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### **Author**

Alvero, Erika Noel

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# A Desperate Need to Connect

By Erika Alvero

**Edward Albee's plays** are known for their absurdities, leading to some equally absurd discussions during Deaf West's rehearsals this past winter for his play *At Home at the Zoo*. Four weeks before opening night, some of the American Sign Language (ASL) translations are still being hammered down, which is why Director Coy Middlebrook pauses rehearsal – to debate with his fellow ASL directors and on-stage actors the proper sign for “cutting off breasts” versus “hacking off breasts.”

The ASL Masters, or translation experts, are still working on the sign for “cutting off breasts,” so they leave it alone for now. But “hacking,” says Middlebrook, is more brutal, and they can use the sign for “sawing” in this case. It's an important distinction for Act 1 of the play, and the signs need to reflect that just as the written script does.

But even for a group of adults, it's difficult to have these conversations without eventually cracking a smile. Laughter soon erupts as the cast and directors reflect on the ridiculousness of their discussion.

“I love what we do!” booms Middlebrook in his theatrical director's voice, while interpreter Alek Lev signs for the deaf cast members. “Is it ‘hacking’ or ‘cutting’?”

Assistant director Sandra Mae Frank jumps in. And penises and circumcisions, she signs. This time Lev interprets for the hearing cast members, as Frank imagines what they might ask friends and family after work: “What have you been doing all day?” Everyone breaks out into laughter.

This is Deaf West, a Los Angeles-based theater group that not only has a mixed deaf-and-hearing cast, but also a mixed producer and director team. They've performed on Broadway twice in the last 15 years, won a Tony Award back in 2003 for their musical *Big River*, a play based on Mark Twain's novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and returned to the national spotlight last summer when they were nominated for three Tony's for their revival of *Spring Awakening*.

Deaf West is now seen as the nation's premier deaf theater company, replacing the long-beloved but more conventional National Theatre of the Deaf.

All the plays and musicals Deaf West puts on are existing productions. But while the written script may remain the same, a Deaf West play is very different. Not only are the casts made up of both deaf and hearing actors, directors choose different formats to weave them together onstage. In this production of *At Home at the Zoo*, for example, each on-stage deaf actor shares a character with a voice actor, who both provides sound for the character and interacts with her deaf counterpart, the two actors together creating a more nuanced performance.

Deaf West productions vary widely, from smaller, more obscure pieces to large-scale musicals like *Spring Awakening* and *Oliver!* But all the works share a common denominator; they revolve around communication and miscommunication, and the difficulty of truly connecting with another human being. While the mixed-cast format makes performances accessible to both deaf and hearing audiences, it also does far more, by elevating plays to another level. Deaf West brings more complexity and deeper meaning to their productions, creating a new form of theater with far-reaching implications for the acting world.

“There is a kind of theatrical imagination that is required when you have a company that is half deaf actors,” said Ted Chapin, president of the Rodgers and Hammerstein Organization. An imagination that should be at the heart of all theatrical productions. “Because it’s all about communication, and it’s all about communicating the story on a stage. They have a different set of tools, that normal theaters have, and the more imaginatively you use theatrical tools, the better the show’s going to be.”

**Now well-established** in both the theater world and the deaf community, Deaf West started out in relative obscurity and grew slowly. In 1985, acting couple Ed Waterstreet and Linda Bove moved to Los Angeles from Connecticut. They wanted a change from the east coast, they wanted to start a new life. But when they arrived, they were shocked to find that there was no deaf theater in LA. Really, no deaf theater west of the Mississippi River.

The greater Los Angeles area is home to over 800,000 deaf and hard of hearing people, according to the Office of Deaf Access of California, enough that Waterstreet and Bove couldn't understand why there was no deaf theater around

them. “And that’s what really led us to start researching and talking with people in LA,” says Waterstreet.

Waterstreet grew up in a hearing family in Wisconsin. He was born hearing, but became deaf at the age of two after a bout of pneumonia. When his father found out that Waterstreet was deaf, he decided to sell the family’s farm and move from Green Bay to Delavan, so that his son could attend the Wisconsin School for the Deaf. He got a job as a watchman at the school, while Waterstreet’s mother worked as a cook. The two of them stayed there for 35 years.

