Who Was It Truly For?: Bernard Bragg, David Hays, and National Theatre of the Deaf

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Brief Overview & Historical Context

The National Theatre of the Deaf was a sign language theatre pioneering an art form known as 'sign-mime,' featuring a mix of Deaf and hearing performers. It operated from 1967 to 2006, and toured all 50 states of the United States and 33 countries worldwide. (National Theatre of the Deaf, n.d.) Productions were fully signed, with voiced interpretation for hearing audiences. In 2006, when federal funding disappeared, NTD was unable to continue its original tours oriented to adults, but continued doing tours of its children's programming through 2017. ("About Us", n.d.) All of NTD's work since has been primarily guest artist spots in music videos, television shows, and panels. (National Theatre of the Deaf, n.d.)

At the time NTD was beginning, ASL was only beginning to reemerge as an accepted method to teach Deaf children. For almost a century prior, it was considered that signed language should not be used with Deaf children, and they should all be taught through lipreading and speech. If Deaf children signed in the classroom, or anywhere else the Deaf school could find out about, they were punished. But did this stop them? Absolutely not. Deaf children signed in secret, using however much sign they knew. ("Oralism: the superiority of modality", n.d.) (Nomeland and Nomeland 2012, 53-59)

This lack of signed education caused serious harm to the Deaf community, and to ASL in general. Not being able to acquire language and culture from members of their community devastated ASL, Deaf culture, and the entire community for almost a century. We truly cannot quantify what the Deaf community might look like today if it were not for the Dark Ages of

Oralism – it would surely look much different. (“Oralism: the superiority of modality”, n.d.) (Nomeland and Nomeland 2012, 51-59)

In 1959, a key advance for ASL in theatre came in the form of the Broadway production of *The Miracle Worker,* a play about Helen Keller, and the first usage of ASL as a part of a professional performance – and an integral one. Anne Bancroft, a then-unknown actress, threw herself into the Deaf world and learning ASL so as to fully portray Annie Sullivan, the woman who was able to teach Keller language. *The Miracle Worker* was very well-received, and was made into a movie in 1962, starring Bancroft; she herself became a powerful advocate for the Deaf, and especially Deaf theatre. (Baldwin 1993, 5-7, 15-16)

Deaf Theatre Before NTD

So what did Deaf theatre look like before NTD?

Deaf theatre began as a community artform, with Deaf people performing for fellow Deaf people. Their choice of stories included some classics, short plays, poetry, original skits, and works about their own Deaf experiences. (Bragg and Bergman 1989, 22-26, 34-38) (Baldwin 1993, 5)

One institution became essential to NTD becoming what it was: Gallaudet University. Throughout the Dark Ages of Oralism, Gallaudet remained a beacon of ASL and Deaf culture. It is the only Deaf university in the world, then and now. Prior to NTD, Gallaudet University, Deaf clubs, and a few residential Schools for the Deaf were making theatre for and about Deaf folks, and in 1961, Gallaudet began offering drama classes, but professional theatre work or full-length shows were simply nonexistent. (Bragg and Bergman 1989, 22-26, 34-38) (Baldwin 1993, 5)

Bernard Bragg, sign name shown here, a legend in the Deaf world and very important to this research, tells this story about a piece called *Auf Wiedersehen* that his father had directed and performed in at their local Deaf club:

"The whole play was done in dramatic sign language. Melodramatic as it was, it left me enthralled and filled with admiration for my father, whose powerful and moving signing dominated the entire performance. He raged, wept, and was tortured by anguish, and the whole audience was swept up in his emotions. (...) The play was a roaring success among the deaf, like the other plays in which my father acted. It is a pity that at the time, the 1940s, the hearing world was not yet ready to appreciate signed plays because my father would have become a great actor." (Bragg and Bergman 1989, 23)

Accessing hearing theatre was not simple for Deaf audiences, either.

At this point in time, today's ASL-interpreted theatre was nonexistent. ASL-interpreted theatre means a piece of theatre done by a hearing group, and translated in real time for Deaf/Hard of Hearing audiences by ASL interpreters, typically two of them.

