

Ilyssa Ernsteen

Oral Presentation – 8 minutes

1. Background: Why You Created Your Work

My first exposure to Deaf theatre began when I was four years old. I grew up participating in Deaf theatre because my cousin is hard of hearing and my mother wanted us to do an activity together. Coincidentally, I lived by The Centerlight Theatre near Chicago, where Marlee Matlin began performing, and my mom signed us up to perform in their productions. I went on to perform with the Centerlight Theatre for years. I grew up surrounded by Deaf people, and never questioned this experience. When I was 16, I attended Interlochen Arts Academy. This was the first time I met other people who were serious about theatre and held a different worldview than mine. I shared with my new friends that I was in the musical *Grease* and played Sandy by voicing the role from off stage while someone else signed the role on stage. My friends laughed and told me that was not "real" theatre. I did not understand what they meant as I spent years of my life doing this, and it was where I fell in love with theatre. When I came to Ithaca, I still had a strong interest in ASL and Theatre, so I minored in Deaf Studies. I learned about the mistreatment and common misunderstandings of Deaf Culture and the Deaf World. Although I had been exposed to Deaf Culture my entire life, I had no idea the extent of discrimination Deaf people faced. It has been a huge frustration of mine having my educated friends ask me if Deaf people can drive or if American Sign Language is a language. I decided I wanted to educate people about Deaf Culture through the medium of theatre. At Ithaca College, there is little to no exposure about Deaf Theatre or Deaf Culture unless you take those specific classes, and even then there are only five classes in the minor. Within the Ithaca College Theatre Department no one has tackled a Deaf Theatre piece in many years. My goal is to educate my peers while being respectful to Deaf Culture.

2. Methods: How Your Work Came to Be

In preparation for the creation of my performance, I read plays from the last fifty years that included Deaf characters; ranging from *The Miracle Worker* published in 1959 to *Sound* published in 2014. I wanted a comprehensive knowledge of Deaf Theatre before I created my own piece. I also read books about Deaf Culture and The National Theatre of the Deaf. The plays I read highlighted the topics I have been studying in my minor for the past four years.

My performance is inspired by techniques of the National Theatre of the Deaf, the plays I have experienced over the past four years as a Theatre Studies major, as well as research on devising theatre. I will work with four actors with varying knowledge of Deaf Culture. This performance should be accessible to people of any age and range of knowledge of Deaf Culture.

3. Results: How Your Work Turned Out

The performance I'm creating will take place April 12th and 13th on the Ithaca College campus in a Dillingham classroom. There will be four actors cast as a teacher, a mother to a Deaf child, and two others will be "students" in the classroom. The audience will be seated in desks as students in the classroom and be active participants of the play. The teacher introduces the mother to the classroom and will teach the children and the audience about her Deaf child. She will teach the classroom some basic signs such as, "Nice to meet you" and "My name is ____."

She will then teach the class a Deaf poem because poetry is very important to Deaf Culture. The “students” I have rehearsed with will hopefully assist in facilitating a conversation with the audience so they can ask any questions they have about Deaf Culture. My goal for this piece is to teach my peers about the basics of Deaf Culture and hopefully they will leave the space better educated.

4. Discussion and Conclusions: What Your Work Means

I am not Deaf, but I am an ally who wants to bring change into our shared world through the artistic medium of Theatre. Deaf West's production of *Spring Awakening* on Broadway brought recognition to the Deaf community, but there are still many misconceptions that exist. Hopefully this piece will assist in erasing some of the stigma that exists regarding Deaf Culture through educational and enlightening means.

5. Bibliography/Works Cited

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