Growing up, Waterstreet was always performing and constantly communicating with his hearing parents and five hearing siblings; perhaps because of that, he calls himself a “natural actor.” But parts of their world always eluded him. He would go to musicals with his hearing family, or see people singing at church. He could see their lips moving as they sang along; they seemed to be having fun. But he was bored. He thought, I wish I could see a signed musical.

As a student at Gallaudet University – a school in Washington D.C. that serves the deaf and hard of hearing – he joined the theater department. And it was there, in 1963, that he met his soon-to-be wife, Linda Bove.

Unlike Waterstreet, Bove was born to two deaf parents. At Gallaudet, she studied library science and theater; her first lead role was in a musical, *The Threepenny Opera*. She laughs at the irony of this being her first major role as a deaf actress. “I never thought I would be involved in music as an actress,” she says.

When the opportunity arose, Bove and Waterstreet joined the Connecticut-based National Theatre for the Deaf and toured with the group across the United States and around the globe.

Bove is known as well for playing Linda the Librarian on *Sesame Street* from 1971 until 2003, the longest running role for any deaf actor on television.

It was upsetting, then, for the pair to arrive in Los Angeles, one of the nation’s great theater hubs, and to find no outlet for the deaf. They tried to join the local hearing theater companies, but that didn’t work out. “Their approaches and philosophies weren’t meshing with mine,” says Bove, “and they had no idea what American Sign Language even was.” And it was important to them that the

West Coast deaf community could enjoy the same high standard of theater that was available on the east coast.

So in 1991, after letting the idea marinate for a few years, they decided to found their own company. “To just go ahead and do it and use our own values and have it run by a deaf person who truly understands what we’re looking for and what we can offer to the deaf audience,” said Bove. They started small, with just the two of them, a secretary and a \$6,000 donation from California State University, Northridge. The landlord of their space at the Fountain Theatre, near Hollywood, was kind enough not to charge them rent for their small office. They would stay at the Fountain Theatre for three years.

After performing their first play, *The Gin Game* (conveniently, a two-person production), donations from the community started coming in. They applied for a grant from the Department of Education and received it – \$4 million for five years, and \$250,000 for five subsequent years, and received additional grants from the National Endowment of the Arts and the city of Los Angeles. And as their budget grew, so did the size of their company, and their capacity to perform larger scale productions.

Initially, Deaf West performed entirely in ASL, for audiences comprised entirely of deaf people. But to their surprise, hearing people wanted to see Deaf West productions too. Waterstreet and Bove added offstage voice actors who communicated with audience members using infrared translation headsets. “It came to the point where we had 80 percent of our audience was hearing and 20 percent were deaf,” said Bove. “So the hearing people were how we were able to keep our theater going. Money was really hard at that time.”

Many of the hearing attendees, however, didn’t like wearing headsets. “That’s when we decided to move the voice actors onto the stage,” Bove says, although she and her husband were hesitant at first, as that move would compromise their original vision of all-deaf productions. “We do live in a hearing world,” Waterstreet adds. “And we wanted to share that concept of living in a hearing world.” But by incorporating the voice actors into the plays themselves, Deaf West created a new art form, one that emphasized power dynamics and communication-related themes.

The transition was gradual, starting in 1992 with their third play, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, a play based off Ken Kesey’s novel about a man who tricks his

way into a mental institution to avoid going to prison. Ironically, the mental institution, controlled by the domineering Nurse Ratched, is a more horrific experience than any prison. The infrared translation devices were still used, but the characters of the nurse and doctor were hearing and voiced for themselves. The rest of the cast, the patients in the institution, were deaf, and translation occurred via the headsets.