During the planning phase of NTD, Jules Irving and the Vivian Beaumont Theatre at the Lincoln Center piloted a program to make theatre more accessible to the Deaf community, by giving them copies of the show's script to follow along with light in specially-designated seats, which was a first step. This was actually encouraged by the founders of NTD themselves. (*David Hays to Mary Switzer* 1967)

Additionally, in the early years of NTD, the Riverside Players in Riverside, CA, featured ASL interpretation in their show – this was unheard of at the time! (*Felix and Laura Kowalewski to Bernard Bragg*, n.d.) (*Bernard Bragg to Felix and Laura Kowalewski*, n.d.) Riverside is home

to a huge Deaf population, so it is unsurprising that this theatre would be an early adopter of interpreted theatre.

Letters & Plans

Many people were essential to NTD's creation, but two are especially key: Bernard Bragg and David Hays.

Bernard Bragg was a Deaf performer and teacher. He was born Deaf, to Deaf parents, and grew up attending a residential School for the Deaf. He attended Gallaudet, and became a teacher for Deaf children. He started in theatre while studying at Gallaudet, studied with the famous mime Marcel Marceau, and continued performing while teaching in California. (Bragg and Bergman 1989, 3-119)

David Hays was a hearing scenic and lighting designer working professionally in New York. He started out interested in mime and movement in theatre. After working on *A Miracle Worker*, he was captivated by ASL in theatre, and decided he must establish a signing theatre. (Baldwin 1993, 7-9)

Previously, multiple attempts had been made to start sign language theatre, all stemming from that same production of *The Miracle Worker,* and especially from Anne Bancroft. In each of these previous attempts and iterations, key pieces were missing, such as funding, essential staff, and an organization to even receive a grant. (Baldwin 1993, 14-17) Hays too was involved in several of these earlier attempts, and these connections quickly led him to Bragg. Hays told Bragg when first contacting him, "...we have discovered that all fingers point to you." (*David Hays to Bernard Bragg* 1966)

Bragg and Hays began a robust correspondence in the early days of the theatre's origins. Hays lived in New York, Bragg in California – letter-writing and telegrams made up the bulk of

their communications, and they were prolific writers. Fortunately, Bragg was meticulous with his filing, and we have almost all of his correspondence, both sent and received. In 2011, a huge amount of his collection was donated to the Rochester Institute of Technology's archives. (RIT/NTID Deaf Studies Archive, n.d.) This is an incredible resource that lets us understand the processes that led to NTD – but there's a flip side. This window into Hays' and Bragg's discussions, thoughts, and decisions vanishes when Bragg moves to the East Coast as the theatre kicks off. This leaves us with much more exterior views on NTD; publications, news articles, personal letters. We will never have a full account of the inner workings of NTD, but understanding its origins lets us piece together the remaining information and expand our perception of these events.

In 1966, Hays sent a letter to Bragg in California. In this letter, he shares many grand ideas and lofty goals – including his biggest goals for this theatre: "Stressing intelligibility to the deaf, which forms the backbone of the art form, we must evolve methods of performance which will create an art, no longer merely a way of bringing theatre to the handicapped, but which is a brilliant new form brought to all of us by the deaf." (*David Hays to Bernard Bragg* 1966)

As soon as Bragg wrote back, the two were in constant correspondence, often sending one or more letters before the first even reached the other! (RIT/NTID Deaf Studies Archive, n.d.) Right away, there were many details to hash out.

One of the most important details was language itself and how it would be used. Would the productions use ASL? Gesture and mime? Was there a universal sign language that could be used? Many letters were exchanged, both between Bragg and Hays, and among Bragg's network of esteemed contacts in the Deaf world.

After much consideration, Bragg came up with an innovative concept, inspired by his lifelong experiences with ASL and visual storytelling and his training as a mime – he called it "sign-mime". This would prove to be both NTD's success and its downfall, all in one.

What is sign-mime? A way of theatricalizing sign, essentially taking sign as communication and making it bigger, more gestural, and more mime-based. Bragg compares it to the difference between casual spoken English and dramatized Shakespearian text. (Pakula 1970, 4)

As Hays' first letter demonstrates, one of the strong desires was to create exceptional work. Not just theatre that's done by "the disabled" and impressive for that reason, but theatre that is impressive in its own right, and unique *because* of what Deaf artists bring to it. This goal of excellence meant they needed outstanding performers. Who would be performing in these works? Where would they find the well-trained performers to reach the quality they wanted?

