CHAPTER VII
INTERPRETING SETTINGS

SECTION H: PERFORMING ARTS

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Definition

Performing Arts interpreting is putting into sign language all literary and musical works. Literary works include prose, poetry and drama. Musical works include all types of songs, musicals, concerts and classical opera. It may also include various facets of dance with dialogue. All these works may be live, on film or videotape.

Performing Arts interpreting is divided into two areas. The first is where the performer(s) is the main focus; e.g., live theater and concerts. In this situation the interpreter is not an integral part of the performance. The second area is where the interpreter is the main focus and the performers are in the background, e.g., singers and readers. Due to the "artistic license" involved in this area it must be noted that interpreters and interpreter-performers have varying roles and responsibilities.

With the enactment of new legislation (Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Section 504), theaters, and indeed the Performing Arts field (supported by Federal Funds) in America, must recognize and accommodate handicapped individuals, a population that includes a large number of hearing-impaired persons. There are a variety of ways that the performing arts may be made available and accessible for hearing-impaired persons, and one of these ways is through the use of interpreters.

Preparation of the Performing Arts Interpreter

An important factor in a successful production is selection of the interpreter to match the assignment. It is necessary to assess a prospective interpreter's signing style, physical appearance, gender, personality, and ability to use body language, etc. before making decisions regarding assignments. Consequently, there are some Performing Arts situations for which one may not be a suitable interpreter, even though s/he is a skilled interpreter in other situations.

A knowledge of theater process is a valuable tool for an interpreter. This includes understanding theater language, the mechanics of a production and certain acting techniques applicable to interpreting. It also includes the ability to accept suggestions and/or direction from a director in the same way as other persons involved in the production.

Any one that plans to attempt Performing Arts Interpreting should see highly skilled interpreter-performers working in this setting. The interpreter should familiarize her/himself with the films and videotapes of literary and musical works to be performed.

There is no substitute for interaction with a wide range of hearing-impaired persons in a broad spectrum of situations. In order to learn to transmit feelings and emotions so
they can be understood, the interpreter must be familiar with the way the hearing-impaired audience members might express the same emotion.

The key to successful Performing Arts interpreting is constant practice. By practicing in front of a mirror one can do a tremendous amount of self-critique. The interpreter should practice all types of literary and musical works being sure that body attitude, facial expression, force, speed, size, and stress of the signs agree. Failure to do so results in conflicting emotional messages.

The performing arts interpreter needs to distinguish among interpreting, impersonating and acting. While interpreting, the interpreter recognizes the audience in a direct manner. While impersonating, the interpreter has little audience contact. Her/his job is to imitate and dissect the character s/he is portraying. While acting, the person seldom, if ever, has contact with the audience. The task is one of complete identification with the character.

**Preparing for Performing Arts Interpreting Assignments**

In preparing for performing arts interpreting assignments the interpreter should keep the following guidelines in mind.

1. Study the author, poet, or composer. Learn about her/his life, style, times and motivation. The mood and feeling of works written 200 years ago will be different from works written today.

2. Learn about the literal and figurative use of language of the author's or composer's lifetime. Language is a living thing and is definitely subject to change in form and usage. Sign language is no different in this respect. It is changing with time, use, and locale. The single most important fact about any language is that it must convey meaning and communicate feelings. Just as there are many ways to construct an English sentence to convey an idea, so are there many different ways to express it in sign language. Usually, a person will convey a particular idea the same way each time. This form of expression varies with the mood, the approach to the subject, the setting and the person receiving the message.

3. Try to familiarize her/himself with the literary or musical work in advance. Formulate ideas about the emotional tone or impact of the work. Invite suggestions from other interpreters and hearing-impaired persons. Practice until s/he is completely comfortable with the work. The interpreter SHOULD NOT depend on "winging it" and hope the right signs will come at the last moment. If at all possible, s/he should practice with the reader, musician, actor/actress or other performers, and s/he should memorize the work.

4. One of the most important segments of the interpreter's preparation is developing the ability to achieve the "rhythm" of the piece. This is more evident in musical and poetic works but equally important in other forms of Performing Arts interpreting. The interpreter should seek appropriate help in situations where meaning is obscure, unusual symbolization is present, or definition of terms is not clear. Effective interpreting requires understanding of the material by the interpreter.
Physical Environments and Arrangements

The interpreter should take the responsibility of pre-viewing the physical arrangements for the performance. This will allow time for any necessary rearrangements or modifications and reduce confusion at the time of the performance. Considerable flexibility is often required in these types of settings.

1. Physical factors as stated previously in the text should be noted. However, there are several special considerations when interpreting in the Performing Arts. Whenever possible the interpreter has the responsibility to confer with the set and costume designers. This can insure that attention is given to selecting sets and costumes that will assure maximum visibility. The importance and necessity of makeup for the interpreter is the same as for the performer(s).

2. Attention must be given to the seating of hearing-impaired persons in an audience. The optimum placement of the interpreter should be in the line of vision from the hearing-impaired audience members to the performer(s). Hearing-impaired audience members should be seated in the closest area that provides clear viewing of the entire stage area.

3. When using a stage and more than one interpreter, place all interpreters on the same side of the stage; the best placement would be side by side or behind each other on a riser. Some fascinating experiments have been done by educational programs for hearing-impaired audiences and theater groups using multiple interpreters on stage, moving with the actors. This is called shadow interpreting and can be an effective arrangement for certain types of literary and musical works.

4. Lighting for interpreters working in the performing arts may take several forms. Interpreters shadowing the performers or on the stage generally work within the lighting for the performance. Interpreters placed on the side of the stage should receive light from all four sides. The back light should be angled down so it will not shine in the eyes of the audience using a warm or cool light. Use of strong white lights will fade the interpreter's features and causes eye fatigue for the viewer. If only one light is used, it should be a cool or straw colored gel placed above and in front of the interpreter.

