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Towards a bilingual theatre aesthetic: an interview with the Deaf and Hearing Ensemble

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Towards a bilingual theatre aesthetic: an interview with the Deaf and Hearing Ensemble

Interview with the lead artists of The Deaf and Hearing Ensemble

Michael Richardson

The Deaf and Hearing Ensemble: Website

- ¹ <http://www.thedeafandhearingensemble.com/about/>

[Figure 1]



An early R & D photograph of Sophie Stone and Erin Siobahn Hutching in *People of the Eye*. (Sophie Stone's role later played by Emily Howlett.)

Photograph by David Monteith-Hodge

The Interview

- 2 In the UK and elsewhere the current paradigm for encouraging D/deaf¹ people to participate in theatre is the sign language interpreted performance (SLIP), the presentation of a piece of spoken language theatre, simultaneously translated in to sign language by usually a single interpreter placed in the downstage corner of the stage. After twenty years or more of promoting this panacea for accessibility, however, theatre managers and academics alike report that attendance at such SLIPs by Deaf spectators is lower than anticipated, and my own (to date unpublished) research into SLIPs suggests that Deaf spectators do not find them as accessible as those who provide them had hoped.
- 3 The ubiquity of SLIPs belies the fact that theatre has been a central part of Deaf culture for over a century. Amateur performances in Deaf schools and clubs were commonplace and are recorded from the late 1800s. Professionally, national and/or regional Deaf theatre companies were established in the second half of the twentieth century in many European countries, as well as in the United States, Russia and beyond. Not all have survived. Miles and Fant (1976)² define Deaf theatre in its purest form as theatre that portrays characters and stories drawn from the Deaf cultural experience, performed in sign language by Deaf people. Clearly this is as inaccessible to hearing audiences as spoken language theatre is to Deaf people; but without hearing spectators, audience numbers have often been insufficient to sustain Deaf theatre companies or even individual productions of Deaf theatre.
- 4 My own particular interest is a middle way: theatre that is both bilingual (spoken and signed language) and bicultural (Deaf and hearing). How can performances be created

that are equally accessible to D/deaf and hearing audiences by drawing on the language choices and cultural experiences of both Deaf and hearing theatre makers?

- 5 Companies producing this kind of work in the UK are uncommon, but one that stands out in this regard is the Deaf and Hearing (DH) Ensemble. They self-define (on their website³) as

a group of D/deaf and hearing actors, directors, theatre makers, writers, artists, musicians, dancers and all round lovely people coming together to create theatre. We make live performance using a mix of British Sign Language, Spoken English, projection, movement, mime, music and soundscapes... We believe in breaking down barriers and pre-conceived perceptions. We aim to create innovative performance exploring genuine, truthful interaction. All our work is fully accessible for D/deaf and hearing audiences.

- 6 For this essay, I interviewed three of the lead artists within the DH Ensemble: Jennifer K. Bates, Sophie Stone and Erin Siobahn Hutching. Jen, hearing, is the co-founder and director of the ensemble. Sophie is a deaf actor who has also been with the company since 2013. Erin, a hearing writer and performer, joined the company in 2014 to create the autobiographical piece *People of the Eye*, about the reality of life growing up in a family with two sisters, one Deaf and one hearing: I will use this show throughout the essay as a practical example of the Ensemble's work. (The DH Ensemble's fourth lead artist, Deaf actor Stephen Collins, was unavailable to participate due to work on other freelance performance projects).

- 7 All three of my interviewees are clear that what lies at the heart of the work of the DH Ensemble is accessibility, for both performers and audiences. "It was always incredibly important for us to honour both cultures and languages in the room. All our work is made by D/deaf and hearing artists" (Jen); and "We aim to produce accessible work for both D/deaf and hearing audiences, where the actors work on an equal playing field; and to explore a language in theatre that is shared and free from barriers" (Sophie). This is not theatre in the 'community theatre' model however. The DH Ensemble occupies "quite a unique place on the theatrical landscape, creating high quality accessible experimental Off-West End theatre, rather than community theatre, theatre for young people or theatre geared more towards D/deaf audiences rather than both D/deaf and hearing." (Erin).