It quickly became clear that the only reliable source for actors was Gallaudet. At this point, Hays asks Bragg if their company was becoming "a sort of Gallaudet club," and if that was a bad thing. (*David Hays to Bernard Bragg* 1966)

To which Bragg replied, "...it is inevitable that the company will be peopled mostly with Gallaudet-oriented individuals - but it is not bad at all. After all, Gallaudet has always been the stout advocate of sign language, by which many of its graduates have achieved their education (and appreciation of drama) whereas, many of the non-Gallaudetians are either orally oriented or products of combined-method schools, some of which discriminate against the exclusive use of sign language as a method of instruction. Nor do they encourage sign-language dramatics 100 percent. Of course, this does not necessarily mean that we are discriminated against the non-Gallaudetians, or for that matter, Negroes and hard-of-hearing people. The company will be

open to all of those who show promising qualities, talents, or zest for training. That's what a school at Waterford [NTD's physical location] will be for. As for the present, or during the formation of the company, we may do well to recruit not only the talented in acting but altogether the skilled in the use of sign language." (*Bernard Bragg to David Hays* 1966)

While both wanted the company to create exceptional work, Hays was especially fixated on the notion. During this planning phase, Eric Malzkuhn, a Deaf playwright brought in by Bragg, responds to Hays' notion of wanting to avoid "second string" work very firmly.

"Your letter was challenging, and disquieting. You will, of course, be receiving plays from me. Second string? Hell, David, I simply try to give my optience [meaning a Deaf / fully visually-oriented audience] the best show I can concoct. Did you ever deliberately design a second string set?

"And things are compounded by the fact that first string is not always first string for the deaf, although sign mime can serve as a mighty potent shot of adrenalin most of the time. …

"I can understand, of course, what you mean by 'it must not be second string' of course. And I can agree. We need the best! However, this is pretty unfair to us Amalgamated Amateur Playwrights of the Tin Ear. " (*Malzkuhn to Hays* 1966)

Malzkuhn's warning seemed to be heard, at least at the beginning, and he went on to adapt a piece from a book for NTD. That piece, *Tyger! Tyger! And Other Burnings,* was included in NTD's first season. (*Bernard Bragg to David Hays* 1967) (Playbill, n.d.)

Bragg and Hays spent nearly a year in a flurry of letters back and forth, hashing out every detail, from big cerebral concepts to small nuances, personnel, travel arrangements, and

publicity. By the end of their correspondence, they had not only formed a firm working plan of how to develop the theatre through its first season and beyond, but also a deep friendship.

Bragg and Hays began their letter-writing in June of 1966. (*David Hays to Bernard Bragg* 1966) Eight months later, NTD taped its first broadcast publicizing the theatre in February of 1967 (Baldwin 1993, 20). Bragg moved to Waterford, Connecticut in June of 1967 (*Bernard Bragg to David Hays* 1967), and they began their first summer training program. Just as planned, they took a troupe on tour that fall, with only a month of rehearsal time (Baldwin 1993, 27, 34), and within their first year had formed an offshoot troupe specifically for children, the Little Theatre of the Deaf. (National Theatre of the Deaf, n.d.) NTD became well-known very quickly, and started touring internationally shortly thereafter. (Baldwin 1993, 34-35) It did not take long for it to start drawing critical acclaim, and to find momentum and footing.

Impacts of Initial Decisions

Many of the decisions first made during that planning phase went on to impact the theatre's future.

Through Hays' insatiable quest for exceptional theatre, the NTD and their training programs fostered incredible performers, and provided a place to bring their skills to light. The fruit of these training programs are very much still seen today. Many incredibly famous Deaf performers either directly descended from NTD, or were deeply affected by those who did. Some of these individuals are still performing today. And for those who are not, many went on to become artistic icons in the Deaf community, especially in theatre, film and the visual arts, such as Chuck Baird, Troy Kotsur, and Linda "Linda the Librarian" Bove, to name a few. (Deaf Art 2018) (National Theatre of the Deaf 2022) (National Theatre of the Deaf, n.d.)

In many ways, sign-mime came to be a way to highlight the skills that deaf performers already naturally had.

Unfortunately, this came at a high cost: the loss of being understood by the average deaf audience. As we've already discussed, creating the caliber of work desired required the best-trained actors available -- this meant Gallaudet grads. However, the average deaf person in the 1960s and ‘70s was not a college graduate. If they were not from a long-standing Deaf family, or a graduate of Gallaudet (two things that often go hand-in-hand even today), they would likely not have strong signing skills, or exposure to the works being interpreted through sign. All of this made it more difficult for an average Deaf audience member to follow.