It was their first chance to experiment with the double layers of meaning that would become a Deaf West trademark. The doctor in the play – one of the patients’ “captors” who was cast as a hearing character – maintained that he didn’t understand sign language in order to keep a distance between himself and his patients. And the protagonist McMurphy, a patient who is in fact not mentally ill, is cast as hard-of-hearing and simultaneously speaks and signs. He straddles the deaf and hearing worlds, not fully belonging to either, just as McMurphy doesn’t quite fit in with the patients or the hospital staff.

The production was successful with both the deaf and hearing audiences, and by the time they produced the Greek tragedy *Medea*, three years later, they had done away with the infrared devices altogether. At this point, too, they had migrated south a little ways to a theater on Heliotrope Drive, towards downtown Los Angeles.

Deaf West was starting to make a name for itself, starting to make headlines in the theater world.

**In every Deaf West production**, each character’s identity is carefully crafted, based not only on the script but the character’s status as a deaf or hearing person. And the format changes with every play. “We look at the material for a very long time and then work out the possible configurations,” writes the current art director, DJ Kurs, in an email. “We resist the urge to become fancy or razzle dazzle, and we look at how the staging will resonate with our primary audience, the deaf audience.”

In *Medea*, for instance, translation for the on-stage deaf actors was relegated to the chorus. The chorus already serves as a sort of translator in traditional Greek plays, explaining and pontificating about the drama as it unfolds through

chanting, singing and dancing. Now they were charged with voicing for the signing deaf actors, in particular for the tragic, alienated heroine Medea, played by Linda Bove herself, in her quest for revenge on her unfaithful husband.

But in other productions, like *Spring Awakening* or *At Home at the Zoo*, each character is played by both a deaf and hearing actor, the voice actor serving as the conscience or inner observer of the main character, played by a deaf actor. The physical manifestation of human nuance.

Throughout all these changes, the artistic direction has always come from a deaf person. “There’s nobody above us,” says Bove. This was very important to Bove and her husband; they wanted to see the deaf community represented as a rich and nuanced culture, rather than having deaf actors reduced to their deafness, something that often happens in hearing-directed productions and films.

And slowly, more people in the deaf community began to come to their performances too. “Deaf people, when they grow up, they don’t have access to theater,” says Bove. She feels that many schools don’t offer enough artistic opportunities to deaf students. She and Waterstreet wanted to change this, to show the deaf community that going to the theater was worth their while, and eventually the ratio of hearing to deaf audience members began to level out.

As Deaf West’s style evolved over the years, the way audiences viewed the productions evolved as well. “It’s not enough just to do a play in sign language,” wrote Kurs. “When audiences see a Deaf West adaptation they have come to expect that the themes inherent in deaf culture and sign language will bring out new perspectives in the material.”

Audiences come to expect not only new perspectives thematically, but also in the types of plays Deaf West performs. Which brought Deaf West to realize one of Waterstreet’s childhood dreams, the signed musical.

There’s a seeming paradox in the idea of a “signed musical,” or a “musical for deaf audiences” – a contradiction to the notion that a musical should revolve around sound. But signed musicals weren’t unheard of: Linda Bove’s first lead role had been in a musical, after all, and the National Theatre of the Deaf (NTD) would put on musical productions.

Ted Chapin, from the Rodgers and Hammerstein Organization, used to work with NTD and was asked to be the musical director for their production of the opera *Three Saints in Four Acts*, that toured the country in the 70's. The goal, he said, was to make music as visual as possible, to try to make the music as integrated in the action as possible. "To make the experience equal to hearing audiences and deaf audiences," he said, "so that you were not necessarily aware of any line of demarcation, like 'here are the hearing people and here are the deaf people.'"

Their first musical, *Oliver!*, in 2000, was very popular, and paved the way for their greatest success yet: *Big River*, which won six Los Angeles Ovation Awards, five Los Angeles Drama Critics' Circle Awards, and was nominated for two Tony Awards, winning one for Excellence in Theatre. The production was a musical adaptation of Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and had originally been performed in 1985. In the original musical and book, Huckleberry Finn, a white teenager escaping an alcoholic father in Missouri, travels down the Mississippi River with Jim, a runaway black slave. It's already rife with themes of oppression, cross-cultural communication, the bridging of different worlds.

