language as their preferred language and identify with Deaf culture (2), which due to a lack of Deaf awareness can lead to access issues in many areas of their lives. Whereas deaf with a lowercase 'd' refers to people who have an auditory impairment but typically don't use sign language and don't identify with Deaf culture (3).

Live theatre is one of those areas which remains relatively inaccessible to Deaf people as the accommodations normally put in place are ineffective. Theatre, the live performance of a story, is important as it provides a creative outlet for opinion, experiences and the challenge of ideas. Through theatre we can understand ourselves and others better and question the world around us. As a result, theatre which represents minority groups has the potential to both educate others on the perspective and culture of that group but also to help members of the group feel heard, acknowledged and understood in a society that often ignores those who are different. In the case of the Deaf community theatre can, if done effectively, educate hearing people and provide the Deaf community a space to tell their own stories and explore their culture by having a space in a world designed for the hearing (4).

The current theatrical provision for the Deaf community can be split into two categories: Deaf accessible theatre and Deaf theatre. These categories are similar to the distinction between Sign Language Theatre and Deaf Theatre made by Miles and Fant. They described Sign Language Theatre as when the piece is adapted from a spoken theatre piece and performed with sign language and spoken language simultaneously; and Deaf theatre as theatre that is made by and for the Deaf and not necessarily accessible to hearing people (5). I have revised Sign Language Theatre to be Deaf accessible theatre as not all adaptations include sign language use in their performance. In addition, Deaf theatre to me doesn't have to be exclusive to the Deaf community as it can be a way to help hearing people understand the Deaf community better.

Deaf Accessible Theatre

Accessible theatre is the concept of adapting productions to make them available to people with a range of disabilities for example, wheelchair ramps, relaxed performances and sign language interpreters (6). *Unlimited*, an arts initiative for disabled artists, produces resources to help companies and theatres improve accessibility such as *Demystifying Access* which gives practical advice to theatres to enable better access (7). However, due to the incentives provided by government backed organisations such as the *Arts Council England*, accessibility initiatives run the risk of tokenism instead of trying to provide true accessibility. Additionally, the Deaf community do not identify as disabled because between sign language speakers there aren't any communication barriers, instead, they see themselves more as a minority group. As a result, the concept of accessible theatre itself fails to meet the needs of the Deaf community (4,8). Despite Deaf accessible

theatre's shortcomings, its central role in enabling the Deaf community to access theatre means that it persists.

One well established method of providing access to productions for Deaf people is the Sign Language Interpreted Performance (SLIP). A SLIP is where a performance is simultaneously spoken and interpreted by a sign language interpreter. The interpreter is often situated at the side of the stage or on their own separate platform and will sign verbatim everything that is said on stage (9). Unfortunately, this arrangement is far from ideal for multiple reasons. First, because the interpreter is normally outside of the performance space to minimise the impact on the hearing audience, the Deaf audience members are forced to choose between watching the actors on stage and watching the interpreter. This means they are at risk of missing crucial parts of the plot because they either miss the dialogue or the acting (10). Also, the interpreter, regardless of skill and expertise, is unlikely to be able to capture all of the nuances in the dialogue. This is, in part, because the interpreter is not typically seen as a member of the performing cast so they do not get much rehearsal time with the company. Additionally, the interpreter has to sign for all of the actors on stage which can provide further challenge. This is because the interpreter has to ensure all dialogue is translated into sign language which can make it difficult for audience members to differentiate between different characters' lines. This being said, if the interpreter is treated as a member of the cast and worked into the show from the beginning, SLIPs could be effective. However, at this point the SLIP is closer to being a sign integrated performance than a SLIP.

Alternatively, captioning can also be used to provide access to theatre for Deaf people. The captions are either projected onto the set, put on a screen to one side or sent to handheld devices (7,11). Similarly to SLIPs, this is most effective when the captions are integrated into the set design. There can be challenges with captioning as it can be hard to translate sound effects into words and it is essential that the captions are displayed at the same time as the actors say the lines. This does not always work as the timings of lines can be unpredictable and often change with each performance. Also, captions rely on the audience members having a good reading ability which is not always the case for Deaf people. As a result, captioning may be more appropriate for deaf audience members who do not use sign language.

In addition, there are other barriers the Deaf community face in accessing theatre that may be less obvious. For instance, due to the differences in grammar between sign language and spoken language, Deaf people may find it harder to understand advertising and therefore be unaware of Deaf accessible theatre they could attend. This is highlighted in a toolkit for theatres by the *Arts Council of Wales* which states that 39% of d/Deaf people find it hard to get information about accessible events (11). This can be improved by using visual advertising, promoting performances through local groups and by creating short promotional clips in sign language.