Some General Guidelines

In Performing Arts interpreting one must exhibit a high degree of flexibility and creativity. New combinations of existing words often appear in spoken or written language to express a new activity or concept. In this way some existing signs must sometimes be adapted, inflected, modified or extended to express the intent of the author or composer. One must be judicious, however, and not become so inventive that s/he extends beyond the range of understanding of the audience.

To be more effective the Performing Arts interpreter must know and be willing to use signs that are idiomatic as well as possess skills in incorporating pantomime and sign mime in order to portray the full range of emotions in the literary or musical work.

Signs should be large enough for visibility, yet concise and move smoothly from one to another.
The force and tempo of the signs should be directly dependent on the emphasis and tempo of the performance.

When signing before groups that include both hearing-impaired and hearing persons in the audience, avoid body contact for signs that make distracting noises, such as "dog," "school," "paper," and "glory."

Fingerspelling is difficult to read at long distances. Because of this, fingerspell only when absolutely necessary or for special effects or emphasis. Names which are fingerspelled in ordinary situations should have a name sign created for them. These name signs can often incorporate some attribute of the character and therefore enhance understanding.

Stance and facial expression should mirror that of the performer.

The interpreter should silently mouth the original words when signing if at all possible. This assists the hearing-impaired viewers in understanding and renders a more natural appearance. Be careful not to over-exaggerate mouth movements or use an audible voice.

Interpreting Poetry

Interpreting poetry requires special skills. Things like subtle voice rhythms, alliteration, words that rhyme, repeated lines, proper names and places, and unusual grammatical structure make it imperative that the interpreter prepare in advance. Do not attempt to make signs rhyme or show alliteration visually. Convey line repetition of signs and appropriate body rhythm. Use American Sign Language idioms when appropriate. Also, use mime and sign mime; let your hands become "falling leaves," "budding flowers," or a "chattering squirrel."

Interpreting Music

Interpreting music refers to the signed presentation of musical works that have words. This is the largest area of the Performing Arts at this time. Individuals and groups all over the country sign songs, sometimes in a purely interpreter's role and other times in an interpreter/performer role.

Care must be taken to choose songs that lend themselves to being communicated in signs. Songs whose thrust is the instrumentation or melody or have clever plays on English words generally are not meaningful to many hearing-impaired persons and often are difficult to sign. Songs with more story-like content generally can be signed with better clarity and understanding by an audience.

While skill in reading musical notation is not necessary, it is beneficial. Language analysis skills will aid in determining the best ways to sign literal and figurative use of words.

The mood, tempo and rhythm of music can be transmitted visually. Mood may be shown by body and facial expression as well as by varied strengths in the signs. Tempo may be shown by the speed and size of the signs. Rhythm may be conveyed by the
movement and pauses in signing. Rhythm may present the greatest challenge to the interpreter as there is seldom a one-to-one ratio between musical notes and words.

Listed below are certain strategies that can be used to help clarify the relationship between content and rhythm:

1. Use the non-dominant signing hand for emphasis
2. Use two hands for plurality or emphasis
3. Use directional signing
4. Repeat signs for plurality, beat, or emphasis
5. Break two-part signs to fit the rhythm of two syllable words
6. Adjust sign movement to the rhythm
7. Continue sign movement for the duration of a note, especially long notes. "Map out" the signing space so that one sign flows to the next (Economy of Movement)
8. Fingerspell only for special effects or to introduce a name sign.

When multiple interpreters are used and there is unison in the presentation, then there should be unison in the signing. Synchronization is very important or the harmonious effect is lost. Attention during practice must be given to the particulars of sign formation and direction. This is particularly critical in choral presentations. It is also possible to cooperate with a second interpreter to split signs in half or to share a sign with another interpreter.

The interpreter must achieve an artful blend of interpreting sign mime and rhythm. Since individuals receive different impressions of the same song, many different interpretations may be possible. After all, it is an attempt to help hearing-impaired persons understand and enjoy an art form.

Louie Fant, a well known sign performer and interpreter is quoted as saying "My parting word of advice with regard to interpreting poetry and songs in particular, is that the interpreter must abandon all inhibitions and throw her/himself emotionally into the piece. His own emotional involvement in the piece will clarify much that might remain obscure."

Reading

Dirst, R., & Word, J. A new experience in theatrical interpreting. Atlanta, Georgia: Georgia Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, 1979
Performing Arts Interpreting: It's Not Just For Us Hams!

By Janet L. Bailey, CSC, SC:PA, Maryland

Some interpreters love the limelight. They bask in the applause and thoroughly enjoy the challenge of translating difficult lyrics. Then there are those who think we're nuts!

Plays and concerts are clearly artistic. But what about the awards ceremony, graduation, or public forum where they begin with the “Star Spangled Banner,” or some other song sung by the local choir?

I’ve seen interpreters cringe when the speaker says, “I'd like to read you this poem...!” So, even if you plan never to be caught dead on a stage filled with Elizabethan actors, you may want to stay tuned in case you find yourself face to face with performing arts interpreting.

I have a degree in theatre. I learned most of what I know about deaf culture, ASL, and interpreting from my early involvement as one of only a few “hearies” in a signed song group at Gallaudet called Good Vibrations. It was a natural transition for me to interpret music and theatre. Bill Pugin and I convinced the Folger Shakespeare Theatre to allow us to interpret plays in Washington in 1977. Since then I have interpreted hundreds of plays and concerts and it still gives me a thrill! It is a challenging and multi-layered task that begins well before the audience gathers or the curtain goes up!