- 8 Since their foundation in 2013 the goal of accessibility has become supplemented by aims which support the artists and their working practices. All their work creates "room for exploration and discovery... all members have inter-changeable skills and we're open to supporting each other in individual desires to direct, write, produce etc within the company" (Sophie). Nurturing this environment of flexibility has become a central driver of the work: "The aims in regards to process are to continue exploring and playing for the duration of the process. This means even before we realise a seed of an idea had been planted - and even after you may think something has been put to bed - the traces of what we discovered will continue to grow and we aim to let it. [We] always allow an idea to come to the surface or as we say 'throw the egg,' meaning it could smash and be a bit messy or, it could become a bird and fly" (Jen). This spirit of discovery, a "looking outside of the box and into ourselves" is not without acknowledged risks; a "great deal of bonding and trust" is required in the creation of shows such as *People of the Eye*. "It's vital that we honour how vulnerable we ask our artists to be and therefore another sub-aim if you like would be the safety of our artists - providing the safe space for this creativity and honesty to emerge" (Jen).

A Concept of Performance

- 9 In my own research I look to Performance Studies to provide a theoretical framework which is equally applicable to theatre and to sign language interpreting (I referred earlier to sign language interpreted performances as the most common method adopted in the UK to encourage the participation of Deaf people in theatre.) I draw on the work of Fischer-Lichte (2014)⁴, and as her framework has guided this interview I will very briefly review her theoretical approach here.
- 10 For Fischer-Lichte a performance is an event consisting of clearly circumscribed activities, taking place in one location at a given time. The participants are actors and spectators, and the performance is created live by the interaction between these participants when they are together in the same space. The performance is built by the actors from a number of material elements: the use of the actors' bodies, the use of space, and the use of sound. As Fischer-Lichte assumes that language is spoken she subsumes it within the broader category of sound; but in my work I am considering signed language and sometimes language represented in other forms, for example in captions or surtitles. Accordingly I add the use of language to Fischer-Lichte's original three material categories. Furthermore, because I acknowledge the potential use of language in spoken, signed and written modes, and the subsequent impact of these on Fischer-Lichte's pre-existing material categories, I prioritise language use above other material aspects of performance.
- 11 The role of the spectators at such a performance is to construct meaning from the different material phenomena presented to them. In theatre, being present at a performance is a particular experience which combines processes that are artistic, social and often political: it can open up liminal spaces that do not exist in the real world, in which spectators can undergo transformative experiences. Fischer-Lichte refers to this liminality in theatre as the aesthetics of performance.
- 12 The remainder of this essay will present the views of the lead artists of the DH Ensemble on their use of language, physicality, space and sound in the creation of their work. I will conclude by summarising the response of DH Ensemble audiences, demonstrating that the work does indeed seem capable of creating an effective bilingual theatre aesthetic.

On the use of language

- 13 "Theatre is communication. People are communication. It makes perfect sense for us to mix it all up and play with [language] in many different forms. We [want] a fun exploration for an audience of deciding how it wants to receive its information. And what happens when that communication breaks down? And there are gaps? And some people are getting information that you are not getting because it's foreign to you? Or the actors are keeping it to themselves?" (Jen)
- 14 To avoid such inequality, the DH Ensemble intends that "both hearing and D/deaf audiences alike will have a shared experience on an equal level, even if what they take from it may be different on a personal level" (Sophie). "We hope to make the piece accessible to both Deaf British Sign Language (BSL) users and hearing audiences. [Also] we hope to tell the audience more about... the reality of real-world communication

through the mix of communication methods on stage.” (Erin). By playing with the use of language, the DH Ensemble invites audiences to focus on characters, relationships and stories “rather than working out which of us are D/deaf or hearing - the name of our company is almost to remind you to forget” (Sophie).