And Deaf West's adaptation heightened those themes. The actor playing Huck was deaf, while Jim's character was hearing. Each one carried a different privilege, and their need to rely on one another in a hearing, white-dominated society became even more palpable.

*Big River* was wildly popular with audiences and critics alike. They toured nationally and even internationally, travelling to major cities and theater hotspots in the United States and then performing at the Aoyama Theatre in Tokyo, Japan.

With *Big River*, Deaf West had put itself on the national map. They had acquired their own 90-seat theater space in North Hollywood; it became known as the "Deaf West Theatre." And with every subsequent play they produced, they cemented their reputation as a company that could bring a new outlook to productions that had become stale and one-dimensional.

But in 2005, then-President George W. Bush passed massive budget cuts to the Department of Education, including a line item that promoted theatrical experiences for the deaf. Meaning that Deaf West lost key funding – until the following year, when Iowa Senator Tom Harkin, a prominent champion of the



disabled community whose own brother was deaf, sponsored an earmark that renewed funding for the company.

Four years later, though, they lost that funding once again when President Obama eliminated that earmark, among others.

And the financial crisis of 2008 didn't help their situation; it was a rough time for companies everywhere. Theater attendance fell – an annual study conducted by the Theatre Communications Group found that by 2009, the number of single tickets sold nationwide dropped by about 12,000, while the total number of subscribers or season ticket holders fell by about 4,000. For Deaf West, the harshest blow came in 2012, when they had to make the tough decision not to renew the lease for their beloved theater space in North Hollywood.

It was a grim moment for the company. “Big River had become such a personal and also professional triumph for that company and for all of us,” says Middlebrook. “And it was so sad that after all of that they had to move out of their theater.”

Deaf West managed to weather the stormy period, though. The success of Big River's national tour and Broadway performances had given the group some financial stability, and they managed to tighten their belt in other ways. Though they had no theater space, they've been able to continue performing by partnering with other theaters like the Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts in Beverly Hills.

Their chance to show the nation that they were still a vibrant force, though, came in 2015 with *Spring Awakening*.

By this point, Waterstreet had retired, passed on his position as artistic director to David “DJ” Kurs. Kurs grew up in nearby Riverside, and his parents – who were also deaf – would take him to Deaf West productions. After seeing the success of *Big River*, he reached out to Deaf West for any openings. He was commissioned to write a children's play called *Aesop Who?* and then became a part of several other productions in the role of ASL Master. And when Waterstreet decided to step down, Kurs was primed to interview for the position of artistic director.

And a revival of *Spring Awakening*, a musical about a group of teenagers in 1890s Germany discovering their sexuality, seemed perfect for Deaf West. The play itself centers on the inability of parents and children to communicate, a difficulty with consequences that become all-too-clear when 14-year-old Wendla becomes pregnant by her older friend Melchior. Melchior, in the original, is a savvy and charming teenager who “teaches” his classmates about sex; Wendla’s mother, on the other hand, had been too uncomfortable to tell her how babies were made. Wendla – who was played by Sandra Mae Frank, currently one of the assistant directors in *At Home at the Zoo* – later dies from a botched abortion.

And in typical Deaf West fashion, the revival added another layer of meaning to the plot, by casting Wendla, for instance, as deaf, and her mother as hearing. “Making Wendla deaf gave her a concrete sort of repression that could be seen and felt,” wrote ASL Master Shoshannah Stern in an email. “With that added layer, she becomes someone whose mother can barely communicate with her.” Considering that today, 90 percent of deaf children are born to deaf parents, Wendla’s situation was very real for many in the deaf community.

The musical’s 1890 setting happened to coincide with a dark period for the deaf community. Ten years earlier, in Milan, Italy, an international congress of deaf educators decided that sign language should be banned in schools, in favor of “oralism,” – deaf children, they decreed, should learn to speak rather than sign.