Preparation

You may work with group sales people, stage managers, lighting designers, sound engineers, directors, and performers. We’ve come a long way since my pioneering days, but there are still folks who have never worked with an interpreter. Get ready to muster all your tact and powers of persuasion to advocate for placement, lighting, and the luxury of scripts or lyrics.

Many venues hire interpreters to tap into the deaf market hoping to bring in revenue. When no one shows up, they may become disgruntled and give up. You may need to help them advertise appropriately, schedule the performance for optimum interest, and explain the workings of a TTY.

You may also need to negotiate for adequate lighting.

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RID Test Compromised

It has been reported to the National Office that the RID Generalist Written Test has been compromised.

At the advice of our legal counsel, a formal investigation has been launched.

According to psychometric industry standards, and at the advice of our psychometrician, we cannot continue to administer the current Generalist Written test.

The Board of Directors, the Certification Council, and the National Office have committed to a complete re-write of the Generalist Written Test in time for the regularly scheduled June test. The membership has responded overwhelmingly to a call to assist in this commitment by writing and submitting questions to be considered for the revised test.
sound monitors, and optimal positioning for the interpreters. I prefer to be on audience level so that they are able to see through the interpreting to the action. If the audience is not seated in a reserved section you may need to be on stage. This inevitably means the far left or right and, in my opinion, reduces the effectiveness. Even in the best of situations when all logistics seem right, the inevitable can happen. During an inaugural gala performance, Sam Parker and I were set to interpret the show when the aisle in front of us was used to escort the “stars” to their seats. As I was trying to interpret through the parade, Sam became frustrated and reached out to move one of the offending pedestrians only to look up and realize he was clutching the calf of Quincy Jones.

Translation

Before you begin to translate, become very familiar with the production. You may know every song from Phantom, but remember you’re not interpreting the cast album. Scenes, songs, and dialogue can be omitted, ignored or forgotten. I’ve seen interpreters launch into a favorite chorus from the recording that doesn’t happen on stage. Be true to the meaning and intent of the author AND the interpretation of the performers.

Choosing conceptually accurate and aesthetic signs is your chance to show your style and use poetic license. Be creative! For My Fair Lady, I cued the noises used when Eliza is learning to say “ah” without her cockney accent. It didn’t matter if the audience understood Cued Speech. They all understood what I was doing and it added to the comedy of the scene.

Sign choreography is your plan for the movements, timing, and sign choices to make a total interpretation. Practice with a mirror, a videotape, or a coach to help assure a complete, pleasing and fitting visual presentation. Consider “down time” between dialogue and lyrics, or when the pace of the piece is so quick that you have to edit. Determine how to sign “in character” using set identifiable visual characteristics to show who’s who. Become the character by changing posture, body-shifts, signing styles and speeds, or general expressions.

When you have two or more interpreters signing together, choreography becomes critical. Individual differences can affect the translation. Planning and practice is essential to make sure you don’t run into each other in a romantic moment. Teams can choose from the following interpreting techniques:

Identical: Both sign exactly the same translation, using the same dominant and base hands for each sign. When you have sufficient rehearsal time this looks wonderful!

Symmetrical: Interpreters use opposite hands for some or all of the signs. Like “identical” the effect can be tremendous!

Combined: This stylized form has one interpreter providing the base hand while the teammate offers the dominant movement. This is often seen for romantic moments when signs like “marriage,” or “meet” are drawn out. It should, in my opinion, be used sparingly and for affect only.

Opposing: There are times when it makes sense to sign the same lyrics differently. If two very different characters are singing together, it might clarify the differences if one interpreters and one transcribes. Many shows also have two characters singing different songs. (You may want to alert the audience to this in pre-production notes.)

Split Focus: Where one interpreter continues signing while the other focuses attention on the stage performance. This can be used when there is something visual happening on stage, but you don’t want to lose the lyrics completely.

Whenever possible the audience should be able to focus on the performers. Don’t forget, they paid good money to see the performers and are stuck watching the interpreter most of the night. Musical interludes are a perfect chance for them to see if the rock star is looking old, or check out the costumes and sets. If the cast breaks into dance while the chorus repeats a song, it can be more interesting for the audience to watch the dance. You can even opt to move out of the sight line if the dance or the visual presentation will take some time.

Rehearsals

When possible, practice during
pre-production rehearsals. When this is impossible, practice with tapes, CDs, or cast albums and try to see the production prior to the interpreted performance. I try to find a hidden or remote place where I can watch and practice without distracting those around me. Once I have seen the action, I like to practice with my back to the actors or the singers to give me a feel for placement that will be as close to the actual conditions I will face. The number of rehearsals depends on your comfort level and the schedule of the performance.

The performance

Your job is not only to provide visual dialogue or lyrics, but to guide the audience through the visual experience. You know what is going to happen, so you need to direct focus back to the stage so they won’t miss the guys slipping on the banana peel! You can do this by simply looking at the stage. When an important line is about to take place, simply look back at the audience and they will take your cue.

Most importantly you should have fun. Your enjoyment is infectious and adds to the overall experience. If you look panicked and overly upset because you cannot hear the lyrics, you will upset your audience, too. Do your job, prepare as well as you can, and when you get to the show...have a good time!

Afterthought

After the hours of work, worry, and practice you will learn a disturbing reality. The production will be over in a split second, even though you spent weeks agonizing over a particular concept or lyric. Be ready for post-production let down. After all you have put a lot of yourself into the preparation and the performance and you may feel empty, emotionally and physically.

But, remember, you can always start to fill up again by accepting another performing arts assignment.

For those of you who still plan to avoid performing arts, two words of warning - art happens. It will creep up and surprise you when you least expect it.

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You can compare lists of different performances in different cities. Keep in mind artists often change their set list from night to night requiring interpreters to be familiar with every single song they have ever written. Your mission? Preserve your team’s sanity—get that set list.