- 15 Interestingly, the focus on a shared experience is counter-balanced by a fascination with the liminal spaces that are created when communication breaks down. Moments of conflict for example create challenges relating to how information is shared with the audience. Sometimes “it’s useful for us to obviously split our audience in two. For example, during *People of the Eye* we very deliberately had a scene where our Deaf character discovered her ‘voice’ in BSL and, in silence, proceeded to directly sign to the audience. We let this moment land. After a delay we then establish our hearing character discovering her voice in English, telling a similar story but from her view point. This was a very deliberate moment when our audience was divided and this, in turn mirrored the characters’ journeys on the stage” (Jen).
- 16 Artistically, language choice is usually related to character: “Each character decides what form of language it wants to use at that particular time...and this has probably come out of the devising process, or for *People of the Eye* it was in the script” (Jen). Decisions about “the mix of spoken English or BSL and when it is used” (Erin) also tend to emerge in the devising process. For example, in recent Research and Development work on *Macbeth* at the Barbican in London “we had two actors playing Macbeth and two playing Lady Macbeth, two Deaf and two hearing. In each pair, one used spoken English and the other used BSL, but we also explored swapping languages at points of high tension” (Erin). The intention here is not to produce a direct translation of Shakespeare into BSL. “That’s not as interesting as exploring how the spoken and visual languages support and contradict each other, and when the two actors playing each character work together and when they fracture, showing the indecision, fear or conflict within the character” (Erin).
- 17 Despite this obvious drive for artistic innovation, however, the concomitant guiding principal is always accessibility. For example in *People of the Eye*, the (hearing) “mother’s monologue would not have made sense to be signed but we needed it to be accessible to the D/deaf audience” (Jen). Language choices may also go beyond the accessible and become political, being used as “a statement of how we communicate and what is missed, misunderstood, deliberately provocative or fractured, which can be shown with the use of voice, preventing voice, turning it off, using sign, preventing sign, captioning, blocking captioning, etc.” (Sophie).
- 18 Sophie’s mention of captions brings us to a further language choice made in a distinctive way by the DH Ensemble: the use of written text within the performance space. “We find a connection within the space between actors first, then question at every stage whether it’s accessible to an audience and how it can be supported by technical means” (Sophie). Captions were introduced by the DH Ensemble for the first time in *People of the Eye*, as a deliberate artistic and communicative choice “from the very beginning of the development process, the first 10 minute scratch performance we did” (Erin).
- 19 As with other language choices this one was guided by accessibility requirements: “the characters of the parents in the piece did not know how to sign at the beginning of the story so the only way to make their dialogue accessible to a Deaf audience while being true to the reality of the characters was to caption it” (Erin). At the same time the use

of captions offered more choices artistically: “we were freed up to develop the relationship between the sisters in terms of their position on stage relative to each other and the audience, and the use of non-BSL ‘home signs’ which families sometimes use. By captioning this scene, it didn’t matter if Deaf BSL users couldn’t see or understand the signing clearly because the girls were huddled together, one with their back to the audience, signing in a mix of BSL and home sign. The audience could understand the content of the conversation from the captions, and learn about the relationship from the staging” (Erin).

- 20 Importantly for the DH Ensemble, captions offer not only accessibility but also a further opportunity for artistic creativity in and of themselves. For *People of the Eye* the DH Ensemble worked with visual graphic designers Sam Dore (Deaf) and Gerry Maguire (hearing) to integrate captions and other visual material into the performance. “The idea was to design these captions to convey the emotion and tone of what was being said, as well as the content” (Erin). “We aim to make sure that technical tools are used to enhance the experience, tell the same story, emotion and struggle as the character so they become a character themselves and belong to the story and are not seen as an ‘access’ tool.” (Sophie). To summarise: “The captions and visuals took on a character persona of their own” (Jen).