This is not something entirely gleaned from historical context – in an article about NTD’s *Parade* and its impacts, journalist Jean Stratton addresses this directly. “These actors are all graduates of college, so their experiences are not likely to be the same as those of all deaf people." (Stratton 1976)

Reviews: Divided

Overall, the reviews toward NTD were extremely mixed, from the very beginning of the company.

Many hearing audiences loved the adaptations and sign-mime, and found it to be a beautiful new artform. Some felt that hearing people could not understand the shows with no spoken interpretation. Otherwise, most hearing audiences enjoyed the performances! (Baldwin 1993, 37)

However, many Deaf audiences felt differently. Some felt that NTD was not “Deaf enough” for the Deaf community, that it was made for hearing audiences, and not made for, or accessible to Deaf audiences. Additionally, the shows did not include much drawn from Deaf

culture. This seemed to conflict with the goals of a theatre company formed on the skills and faces of Deaf performers. (Baldwin 1993, 36-37) (Miles 1974)

In fact, despite being the only theatre fully incorporating ASL into their works, as of 1976, 85% of their audiences were hearing, with only 15% being Deaf. (Stratton 1976) In a world where most TV, radio, and theatre was entirely inaccessible to the Deaf, this is an incredibly low percentage.

Even in NTD's own publication, it is clear that the company experienced a lot of cognitive dissonance about its goals and motivations. In 1970, Pat Keysell, a guest member of the NTD touring troupe and the director of the British Theatre of the Deaf, wrote this:

…"[T]he new medium certainly raised a lot of comment, one way and another, both in the Press and in person. An eminent man of the theatre wrote to me, 'I think you are achieving something of the greatest consequence, interest and beauty. These people have achieved a physical co-ordination of a quite remarkable kind. An eminent deaf man wrote, 'I don't understand why sign-mime should be introduced into this country.' (Keysell and National Theatre of the Deaf 1970, 2)

Dorothy Miles, whose sign name you can see shown here, who was an NTD performer, said in her Master's thesis:

"For deaf persons, to whom signs were a means of communication, the impact of sign-mime, as it was called, was mainly one of incomprehension. Consequently, there was much dissatisfaction with, and in some cases resentment against the new theatre with the deaf community." (Miles 1974)

This critique of NTD emerged at their first publicly accessible outing. From even their first publicity, a televised broadcast with NBC publicizing the soon-to-exist theatre group, NTD

received complaints from the deaf community that their performances were unintelligible. Unfortunately, NTD largely brushed these complaints aside, and chose to either believe the Deaf reviewers were being harsh or close-minded, or that their works were too high-brow. (*Bernard Bragg to David Hays* 1967)

At the same time, Taras P. Denis, an early NTD performer and writer (Baldwin 1993, 6), received a 5-page letter from an allegedly livid deaf man. (*Bernard Bragg to David Hays* 1967) Though this letter has been lost to time, it is discussed in surviving letters between Bragg and Hays, in which they opt to "brush it aside" just as they had with anti-sign language objectors who reached out to the station. (*Bernard Bragg to David Hays* 1967)

To be fully clear: many deaf people *did* love the work NTD was doing – and those were the voices that the company paid attention to.

Priorities & Credit

One thing that firmly shows where priorities lie is the credit publicly given to Bragg.

Bragg was essential to establishing NTD and the direction it took; despite this, he is not credited as any sort of founder until 1993, fifteen years after he left the organization, and 25 years after its establishment. Every year, NTD published an Annual Report on their activities over the year, who was involved, and the staff of the organization. These reports never mention Bragg as more than a performer, instructor, or "administrator at large" until after Hays has stepped back from the Artistic Director position. (National Theatre of the Deaf 1994) (RIT/NTID Deaf Studies Archive, n.d.)

Additionally, Hays' director's notes in these reports gives us a year-by-year perspective on his priorities and initial goals. In the first edition released in 1968, Hays has many goals he asserts: first, to create a new artform, second, to broadly entertain, and third, to bring theatre to

the Deaf. (National Theatre of the Deaf 1968) But by the 1970 edition, he dropped Deaf audiences from the main troupes' priorities, relegating them to side projects, and declaring the theatre's goals "purely artistic". (National Theatre of the Deaf 1970)

Another way priorities were made clear is the works produced. Throughout all of their tours, NTD performed just two pieces about Deafness.