Also found at many artists websites or at www.lyrics.com are lyrics that will make your translating and interpreting life much easier. Lyrics are never what you think they are. Just when you think you’ve memorized a song, you get a hold of the actual lyrics and realize the song’s meaning is totally different, completely ruining your poetic translation. Blow the lyrics up into large print copies and bring them with you to the job. Your team can be firing off the names from your copy of Billy Joel’s We Didn’t Start The Fire, a last minute addition that was not on the set list for that night. Practice copy signing in low light.

Places please...

Expect seating, lighting and sight line snafus. So, greet your contact person early wearing comfortable contrasting clothing. Interpreters should be located in a section where the performers and interpreters are in the same line of sight. (No tennis matches please). Advocate for yourselves, too. Ask for a comfortable place where the whole team can work without the interruption of curious audience members. The perfect lighting situation would include an adjustable instrument with a dimmer. Shutter it and add a light amber gel. If this is not available, a small music stand light will do. Bring a flashlight. It’ll do in a pinch.

Struggling to hear the lyrics? Today’s stadiums and arenas are no Theatre Dionysus. Acoustics are lousy and artists’ diction are worse. Add this to the incessant drums, loud guitar and rowdy fans and you’ve got an aural impossibility. Onsite, make friends with an unsuspecting back stage technician and campaign for an audio listening system or monitor which funnels vocals directly to your ear. Also see if he or she can cough up the most current set list—never hurts.

When setting up for the average two act concert, CAP schedules a team of three interpreters. Each team has two leads and an understudy who serves as a rehearsed backup should one of the leads fall ill. Venues are visited before their performance dates when accessible seating arrangements, sight lines and credentials are arranged. Credentials should, whenever possible, include a parking pass and a hanging or self adhesive pass that gains easy access between restrooms, the interpreted section, restrooms, administrative offices and restrooms. Did I mention restrooms? It’s always a good idea to introduce yourself to neighboring security folks. Bodyguards are an excellent commodity when the interpreters are stationed in the mosh pit.

The most important thing about concert interpreting is to have fun. Concerts are social events attended for the sole purpose of having a good time. Deaf consumers are there to see the show just like the hearing audience members. Don’t kid yourself into thinking that they have come to see you. Leave egos behind and bring your infectious smile. By the way, don’t forget that you get to see your favorite performers too and they pay you to do it.

1 Slang term for the area in front of the stage where standing grunge rockers are crammed into a small space. Slammers and crammers who jostle for a better view, are moved to thurst, head butt, slam dance and even propel their neighbors by passing them overhead in a feat known as “crowd surfing.” Although I can’t recommend this activity for interpreters...it is kinda fun. Heavy shoes and strong bones required!
Interpreting For Theatre

By Lynnette Taylor, CSC and Stephanie Feyne, CI and CT, CSC, New York

As theatre interpreters, we operate from the basic premise that the audience has come to the theatre to see the play, not the interpreters. Once that has been taken into consideration, then our task becomes clear - to translate the story from a spoken language into ASL. Some audiences prefer to have more of a transliterated approach, but for purposes of this article, we will be talking about translations into ASL. (Although, even with transliterations, some of the questions we use to approach translation would apply.) Our fundamental belief is that regardless of the form of the source message - be it the naturalistic drama of Arthur Miller, the poetry of Tennessee Williams, the iambic pentameter of Shakespeare, the dance and music of "Jelly's Last Jam," or the cryptic and apocalyptic drone of Arrabal — the MEANING takes precedence over everything else.

In theatre, interpreters find meaning in the text (its form and its function), what actors have done with the text (character, tone, etc.), and the staging (which includes blocking, lighting, sound effects, music, etc.). In short, the entire piece as a whole has to be considered when interpreting. The actors' choices about their characters (which affect the way lines are delivered), the context of the situation and the visual information as well as the mood of the performance, will all affect the interpreters' choices. These are not unlike the considerations we face when we interpret in the community.

Before jumping in, we feel it is critical to look at our work in relation to the whole of the piece, not just at our interpretations. Recognize that the image is a fundamental signifier of meaning. The play is like a cinematic frame and if we take up too much of the frame the audience can't see the image. What that means in practical terms is: keep your translations clear and brief, and always refer to the stage not only as a focal point, but as a significant expression of the meaning (which can also be called the story).

OK, so where to start? Start with the play and the script. Do a text analysis. Do you understand it in its original form? What questions do you have about the piece? Dramaturg it with an expert in the field, if need be. Every year for Shakespeare in the Park in New York, we hire a dramaturg to answer our questions and help us understand the complexities of the play and the historical relationships. We may not be able to embed all the multiple meanings into our translations, but we have the information and from there we can make choices about our translations. Also, make sure that you and your partners have the same understanding of the play. It's important that you all are telling the same story.

Once you know the story, then the goal is to render it into the target language in a natural form, one not based on that of the source language. Unlike actors, we do not have the luxury of performing the same role night after night and perfecting our lines, and it's not realistic to "freeze" an entire translation. That's why it's critical to KNOW the story. That way the story is your guide, and you won't be lost or floundering if you can't remember your "perfect translation."

In rendering the character's lines into ASL, it's helpful to know what actors consider when developing their characters. As printed in the text Respect for Acting by Uta Hagen, the areas an actor examines to "unearth the character" include: character, circumstances, objective, obstacles, relationships, communication, style. As interpreters, we need to watch and listen to what the actor does in these areas and let the actors' choices inform our translation choices.

Equally important to the actors' choices are your interpreting partner's choices. They also inform your interpretation. Just like good actors, good theatrical interpreters must "listen" to the signs they are given and respond appropriately. Theatrical dialogue is grounded by characters responding to each other. Interpreting partners must also ground their interpretation by incorporating the linguistic connectors that make dialogue believable, rather than stilted.