On the use of the actors’ bodies

- 21 As already outlined in the brief description of Fischer-Lichte’s concept of performance, I have here separated the use of a physical language from the physicality of the actors’ bodies used in a non-linguistic manner. “In some cases we don’t see or use sign language as a ‘physicality’. It can be so quiet, small and intimate, or even clinical, formal, that it is purely a language that is separate from physical connection or expression” (Sophie). That is not to say that the DH Ensemble has not “also explored the physicality inherent in sign language, which some people can perceive as over-the-top, melodramatic or too expressive if they are not familiar with Deaf culture or comfortable themselves in their own bodies” (Erin). “The beauty is when we do use it for its physical power, it has an impact that we can use to affect others and ourselves as part of the narrative/story” (Sophie).
- 22 Putting aside sign language, however, it emerges that for the DH Ensemble the actors’ physicality is understood as a fundamental form of communication in its own right. “We are a very physical company, and all our work stems from physical exercises” (Erin). It is also a tool to promote accessibility. “We are fascinated by visual storytelling and what can be ‘said’ without spoken words, captions or BSL. Physicality is always the first thing we explore and everything builds from this” (Jen). In physical warm-ups, exercises and devising “we find our strongest connections to our truths and are liberated by finding a ‘language’ that is shared by all” (Sophie).
- 23 The DH Ensemble’s approach to physicality is supported by a strong understanding of theory and engagement with practice: Anne Boghart’s technique of Viewpoints, Laban’s theory of space, weight and time, Butoh dance theatre, contact improvisation and the Suzuki acting method. “Our process of building character can often stem from finding a physicality for that character. We utilise a lot of games and play theory to release our creativity and build relationships and trust within the artists involved in a project” (Erin). Furthermore “we’ve had Brian Duffy, a deaf physical choreographer work with

us on *Nodus Tollens* for a recent festival, which helped to stretch ourselves physically to reaching the level we needed to be for outdoor theatre” (Sophie).

- 24 The actor’s body as a communicative tool is a well-mined resource for the DH Ensemble. “Physicality is used to communicate character, relationship, theme and action... [and can be] understood by anyone, regardless of language or culture” (Erin). “Everything demands physicality. Even doing nothing is a statement. So much happens in a space or a time, everything can be read and interpreted” (Sophie). Without a physical approach the risk is “stories being missed when we’re too busy trying to find the words...[Physicality] “gives space for people to ‘listen’ in different ways” (Sophie).
- 25 This focus on physicality is used by the DH Ensemble to offer audiences “A theatrical experience. A story. Moments of people’s lives appearing on a stage – maybe realistic/naturalistic, maybe heightened, maybe surreal or abstract” (Jen). As with the language choices previously described “Our instincts as artists guide our choices” (Jen), but at the same time the careful exploration of those choices supports the principal of accessibility: physicality “tells the story better than words could” (Sophie).

On the use of space

- 26 The use of space by the DH Ensemble is less fundamental to their artistic approach to creating work than is the use of language and physicality, although politically it has been “manipulated to create a reaction/environment in the room as a statement. We’ve cut performance spaces in half, we’ve taped boxes for restrictive movement, we’ve played with breaking those rules, we’ve invited audiences into those spaces, we’ve used height and created sets with our bodies and costumes, corridors and grids to form a sense of space within a space” (Sophie).
- 27 The primary goal here, however, is accessibility. “It’s usually to do with sightlines and our actors’ relationship with the audience. Dependent on different spaces this has an impact on how intimate the communication can be between the audience and character” (Jen). This is particularly true when captions are being used. “It’s really important that the audience can see the performers and the captions, if there are any, because D/deaf audience members can’t experience the performance through sound alone (and it’s not ideal for hearing audience members to do this either with work as visual as ours)... Spaces without a stage, or without raked seating, or venues in traverse when we are using captions or video projection – all of these we have to think carefully about when it comes to accessibility and sight lines” (Erin).
- 28 The name of the game is pragmatism in pursuit of a strong connection with everybody in the audience. “We’re nothing if not adaptable... We always keep in mind and have learnt along the way that the audience must be able to see what’s going on. If they’re cut off it has to be intentional otherwise we’ve lost the opportunity to tell that story when it matters” (Sophie). “Our work has been performed outdoors, in rehearsal spaces, halls, and fully equipped theatres of varying sizes,... but we do have to ask careful questions to make sure the integrity of the work won’t be compromised” (Erin).