The first one was a piece called *My Third Eye*, about the performers' Deaf lives and experiences, much of which was recorded and can still be viewed today. It is a powerful piece showing the beauty and struggle of life while Deaf. (Baldwin 1993, 49) [https://media.gallaudet.edu/media/My+Third+Eye+%281971%29/1_v07ed15g]

Deaf audiences adored it. However, hearing ones did not. It became clear that NTD could not sustain itself on Deaf shows. They needed hearing audiences, and plenty of them. (Baldwin 1993, 49)

The second Deaf show was *Parade*, which featured Linda Bove as a Wonder Woman-esque superhero. (Stratton 1976) Sadly, this piece is difficult to find detail on, and was not televised like *My Third Eye.*

Parade was popular with both Deaf and hearing audiences, but despite this success, NTD never did additional shows about Deafness. (Baldwin 1993, 49)

Reflecting back on this later in his life, Bragg said "The sad truth that sank into me is that deaf audiences are simply too small a minority to sustain a thriving deaf professional theatre. To survive, plays about the deaf must be geared to hearing audiences by focusing on universal experiences and conflicts between the hearing and deaf worlds." (Bragg and Bergman 1989, 183)

How We Got Here

So, how do we go from such a unified and collaborative beginning to where their relationship and goals ended up?

Hays was very clear in his first letter to Bragg that a huge priority was intelligibility to the Deaf. However, this goal quickly deteriorated. It becomes clear that creating a new art form was more important to Hays than making it accessible to the Deaf community.

There are many factors to how their goals shifted.

Some of their goals fell by the wayside as the theatre makes its way from the planning stage to a real-life organization. Beyond transferring something from paper to stage, the nature of being a travelling troupe with ever-changing cast and audiences led to a morphing of methodologies and goals as the hands shaping the organization changed through time.

Additionally, it seems there were fewer conversations between Bragg and Hays about how the organization was trending and how to best correct the course. In many ways, the pushing-aside of Bragg is what put a final nail in the goal of intelligibility's coffin.

One especially bittersweet reason is that sign-mime itself was a part of this rift between Deaf and hearing. In striving to create a new and innovative artform that would play well on the hands of the Deaf, they had accidentally alienated a large chunk of their Deaf audience.

"I respect and admire the N.T.D.," Bragg says. "It is an important irony that the N.T.D. gave plays that would help the hearing people understand about deaf people. But the more they tried, the further away the deaf people were." (Lewis 1979)

Hays remained the artistic director until 1993, when he stepped back from this role. Bragg, however, left the company in 1977. (Bragg and Bergman 1989, 178-184)

In his autobiography, Bragg talks about a letter from Hays causing him an important realization. In this letter, Hays requests that Bragg handle an upcoming international press appearance very delicately.

"...He says '...the deaf must work very hard to make our [NTD's] appearance a success, but they must allow it to be seen as something that is presented by hearing people. You must very carefully explain the subtle problem that we have always had: that if an appearance is totally sponsored by the deaf, hearing people do not understand it as professional entertainment, but rather as 'help for the handicapped.'" (Bragg and Bergman 1989, 177)

This letter, while seeming well-reasoned to Bragg, left him reevaluating his perceptions of his time at NTD.

"I had thought that the idea was for me, a deaf man, and for him, a hearing man, to jointly make deaf theater popular in the world. In fact, that was my understanding when David and I jointly established the NTD way back in 1966. His letter made me realize that the world was not ready to accept deaf professional theater on its own unless it were led by a hearing person, a man like David." (Bragg and Bergman 1989, 177)

While the world may not yet have been ready, it is impossible to ignore just how essential Bragg was to what NTD became, and to many of its positive impacts on the world.

NTD paved the way for the Deaf theatre that has followed it. It fostered Deaf performers and creatives, helping to make it possible for Deaf performers to be seen more and more now. NTD has, directly and indirectly, effected most Deaf and sign language performances since the theatre's creation. It has fostered Deaf performers and creatives, popularized the idea of signed theatre as art in its own right, and influenced the structure of many Deaf theatre organizations today.

There are goals NTD never achieved, as we have been over. However, that fact does not change that they did have incredible impact on the world, both hearing and Deaf.

And though there were many things sacrificed to come to this point, the troupe truly did achieve Hays' first goal: to create a new artform, brought to audiences by the Deaf.

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