In a performance venue, interpreters show their respect for the piece by conforming their translation and its performance to convey the qualities presented on the stage. The goal is that your translations guide the audience to understand the characters. This may sound contradictory: to convey but not become the character. One way to keep your balance is to hold a mental image of this work as "storyteller" rather than as performer, with the actors generating the lines and the interpreter imparting them to the Deaf audience.

Also, since the audience is there to see the play, part of the interpreters' job is to refer to the stage, allowing the audience to focus on action and reaction and other important visual cues or scenes.

Once your preparation is complete, it's extremely helpful to then make sure your work is effective. One way to evaluate your work is to get feedback from a Deaf advisor (If you have that luxury). You can also back-translate your work and check if the meaning is clear, if the relationships are clear, if your translation expresses what you want it to and is appropriate for your intended audience.

And after you've done the show, how do you evaluate your work? Check in with the audience. That will give you a true sense of whether it was successful or what can be improved. If the Deaf audience leaves talking about the play, take pride in that. You've done your job.
The Challenge of Theatrical Interpreting

By Candace Broecker Penn, CI and CT, CSC, OIC:C, MA, New York City

Translating plays has become an accepted practice in theater. Readers of plays and audiences desire to gain understanding about the human experience. Over the centuries, Homer has been re-envisioned by numerous writers in prose as well as verse. The Greek tragedies and comedies, French farces, authors such as Pirandello, Ionesco, and Chekhov have been translated time and again. The desire to make a text more current and vibrant to the contemporary audience even inspires modern writers such as David Mamet to translate a play. I contend that the same freedoms afforded the great translators should be extended to theatrical interpreters working for Deaf audiences today. Interpreting a play is a large and complex undertaking and not to be taken lightly. It requires the freedom to make the boldest and clearest choices on behalf of the theatrical performance.

The translator of the printed page seeks to be utterly true to the text in a way that is clearly understood in their present culture. Similarly, the interpreter is expected to bring the play to life in another language. Yet what gives the play meaning, essence, and ambiance in one language can be quite different in another language.

The artistic license afforded translators allows for freedoms as well as constraints. The challenge is to attain an equivalent resonance. Using the same framework, the interpreter must make a series of effective aesthetic choices. The interpreter has to weigh the liberty to convey the essence of the theatrical experience with the responsibility to the literal text.

The translator and interpreter are really two bookends in the process. The translator’s work occurs prior to the production. The finished work will hopefully result in a published version for posterity. The text serves as a basis for the actors to perform it, the directors to stage it, and then for anyone to read. The interpreter’s work, by contrast, occurs at the end of the theatrical process and is often condensed into a few weeks. The theatrical interpretation is also more transient. It may be done for one or two performances. Yet, it is no less serious a task. It begins with the text, but the interpreter cannot expect to know how to translate a written script without seeing the actors and director’s work in a particular production.

In searching for appropriate choices, many facets of the performance will inform our decisions about the interpretation. We must examine the plot and theme of the play, looking for the message that the playwright and director are trying to communicate. The well-known director and teacher of acting, Lee Strasburg, has said it is the director’s job to look for the events of the play that are not stated—the secrets—and use them to inform the performances. There is sometimes a world of difference in the way that actors provide life using affect and meaning to the text. It can, in fact, be in opposition to the written line. The interpreter’s job is to convey the essence of the human exchange, not just the literal exchange. The interpreter must understand the nature of the dramatic events. This requires the freedom to examine closely the issues of text vis-a-vis subtext, thematic images, mood and motives of characters, mood of the play, and the events that inform the scenes; and include in the analysis specifics such as language choices, eye focus and eyegaze, use of space and movement onstage. These are a few of the elements an interpreter has to weigh in translating a performance.

Art, a French play, is currently being produced on Broadway. It is already a hit in France and England. For the American audiences, the original French and English translators spent time working with the American cast. Interestingly, decisions were made to keep all proper French nouns and even the monetary unit, francs; after all, the play takes place in Paris. However, some words and phrases were thought to be too British and were changed such as “That’s it, is it?” to “So that’s it” so that American audiences would more easily connect. (Playbill, 98(3), p.12) As actor Alan Alda says, “the point is not that we should sound like Americans, but that we should be directly understandable to the American audiences as the French actors were to the French and the British actors were to the British audiences.” (op. cit.) Alda’s comments seem particularly applicable to theatrical interpreting. The primary objective must be to make the play directly understandable to Deaf audiences.

Comparing excerpts from two recent translations of The Cherry Orchard by Chekhov done by Jean Van Italie and David Mamet provides a demonstration of the translator’s freedoms in choice.

Van Italie (1977)

Yasha: May I pass through, s’il vous plaît?

Dunyasha: One wouldn’t recognize you, Yasha. You look so...European.

Mamet (1985)

Yasha: Excuse me but may I be permitted to walk through here?

Dunyasha: May you... Don’t you know who I...? Yasha...? What did they do to you in Europe...?

Consider Van Italie’s use of “One wouldn’t...” No one speaks like that today. The use of the French seems a
bit too affected, not the way that Americans speak. Mamet finds more of the rhythms that are used in our contemporary speech. He uses broken cadences, unfinished sentences (May you...) and interrupted thoughts (Don’t you...). In addition, Mamet is leaving as much unsaid as said, thus requesting the actor to fill in the thought process. By contrast, Van Italie is fairly straightforward. The result by Mamet is a piece that is not just a translation of the original text, but a true interpretation that speaks to the audience in the way that Chekhov spoke to the Russian audiences of his time. These are examples of bold choices made in a contemporary style.