On the use of sound

- 29 The use of sound is central to both the artistic and accessibility goals of the work of the DH Ensemble. “Again it’s about what information and what story we are telling. What

do we want the audience to 'get' at that particular moment in the play? What should they know? How do we want them to feel?" (Jen). "We hope to add another layer to the theatrical experience, and find ways in which sound, visuals and physical performances can work together to make a production accessible to all" (Erin).

- 30 The approach to sound is understandably different depending on whether they are thinking of the D/deaf or hearing members of the audience. For the former, "we are very interested in... very deep tones which vibrate a theatre when played through a subwoofer, or infrasonic tones which are outside of the range of human hearing but can be felt" (Erin). As with physicality, the approach is grounded in theoretical understanding: "I have published an academic paper on my theory regarding infrasonic tones and access for D/deaf audiences. The idea is that the tones that are 'beyond hearing' are felt through vibration of the skeleton" (Jen). As with the bass notes already mentioned the intention is to inform "the D/deaf audience that there is other information being given and to create a specific atmosphere" (Jen).
- 31 "We also deliberately used tones that were quite intense for a hearing audience. This was to make a choice as to how we wanted our hearing audience to feel at that particular time in the play" (Jen). "If the captions or actors create 'loud' images, we try to find a matching sound, (either alternative, abstract or equivalent) and vice-versa... we play with intensity or speed to create pressure" (Sophie). "Our choices are guided by the integrity of the piece, and the desire to create a space in which Deaf and hearing artists and audiences are equal – even if their experiences are different" (Erin).
- 32 The resulting complex soundscapes are created by working with sound designers. "We have worked a number of times with a fantastic sound artist called Emma Houston, who often works in collaboration with Deaf artists to find soundscapes that are both artistically integral and accessible" (Erin). The process is highly collaborative both in and outside of the rehearsal room, and it is clear that there is a requirement for sound and visual information to be tightly integrated. "We go with the idea that 'whatever is seen is heard, and whatever is heard is seen' as far as possible" (Sophie).

Building a strong actor-spectator relationship

- 33 For the DH Ensemble then, it is clear that consideration of the diverse needs represented in their audiences drives them to use the materials of performance as effectively as possible to communicate honestly with spectators, without sacrificing their artistic integrity. "Theatre is about an audience and an actor's relationship with an audience member or participant and as such it's a huge focus in our work" (Jen). Techniques for engaging spectators drawn from earlier periods in theatrical history are commonplace: "We sometimes use audience interaction, direct address, breaking character to address the audience as actors – all kinds of things!" (Erin). But at the same time "We play with when we choose to invite an audience in (and physically ON stage), and when they are to feel as pushed out and unable to access something, as the characters are, whatever their language or audiological [status]" (Sophie).
- 34 The specific experience of *People of the Eye* also demonstrates that they do not consider each material element of performance in isolation, to be perceived by only one of the senses. "We discussed how each scene could be explored differently... Sound was explored physically, visuals were explored audibly, and other people's 'voices' were explored digitally" (Sophie). The result is a performance that is approachable on

different levels, simultaneously available through different modes of perception and thus accessible to a wide audience demographic.

- 35 Achieving this strong actor-spectator interaction is also supported by the DH Ensemble building an ongoing relationship with its audiences that influences the development of the work. “Audiences have been great as a mass ‘outside eye’ in the work-in-progress process of *People of the Eye*’s early development. They’ve brought their perspectives as both D/deaf and hearing members with such varied personal experiences, which helped inform the questions of balance, access and reflection which was fed back into the work. People returned to see the changes and have been especially positive and encouraging in the tweaks made and new scenes so they feel listened to, valued and reflected on stage” (Sophie).