The added layer of oppression couldn’t help but become embedded in the plot and the language, with special resonance for the deaf community. Wendla would be living “in a post-Milan world where if you’re unable to speak, you are considered less than people who can,” wrote Stern. The way she signed would need to reflect this repression. ASL doesn’t use just hand signs, but rather the entire body and facial expressions. It makes use of the full human being, save for the voice. But to reflect the view of deaf people in 1890’s Germany, Frank restricted the movements of the actress who played Wendla, who was normally a very expressive signer.

Wendla’s deafness made her even more vulnerable to Melchior. In Deaf West’s rendition, Melchior is hearing but has a deaf mother, and thus can both sign and speak. “He’s a boy who could be a medium to teach you things, not just because he has knowledge, but because he has unlimited access to both languages,” wrote Stern. “Because of that, he also becomes that much more privileged and

powerful, which makes her that much more hesitant about whether she can even say no to him when he makes advances toward her.”

And, said Stern, the signing adds a visual complexity that wasn't present in the original. She recalled seeing a Broadway performance of *Spring Awakening* in 2008, with an all-hearing cast. It was impressive, she said, but visually seemed sparse. “The visual component didn't have the same layered depth that the musical had,” wrote Stern. “I think adding ASL to this allowed for the visuality to become as complex and intricate as the music and story always was.”

And the richness of the text and the lyrics came through for the deaf community in a way that didn't if they were just watching the musical with translation on the side. “So the deaf person finally gets to see for the first time the intention of the play,” said Bove. “And that to me is so powerful.”

The uniqueness and complexity of Deaf West's *Spring Awakening* wasn't lost on theater buffs. Broadway producer Ken Davenport says it took him all of 15 seconds to realize that he wanted to bring it to Broadway. “I saw Sandra and Katie performing ‘Mama Who Bore Me,’ and it blew me away,” he says, referring to the opening song of the show, performed by the two Wendla characters.

A year and a half later, the group found out they had been nominated for three Tony Awards, for Best Revival of a Musical, Best Direction of a Musical, and Best Lighting Design of a Musical. And they'd been invited to perform, although, in light of their financial woes, they had to fundraise through Kickstarter in order to be able to attend. They didn't win. But they were back in the spotlight. “People actually listened to us, not just walked by and ignored us, but finally listened and understood in a way,” wrote Frank.

“They're fighting a good fight,” says Jeremy Gerard, an arts reporter and critic who reviewed *Spring Awakening* for Deadline.com. “Which is to shake up our pre-conceptions about what musical theater should be and our pre-conceptions about the limitations of human challenges, in their case hearing-challenged actors and actresses. I think that's a fantastically important thing to do, in our time and is long overdue.”

**It's day four of rehearsals** for *At Home at the Zoo*, and Middlebrook has paused the action. It's early in the production process, after all, and while the actors try to perform from memory, slip-ups happen. This time it was Amber Zion, the on-stage actress for Ann. Each of the actors reacts differently when they forget a line – Troy Kotsur, the on-stage actor for Peter will snap his fingers to be fed a line while Peter's voice actor Jake Eberle curses softly under his breath. Zion beams abashedly at Sandra Mae Frank, who is seated front and center with a script binder open on her lap, ready to feed the on-stage deaf actors lines they miss.

Act 1 of *At Home at the Zoo* centers around the relationship of Peter and Ann, an executive at a small book publishing company and his wife – the entire act takes place in the living room of their New York apartment. Ann is tired of their comfortable, Upper East Side life, and tries to distract Peter with provocative conversation topics. Hence the debate over the sign for “hacking” versus “cutting” – at one point, Ann randomly brings up to Peter that she wants to have her breasts removed. And right before that, she tells him that her mother has been contemplating an affair. Which is where they've paused.

This is the first time *At Home at the Zoo* will be performed after Albee's death in September of 2016. Albee first published *Zoo Story* – what is now Act 2 of the play – in 1959. He wanted to further develop Peter's character, though, and so, nearly fifty years later, he wrote the Act 1 prequel that the cast is currently working on.