Both translations are widely used. Both translators preserved the integrity of the original. Their information is clear, but Mamet writes in a current voice that may feel more connected to the modern audience. Similarly, the theatrical interpreter must search for the most effective and natural expression in American Sign Language.

It is striking how often translators work in tandem with each other. Comedy particularly seems to present frustrations to the translator as well as the interpreter. Off-Broadway, at the Roundabout Theatre, a new translation of a Georges Feydeau farce A Flea In Her Ear is currently running. This endeavor required cross-cultural discussions between the two translators, one French and one American, to find a contemporary equivalence that would be just as entertaining. Some simple examples from the production include changing the name of the Hotel Coq Dor (The Golden Cock or Rooster) to the Hotel Pussycat. Although the name change switches gender, it retains the sexual allusion and makes an effective impact on the American audience. A comparison of two translations of a later line: “It's not exactly a nursery school” (Besset & O’Donnell, p.11 ) versus “It doesn't sound like a family place” (B. Shaw, p.15) exemplify the struggle to find funny solutions. Humor is, of course, culturally bound. In comedy every interpreter wrestles with how much freedom, or artistic license, to take. The questions of what choices to make, what risks to take, and how much one should deviate from the text indicate that access to cross-cultural discussions are necessary to make the best decisions. Working in tandem with a native signer, be it an advisor, director, or coach, helps in that endeavor. The interpreter simply cannot afford to stand up and interpret the text literally.

Theater is a shared experience. We learn how others respond as we react as a communal body to the events onstage. There is a synergy involving the exchange of energy between the performers, the play, and the audience. Fine theatre transcends cultural lines. There is something in a well-crafted play that everyone responds to. August Wilson writes about the Black experience in ways that all audiences understand. Children of A Lesser God is about more than Deaf Culture. Plays such as Hamlet are always beckoning us back for another look, another reconsideration.

As interpreters, we are both part of the performance and part of the audience. This is an important distinction between translator and interpreter. The interpreter must consider not only the text, but also the dynamics of the production and audience response. The translator is more textually bound. The interpreter is more experientially bound. The interpreter must include the impact of the dramatic event on the audience sitting in the theater. To obtain a true response, it is informative to attend the play first without reading the script. Participate as an audience member fully enjoying the experience of the performance. The memories and feelings connected to the show will inform translation choices later in the process. The rehearsal should include continued observations noting not only when stage action is quiet or active, or when there is a strong desire to focus on the stage, but also when the audience laughs, cries, or holds its collective breath. Everyone wants to connect to the feelings that are expressed in the performances; the audience wants to experience the thrills and chills of the play.

At the end of the interpreter’s rehearsal process, it is valuable to return and watch the play one last time. At this performance, the interpreter should note again how the actors are portraying their characters, the dynamic movement of the play as a whole, and connect again with the audience’s willing suspension of disbelief. The interpreter usually stands with his or her back to the stage and these intangible aspects are important pieces of the transla-

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Specialist Certificate: Performing Arts
An RID History Lesson


I am one of only 10 Americans who hold the RID Specialist Certificate: Performing Arts." Impressed? Let me burst that bubble. The only reason the ten certificate holders can boast this achievement is that RID offered the training and the performance test once and only once. The first ten certified in 1980 were the last certified. [Mind you, this minor reality has never stopped me from making that impressive statement!]

The ten holders of the SC:PA are: Darlene Allen (CA), Janet Bailey (MD), Debbie Brenner (GA), Becky Carlson (MN), Andrew L. Diskant (OH), Steve Fritsch-Rudser (CA), Laurel Goodrich (CO), Rob Granberry (TX), Margaret James (WI) and Anna Witter-Merithew (NY).

In August 1979, 15 interpreters attended the five day training, held at the beautiful Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center in Waterford, Connecticut. The program was a joint effort between the National Theatre of the Deaf and RID supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

A paper written by project coordinator Julia Hays describes the training as, "a pilot workshop . . . designed to explore skills needed by interpreters to assure successful crossover into the theater world . . ."

We were fortunate to have a star-studded and talented faculty: Phyllis Frellich, Michael Posnick, Andy Vasnick, John Broome (Movement Director of Royal Shakespeare Company); Bernard Bragg; Ed Waterstreet, and Susie Kirchner, RID representative. Classes included acting, voice, movement, translation, role, and discussions of practical interpreting concerns.

For four days and nights we attended classes. The fifth day, 8/31/79 (imagine doom filled music) we took our evaluation. Now, I don't want to say that this was too much to cram into one five day period... but, much of my memory is a blur! I seem to recall that our evaluation was split into several components with a "rehearsed" and an "unrehearsed" piece. Keep in mind that we were in class from dawn to late in the evening. The rehearsed piece was given to us to rehearse the night before the evaluation and the unrehearsed piece was given to us just prior to entering the hall of doom. [Fellow SC:Paers: Am I right in remembering the evaluation took place in a trailer and that those of us waiting our turn sat fidgeting on picnic tables outside???]

I do recall that I have never been so nervous. Those of you who know me know that I don't suffer from stage fright. THAT EVALUATION SCARED ME. I even remember that my lips quivered as I tried to perform "Evergreen" in front of the live panel of seven hearing and deaf members. Ed Waterstreet had always been an idol of mine... and there he sat watching my lips quiver... I could have died. I still have my evaluation paper which offers feedback such as, "Lively appearance - theatrical," and "needs more composure."

The pilot training was a great first step. Many of us who were actively working on interpreted theatre projects felt that the tight class schedule left little or no time for us to get to know each other and benefit from what we had all learned in our own areas. All of us were experimenting and learning in our own areas of the country. We all had similar concerns (i.e., audience development, and how to deal with theatre personnel who didn't want us there in the first place.) We brought with us stories of great successes and frustrating failures. Stage Hands Director, Debbie Brenner, was one of the first to experiment with Shadowing. I wish we had had more time to share. But, we did make contacts that have lasted through the years.