Towards an effective bilingual theatre aesthetic

- 36 The drive for artistry and accessibility at the DH Ensemble as described in this essay has produced positive responses from audiences. “Deaf audiences are often excited to see their language on a stage and they believe our work has held a mirror up to their lives – something they don’t usually see” (Jen). “With *People of the Eye*, we had very strong, emotional reactions from Deaf audience members and people like interpreters, or family members of Deaf people” (Erin).
- 37 As for hearing audiences, those “who are more used to our experimental style have had an awakening with this form combining the different languages” (Jen). “The experience could be more engaging on an intellectual level as they were exposed to a whole lot of new information they never knew before... With *People of the Eye*, many hearing people told us it made them want to learn sign language and that was really heartening to me... Many people do find sign language fascinating and beautiful and they do enjoy watching it even if they don’t understand it” (Erin).
- 38 Of course not everybody is appreciative. “We have also found that some people do not connect with the work, and I think that is absolutely to be expected – I would rather we provoke strong emotions at both ends of the spectrum, rather than a whole lot of people thinking it’s very middle of the road, safe work” (Erin). The most important thing is that “people in the audience of our shows have walked away feeling like equal members, even when they’ve taken different things from the story because of their individual life experiences and backgrounds. Friendships and connections have even developed within the audience from a mutual respect and understanding of the journey they shared in the space” (Sophie).

Conclusion

- 39 The contributions to this essay made by the lead artists of the DH Ensemble demonstrate that they are committed to the maintenance of high artistic standards and to the promotion of accessibility in all their work. Furthermore they suggest that rather than being mutually exclusive, these twin goals of artistry and accessibility are intertwined and mutually supportive elements of their work. Additionally, their approach is underpinned by an understanding of theory, the rigorous application of tried and tested practice and a willingness to experiment with new methods when existing practice is found lacking. I would go further to suggest that their success

wouldn't be possible if it wasn't for the unapologetic confidence in and enthusiasm for the work demonstrated by the lead artists. "It's important to us to not try and adapt ourselves to 'fit' a social expectation, but more to celebrate our differences and use them to create rich, diverse work in ways that never apologises" (Sophie). "We make theatre that we want to see and we get excited about showing it off to other people. We love how excited other people have gotten about our process and productions. We love what we do!" (Jen).

NOTES

1. The term 'D/deaf' is used to denote both those who use a sign language and identify as culturally Deaf, and those who suffer from an audiological hearing loss (be they deaf, deafened, or hard of hearing). Where the simpler word Deaf is used, it refers only to the former.
 2. Miles, D. and Fant, L. J. (1976) *Sign-language theatre and deaf theatre: New definitions and directions*. Edited by Murphy, H. J. Northridge, CA: California State University.
 3. <http://www.thedeafandhearingensemble.com/about/> Accessed February 2017.
 4. Fischer-Lichte, E. (2014) 'The Concept of Performance', in Arjomand, M. and Masse, R. (eds.) *The Routledge Introduction to Theatre and Performance Studies*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, pp. 18 - 45. 3.
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ABSTRACTS

Interview with Jennifer K. Bates, Sophie Stone and Erin Siobahn Hutching, three of the four lead artists of the Deaf and Hearing Ensemble, a company that uses bilingualism (English and British Sign Language) and biculturalism (Deaf and hearing) to create theatre that combines artistry with accessibility. The interview was conducted by emails in January and February 2017.

Entretien avec Jennifer K. Bates, Sophie Stone and Erin Siobahn Hutching, trois des quatre artistes principaux du Deaf and Hearing Ensemble, une compagnie qui utilise le bilinguisme (anglais et langue des signes britannique) le biculturalisme (malentendants et entendants) pour créer une forme théâtrale à la fois artistique et accessible à tous. L'entretien a été mené par courriels entre janvier et février 2017.

INDEX

Subjects: Theater

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Keywords: bilingual theatre, deaf theatre, sign language, captions, accessibility, audience engagement, Deaf and Hearing Ensemble, People of the Eye, performance, aesthetics.

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