Ultimately, for the Deaf community, the drive for accessibility seems to be missing the mark in providing Deaf people the equivalent to hearing theatre, which has been shown by poor reception to SLIPs by the Deaf community (12). Perhaps accessible theatre is more appropriate for the deaf audience who will be able to understand more of the hearing performance. In the cases of success, these productions have been made by Deaf theatre companies where creating for the Deaf community is the centre of their work. These examples, however, fall under the next category of Deaf theatre.

Deaf theatre

Deaf theatre is theatre that is made by Deaf people for Deaf people, this means that it is fully accessible and covers themes that are important to the deaf community (5). There are many community theatre-based projects and companies that create Deaf theatre but, Deaf theatre rarely reaches the mainstream audience. Whilst this is unlikely to change as the demand and awareness is not great enough, performances such as *Deaf West's 'Spring Awakening'* prove that mainstream theatre has a space for Deaf theatre. Also, there may be a lack of awareness of Deaf theatre which is perpetuated by assumptions within the Deaf community that performances will be the same as previous inaccessible experiences. To fully understand Deaf theatre, I will look at two examples: *Deaf West's 'Spring Awakening'* and *Red Earth Theatre's 'Mirror Mirror'*.

In 2015, *Deaf West's* revival of 'Spring Awakening' opened in the Brook Atkinson Theatre on Broadway for a limited run. This performance challenged the concept of musicals by putting an emphasis on communication through gesture, not just for the Deaf audience members, but for the whole audience Deaf or otherwise. The company also used the production to comment on the challenges Deaf children face in education, particularly in the context of the 1880 Second International Congress on Education of the Deaf which is contemporary to the time period of the plot. This conference limited Deaf children's access to sign language which is keenly felt throughout the musical adding new meaning for Deaf and hearing audience members alike (13). It is a clear example of how Deaf theatre can maintain its relevance and meaning within the Deaf community whilst also inviting hearing audiences to share in the Deaf culture and has the potential to help change preconceptions about deafness. 'Spring Awakening' wasn't *Deaf West's* first musical, they had already successfully produced 'Big River' and 'Pippin', however, despite its success, it is the only sign language integrated performance to have made it to Broadway or the West End, which are largely seen as the leading centres for English speaking theatre.

Another example of a successful Deaf theatre production is 'Mirror Mirror' by *Red Earth Theatre*. 'Mirror Mirror' was first performed as a touring production in the UK in 2017 and is a retelling of Snow White. This production involved two actors one Deaf, one hearing, and puppets to play the other characters. The show's reception was overwhelmingly positive with 98% of the audience saying they would recommend the play to others (14). Interestingly, *Red Earth Theatre* conducted a survey and ran focus groups with the audience with the aim of improving the performance for both the Deaf and hearing audience. Sadly, yet unsurprisingly, just over half of Deaf audience members interviewed said they had never seen a sign integrated performance before which highlights the lack of access the Deaf community have to theatre. The main criticism their research found was about the use of Sign Supported English (SSE) in the production. SSE is an adapted version of sign language that works alongside spoken English (15) which can be hard for Deaf people to understand as it doesn't follow sign language syntax, especially when other conditions such as lighting and positioning may not be ideal due to the nature of performance. *Red Earth Theatre* acknowledged this but highlighted that as they were limited to two actors due to budget constraints that it was very hard to avoid. Therefore, this highlights the lack of resources in Deaf theatre and why there is a need for sign integrated performance to be available in mainstream theatre.

Outside Broadway and the West End, Deaf theatre is produced in many cities and areas with larger populations for example, *Definitely Theatre* in London. These companies directly serve the Deaf community and create high quality productions that can be understood by Deaf and hearing audience members. However, regional and off-West End or off-Broadway theatre is rarely

equivalent due to differences in budget and access to resources and actors. This means that whilst Deaf theatre is good, it cannot be said to provide the equivalent of West End or Broadway theatre and so there is still a lack of provision for the Deaf community. In addition, it is disheartening that Deaf theatre hasn't seen more mainstream success after that of *Deaf West's 'Spring Awakening'*.

Conclusion

Overall, Deaf accessible theatre does not meet the needs of the Deaf community because it is neither effective in enabling Deaf people to understand the performance or inclusive of Deaf culture. However, Deaf theatre also fails to meet the needs of the Deaf community, not because of its contents, but because in being separated from mainstream theatre, Deaf theatre lacks the resources to put on equivalent scale productions and cannot reach its entire audience. For this to change, mainstream theatre companies need to see Deaf actors and audience members as an asset to their creative process and not just a way of getting funding or ticking boxes. Hopefully with the success of productions like *Deaf West's 'Spring Awakening'* and *Red Earth's 'Mirror Mirror'*, more of the Deaf community are able to get involved in theatre in the near future.

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