We've come a long way since 1979. The work of these RID pioneers has opened theatre doors all over America.

The ADA has forced open even more, including concert halls. More and more interpreters are working in this area, audiences are increasing, and training opportunities abound. Still, there are only 10 who hold the specialist certificate. Thought for the day: should RID re-establish the SC:PA?

I offer this article as a history lesson. Sadly, the RID office has no record of this event in their files. Luckily, I have every check I have written since 1969. I plan to copy the information for the National Office. As RID members we need to try to keep our history intact. So, dust off those files and shoe boxes, and offer up your own slice of RID history.
Doin' A Vanna  
or  
One Focus Thrown is Worth a Thousand Signs

By Sign On Stage, Illinois (Joyce Cole, CSC, Marijo Wimbush, Associate Member, and Donna Relter Brandwein, CSC)

Artistic interpreters are always aware of the fine line between conveying the information and becoming the show. What we often forget is all that is happening behind us or next to us (or if we are lucky, in front of us) depending on our placement! Visually, there is so much on the stage for us to use to tell the story. We often feel the whole world of the story on our shoulders, but in fact we have lots of things to help us if we take a breath, remember it's there and then rehearse to use it.

As an example, during the finale of Act One in Showboat, a huge production number is staged called "The Wedding Celebration." Everyone and their mother is on stage during this scene! The song that is being sung is explaining the happiness of the wedding day (without a lot of complexity) and then flows into a reprise of a song that has already been sung earlier in the act. The interpreter modulated the size and intensity of her signs:

■ to convey the information in the lyrics
■ to set the tone of the scene
■ to give out the essentials

While signing "small," she began to look at the stage herself. This allowed the audience to trust they got the point of the lyrics and begin to leave her and look at the stage. This technique allowed people to know what was happening and also to enjoy the pageantry of the number. Entrances of the main characters in beautiful costumes told more eloquently what was happening than the lyrics of the song. This is one way of using what is behind you to help tell the story (throwing focus).

Another example comes from the play, A Streetcar Named Desire. During one scene, Stanley and Stella have a horrendous fight and Stella runs to the upstairs neighbor’s apartment to hide. (This, of course, is the S-T-E-L-L-AAAAAAAA scene made famous by Marlon Brando.) Water is thrown from a bucket onto his head to get him to shut up and go away. The two interpreters were sitting on the edge of the stage quite near the staircase going up to that apartment where that water was going to hit. The interpreters wanted to make sure the audience would be able to catch every moment so they memorized the lines and finished signing them a tad early and threw focus to the stage behind them. (They took advantage of this break in the work to scoot up a little too so as not to get wet themselves!) We call this “doin’ a Vanna” (without pointing, of course).

As artistic interpreters, we are constantly making choices about what to include, what to drop, what’s important to the story and what is not. When making these choices and decisions, factoring in the visual moments that are essential for the audience to see becomes paramount. We don’t have to, nor should we, tell the story by ourselves. Using the story as it is being told on the stage visually (including the costumes, the set, the blocking/movement/dancing, etc.) and highlighting the most important moments by throwing focus allows the audience’s gaze to flow back and forth between the action and interpreters quite naturally.

Seeing the production as many times as possible is the most valuable tool in preparing to use these techniques. After seeing the show, the second step is to work with the script. While preparing your translation, you and your partner can begin to find these moments in the script and flag them. Third, going back to view the play again (and again) is then necessary to plan these moments out adequately. Lastly, rehearsing with your partner using an audiotape of the production is then necessary to work out the timing of these moments.

These techniques are easy to incorporate into your work and help to make the fine line between conveying the information and becoming the show easier to find. Using what is happening on the stage visually is an incredible tool that interpreters can always use to help tell the story. In this way, the actors, the scenery, the costumes, the staging and the interpretation all work together to enhance the Deaf and hard of hearing audience member’s experience of the entertainment event. ■
Interpreting for the Theatre: Behind the Scenes

By Beth Prevor, CT, MA, Executive Director, HANDS ON, New York City

Almost 20 years ago, an interpreter was hired to interpret a play at a small theatre in New York. As a former stage manager (on and off Broadway) and then a sign language student, I was very interested in this new field of theatrical interpreting and found out about the performance through the interpreter (my sign language teacher at the time). I got to my seat, and I believe there was one deaf person, another student and myself (actually not a bad crowd for the time). There was a stool with a small table next to it in front of us. As the lights went down and the interpreter took her seat, the stage manager came out and placed a single candle on the table, lit it, and the show began. Between the constant flickering, shadows and basic darkness it was almost impossible to see the interpreter. Needless to say, the deaf audience member was not happy. During intermission, the three of us huddled, and, having a theatre background, I was volunteered to talk to the stage manager. The stage manager, full of good intentions, felt a candle would lend a certain ambiance to the interpreting by mirroring the mood of the play (Shakespeare, if memory serves me right). So, I spent Act two not watching the play or the interpreter, but trying to keep a flashlight beam focused in the interpreter’s signing space. End of story but beginning of HANDS ON.