Under Middlebrook's direction, Deaf West had performed *Zoo Story* in 2007, receiving good reviews. The group was all set to put on the Los Angeles premier when the financial crisis struck. When they lost their North Hollywood theater space, they also lost the resources for this premiere. So this production – performed as a partnership with the Wallis Theater in Beverly Hills – is especially meaningful, not only as a tribute to its lately departed playwright, but also as emblematic of their revival after a devastating period.

The cast is tiny. Two characters in Act 1, and two in Act 2. The voice actors for this play, Jake Eberle and Paige White, didn't know any ASL before the first rehearsal four days earlier – it's been a steep learning curve.

“I'm learning,” said White, laughing. “I feel like I've learned a lot of weird vocab,” referring to the play's raunchy material.

But ASL and English are two completely different languages, and don't always match up structurally. "We're supposed to be word for word text-wise," said White. "And then filling that within the space, even if the noun is at the end of the sentence, or the verb comes first. And so making sure it still matches."

Middlebrook cuts into the scene, encouraging everyone to grab their scripts (or "books" in theater lingo). He breaks the stage spell with this comment, and the on-stage actors Zion and Kotsur visibly relax, grinning and signing with one another, much friendlier than their fictional counterparts.

Kotsur is a funny man, wearing a grey conductor's cap and a checkered sweatshirt – known within the cast for his penchant for peanut M&M's. He fiddles with his prop glasses when he's on the stage – he's been practicing playing with props, which requires him to sign one-handedly.

He's played the part of Peter before, back when Deaf West performed *Zoo Story* in 2007. But that hasn't made it any easier for him to relate to his character, an isolated man whose very boringness is at the essence of the play. "It's been hard for me to grasp and really embody what the character is supposed to be," says Kotsur. "It's an isolated, boring life, which makes it funny and difficult for me to take my life out of it, when I step into the character."

But a lot has changed in his life since he last played the part of Peter, 10 years ago. And Peter has changed too. Now Peter has children, something that wasn't part of Peter's character when Deaf West first put on *Zoo Story* – the first version of the play that only consisted of what is now Act 2.

"I can understand what that's like being the father of a girl as well," said Kotsur, whose own daughter is 11. She's a CODA – a "Child Of Deaf Adults" – and is bilingual in both ASL and spoken English. "I had to play the part of a father. So that's been fun for me, to go on this journey with the character."

Meanwhile, the director has turned his attention to Ann's mother's prospective affair. You have Peter's attention with the affair, he tells Zion. In the telling of this story, she will have to quote her mother – is her mother hearing or deaf? It affects how her mother would sign: as a hearing person, she would use a simplified form of signing. Her movements would also be less fluid than that of a native signer, less expressive and more deliberate.

Zion listens, and then nods. She thinks that her mother is hearing, Zion tells Middlebrook. He nods back. Perhaps this is an opportunity to poke good-hearted fun at her mother's signing, and add another layer of storytelling for the deaf and in-the-know hearing audience members.

As is common with Deaf West plays and musicals, in *At Home at the Zoo* communication struggles are important themes underlying the plot. In Act 1, Ann tries to make Peter understand how tired she is of their safe life and how she longs for passionate, animalistic sex. In Act 2, a man at the park named Jerry tells Peter a story about a dog, in one of theater history's more famous monologues. When Peter fails to comprehend the significance of this four-page-long speech, Jerry, feeling that his life is over, coaxes him into a duel. The play concludes with Peter killing Jerry.

The play is about our desperate need to connect, says Middlebrook. "The very animal nature of man and life," he says. "And we've just caged ourselves from that with clothing, with furniture, with other things."

It resonates further with the deaf community and with the history of deaf oppression, he says. Back when deaf people were treated as animals themselves. "They weren't educated and they were shunned or isolated," Middlebrook says. This production, then, would be alluding throughout to "the perception and the history of being treated like an animal."

This multi-level animal theme carries through the play – Jerry, in Act 2, is a social outcast living on the margins of society, and delivers a four-page-long monologue about his excruciating attempt to connect with his landlady's dog. "Animals are indifferent to me...like people...most of the time," says Jerry in the play. "But this dog wasn't indifferent." Befriending that dog was Jerry's one chance to connect to someone, something, in a world that shunned him.