In this article I hope to share some of the things I’ve learned in the last 16 years about producing interpreted theatre. HANDS ON was established as a full service arts organization dedicated to producing interpreted theatre. We were founded by four women (two theatrical interpreter/actresses, one deaf actress and me, a stage manager). Our goal was to determine exactly what was involved in producing an interpreted performance and then develop a systematic approach which would ensure its smooth coordination. We knew that interpreting a play was more than just putting an interpreter on a stool. But we also knew that our field was unknown and foreign to most theatre personnel. A theatre would probably not know how to find a qualified interpreter, much less a deaf audience, nor would the interpreter know how to make sure the light was set right and the audience was seated in the right place. We wanted everyone involved to be responsible only for their field of expertise. Our job would be to coordinate the various roles and functions. We designed a system that divides a production into three focal areas: the theatre, the interpreters, and the audience. We developed a time line for each of the three areas. Starting two months before the interpreted performance, the time line included all tasks from first contact with a theatre continuing through to audience feedback forms after the production. There have been slight modifications, refinements and clarifications over the years. However, our original design has proven substantially reliable as a vehicle for producing a successful interpreted performance. The following is a brief overview of the tasks to be accomplished within each of the areas.

Theatres

All meetings with new theatres begin with a consultation. This is a soup to nuts discussion of exactly what’s involved with interpreting a play. With many of the theatres we work being not-for-profit, money is usually at the top of their list of questions and priorities. We offer information and advise on fundraising ideas. However, sometimes this initial conversation leads to the realization that the project cannot be undertaken immediately. In that case, we guide the theatre to accepting that time may be better spent planning for the future. One of the outcomes of our initial consultation with the theatres is that we clarify what our official relationship is to be. Once hired, HANDS ON functions as a contractual employee of the theatre, meaning...
that we become one of the theatre's official programs, applying our technical expertise to performing work which they initiate. For example, for-profit theatres place a strong emphasis on audience development and community involvement. Because of our position as a program of the theatre, we are uniquely situated to become involved in this aspect of the theatre's mission. Because we possess technical knowledge and connections which the theatre lacks, we are able to bring in deaf audiences and make the performance accessible. So while we may act as a link between the theatre and the Deaf community, the program itself belongs to and is funded by the theatre. Initially, it's important that a person from the theatre be identified who will serve as a contact, coming from whatever department the theatre deems appropriate, be it marketing, development or ticket services. This person functions as a liaison between the needs of the interpreted production staff (HANDS ON) and the resources of the theatre.

Some things to consider early in your discussions with the theatre include:

- setting the date and number of performances;
- the allocation of tickets: how many? the price? group rates?; deadline for reservations?;
- the number of interpreters needed, and their fees;
- where the interpreters go to rehearse during performances and how they get into the theatre;
- marketing and audience development issues.

Interpreters

Interpreters are hired by HANDS ON for each production. Ideally, we will have seen the play (or at least read a script) before hiring to ensure a good match between interpreter and production. The number of interpreters hired also depends on the production. We work with one to four interpreters for a performance. Directors and advisors are hired to work with the interpreters, again depending on the needs of an interpreter. We've also had situations where we bring in specialists to assist the interpreters. For example, for The Golem (a play with many references on Judaism) we hired a Rabbi; for Shakespearean plays we hire a dramaturg. Each play has to be considered individually, as each offers unique challenges. Updated scripts, audiotapes, access to the theatre, interpreter placement, and lighting needs are all coordinated by HANDS ON. The goal is always to allow the interpreter to focus on interpreting rather than worrying about all these other necessary but non-interpreting issues.

Audience

And finally the audience—perhaps the most important part. The job of the audience is to find out about the performance, make their reservations and attend, hopefully with anticipation of the event. HANDS ON mails out flyers advertising the performances, takes reservations, answers questions, arranges seating, and designs program inserts. We take care of preferential seating (close for visually impaired people; some people just have a favorite seat, which we try to remember). As a small company with an audience that we know very well, and who knows us very well, the personal touch is very important. We want the experience to be something the audience will enjoy (maybe not always the play, but the experience). Our job as liaison between the Deaf community and the theatre is to make them feel welcome; this is something we work hard to achieve.

In the last 16 years, HANDS ON has produced more than 250 interpreted performances, provided consultations to more than 40 theatres and arts organizations nationwide and sponsored workshops on interpreting and audience development. We have developed a highly regarded and meticulously maintained mailing list of almost 2,000. We have recently expanded our services to include the TOLA Program (Theatre Offers a Lifetime of Adventure). The TOLA Program is geared toward providing interpreted performances suitable for families with young children (for deaf children with hearing parents or hearing children with deaf parents).

Four years ago, we began producing a monthly Calendar of Cultural Events for the Deaf community, a service which started from a request from the community for a centralized information source for accessible cultural programs. Community response has been overwhelmingly positive. We also maintain a Web page where we get questions from people from around the country and around the world.

Our goal at HANDS ON has always been access for the Deaf community to theatre and the arts. The cumulative affect of 16 years of interpreted theatre has afforded our Deaf audience the experience necessary for them to become part of the theatre-going community. In New York City, members of the Deaf community have become sophisticated and discriminating audience members. They choose the plays they will attend based on a real knowledge of what is going on in the theatre world. Developing a relationship of trust and a long term commitment amongst all those involved—audiences, theatres and interpreters is an essential element. It takes time and hard work, but we've come a long way from an interpreter, a stool and a candle.
Jabberwocky

‘Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
  Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogroves,
  And the mome raths outgrabe.

“Beware the Jabberwocky, my son!
  The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the Jubjub bird, and the shun
  The frumious Bandersnatch!”

He took his vorpal sword in hand:
  Long time the manxome foe he sought-
So rested he by the Tumtum tree,
  And stood awhile in thought.

And as in uffish thought he stood,
  The Jabberwocky, with eyes of flame,
Came whiffling through the tulgey wood,
  And burbled as it came!

One, two! One, two! And through and through
  The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!
He left it dead, and with its head
  He went galumphing back.

“And hast thou slain the Jabberwocky?
  Come to my arms my gleaming boy!
O frabious day! Callooh! Callay!”
  He chortled in his joy.

‘Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
  Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogroves,
  And the mome raths outgrabe.