Four weeks after they first began rehearsals for *At Home at the Zoo*, it's time for the final performance. At the Sunday matinee on opening weekend, bilingual ushers welcome guests into the Lovelace Theater at the Wallis, exactly where rehearsals took place. The stage is washed in an ocean blue light and surrounded by metal bars – "a hybrid between a zoo and a museum of natural history," says Middlebrook. Ominous tiger growls and chirping birds murmur in the background, catching the attention of hearing audience members, who whisper

to each other that “they’re at the zoo.” They’ve replaced the old sofa with a couch that looks much cozier, and hopefully sturdier – during rehearsal, the sofa would wobble dangerously during Ann and Peter’s almost-sex scene, and duct tape could only repair so much.

The lights dim, and a voice comes over the loudspeaker, reminding guests to turn off their cell phones and explaining where the emergency exits are. Gilchrist takes the stage to simultaneously sign these instructions. She would step up to interpret during rehearsals when Lev was out, which stretches her a bit – she’s conversational in ASL, but interpreting is harder. Frank is used to signing with her rapidly, and sometimes forgets that Gilchrist can’t interpret as fast.

The play starts, with Kotsur alone on the stage, trying to work before his stage-wife comes along to distract him. He’s looking tweedier now, his casual rehearsal sweatshirt replaced by a sweater vest over a plaid button-up. Peter’s voice actor, Jake Eberle, is dressed to match, mirroring Kotsur’s actions too as he takes a seat outside the cage bars. In Act 1, the voice actors will be outside the cage looking in with the audience, as if observing wild animals at the zoo, but in Act 2, they will join the stage actors inside the cage – the danger is more palpable and they’ve been thrown in with the creatures.

The audience is mixed, both deaf and hearing. The play starts out with a lot of humorous banter between Ann and Peter, and though Albee’s clever wordplay garners some chuckles, the real laughter comes from Kotsur and Zion’s dramatic visualizations, especially when the ASL meaning is clear to everyone in the audience. When Kotsur’s character says he wants a dog, Kotsur spends several seconds making the motions of petting and being licked by an imaginary dog, to much laughter. And they crack up – somewhat guiltily – at Zion’s sign for her stage husband’s foreskin that he believes is falling off, the tips of one hand’s fingers brought together like a clam, to represent the foreskin, waving at it sardonically with the other hand.

One of the company’s goals is to “really elevate the style of ASL to the point where the entire audience will understand the meaning of what was just signed,” Bove had said. And their laughter seemed to indicate that they did.

Chapin agrees. “When deaf theater is at its best,” he says, “hearing people think they understand sign language.”

They'll be performing *Our Town* next, a play about life and death in a small town in New Hampshire during the early 1900's. They're continuing to look for plays in which they can easily weave together deaf and hearing culture, says Waterstreet, and they've become more open-minded over the years, in terms of bringing hearing people into their productions.

Deaf West will always think primarily about its deaf audience, as they craft their productions. But hearing audiences have benefitted from watching their shows as well, not only in adding nuance to existing plays and musicals, but also in shifting perceptions about what theater should look like.

"I think we should be unbelievably grateful to them," says Gerard, "for not just the quality of their work – because their company is remarkable – but for the legitimate mandate of forcing us out of our comfortable envelopes of how we look at things and looking at things fresh."



## ABSTRACT

Deaf West is a Los Angeles-based theater group that has become the premiere deaf theater group in the United States. Its format of bringing together hearing and deaf actors on stage in its productions not only makes performances accessible to all audiences, but also embeds them with more nuanced and complex meanings, revolving around ideas of communication and miscommunication.

## SOURCE LIST

### **Interviewees:**

Coy Middlebrook  
Alek Lev  
Sandra Mae Frank  
Ted Chapin  
Linda Bove  
Ed Waterstreet  
DJ Kurs  
Jeremy Gerard  
Troy Kotsur  
Jennifer Brien  
Kelsey Gilchrist  
Jake Eberle  
Amber Zion  
Paige White

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