



**Equal Prominence:
Directing a Deaf and Hearing Production of *I and You***

By Andy Head

Introduction

The performing arts program at the Rochester Institute of Technology and the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (RIT/NTID) is firmly situated at the intersection of two distinct cultures. On one hand, NTID is the nation’s first and largest technical college for deaf and hard-of-hearing students. The school’s performing arts program is connected to a rich tradition of distinguished Deaf performers and close ties to the National Theater of the Deaf.¹ On the other hand, RIT serves a student body in which 83% of the population do not identify as deaf or hard-of-hearing. Those students seek participation in theatre that closely resembles what they’ve witnessed in high school, community, and professional theatre. That is, they seek a world of speaking actors engaged with speaking audiences. Within this cross-cultural framework, RIT/NTID Performing Arts strives to achieve two essential programmatic goals. The first is to create productions with integrated casts of deaf, hard-of-hearing, and hearing actors. The second is to create productions in which American Sign Language and spoken English are equally

¹ “We use the lowercase deaf when referring to the audiological condition of not hearing, and the uppercase Deaf when referring to a particular group of deaf people who share a language—American Sign Language (ASL)—and a culture.” National Association of the Deaf.

accessible to deaf, hard-of-hearing, and hearing audiences. In many productions these two languages are presented simultaneously with the addition of captioned supertitles.

This paper chronicles my experience as a director blending the Deaf and hearing theatre worlds together in a 2019 RIT/NTID production of Lauren Gunderson's *I and You*. The play tells the story of Caroline and Anthony, two high school students working together on a class poetry project about Walt Whitman's "Leaves of Grass". They spend an entire evening in Caroline's room getting to know each other and assembling a presentation that is due the next day. As a hearing director leading this production I decided to double-cast the roles of Caroline and Anthony, each with a Deaf actor and a hearing actor. In blending the actors and their respective Deaf and hearing cultures onstage, the play took on new meaning for both performers and audiences. It offered unique ways to explore the rehearsal process and also allowed performers to better connect with characters they were portraying. This production of *I and You* was shaped and realized through a co-creative process with members of the Deaf community, and out of our shared work, equal prominence was attained.

Theoretical Framework

The use of such blended theatre forms dates back to the 1970s and 80s, or "the golden age of Deaf performing arts" and "age of accessibility" as named by Deaf theatre critic, playwright, and director Donald Bangs. "A time when Deaf theatre artists made great breakthroughs, winning Tonys, Emmys and Oscars in the process, and theatre professionals trumpeted American Sign Language as a new art form."² In "A Journey into the DEAF-WORLD", authors

² Donald Bangs, "Sound of One Hand Clapping: Performing Arts and Deaf People." *Deaf Studies for Educators. March 7-10, 1991, Dallas, TX.*, compiled by Juanita Cebe, 196. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University, 1992. It's important to note that this period of accessibility began before Congress passed the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990. Prior to that mandate, theatre and other performing arts had already started working towards greater levels of communicative inclusion and accessibility for performers and audiences.

Ben Bahan, Robert Hoffmeister, and Harlan Lane dedicate a chapter to Deaf culture's connection to the performing arts. Therein they detail four genres of theatrical performance found in "the DEAF-WORLD". These include (1) *sign language theater*, which is defined as "adaptations of hearing theater presented in ASL"; (2) *DEAF-WORLD theater*, or original "signed stories situated in Deaf culture"; (3) a cross-cultural blend which combines characteristics of sign language theater and Deaf-World theater, for example Mark Medoff's 1979 play *Children of a Lesser God*; and (4) hearing plays adapted fully into Deaf culture for Deaf audiences.³

The definition of sign language theater is expanded by Donald Bangs in "What is a Deaf Performing Arts Experience?" There he references ideas from Dorothy Miles and Lou Fant, both early pioneers with the National Theater of the Deaf, which further develop the description of sign language theatre to be "based on the text of a play by a hearing author, translated into sign language. It is performed by two casts, a signing cast in prominent position and a less-noticeable voicing cast. The work does not deal with deaf-ness or situations involving deaf characters."⁴

My approach with *I and You* was blended, as it does not fit exactly within any one of these types. Rather, I borrowed elements from sign language theater and merged them with a co-creative approach by consulting with both the Deaf community and the playwright. This process incorporated elements of the fourth category of adapting hearing plays into Deaf culture. In addition to Deaf actors, the production team included a Deaf ASL Coach,⁵ a Deaf costume

³ Harlan Lane, Robert Hoffmeister, and Ben Bahan, "Performing Arts." *A Journey into the DEAF-WORLD*. San Diego, CA: DawnSignPress, 1996. 144-54.

⁴ Donald Bangs, "What is a Deaf Performing Arts Experience?" *The Deaf Way: Perspectives from the International Conference on Deaf Culture. July 9-14 1989, Gallaudet University*, edited by Carol J. Erting, et al., 751-61. Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1994.

⁵ For *I and You*, this person's role was akin to an assistant director. He was tasked with translating the script from English into ASL, helping actors to clarify their signing, offering staging recommendations that would benefit Deaf audiences, and pointing to moments that didn't make sense within Deaf culture.

designer, and a Deaf technical director. These team members strengthened the concept of double-casting by interpreting the script through Deaf eyes and a Deaf perspective.

To be clear, *I and You* does not fall into the larger body of plays from the Deaf-WORLD theater category. Also called Deaf theater, these stories chiefly center on the experiences of being culturally Deaf. For example, *My Third Eye* was the first original piece created by the National Theatre of the Deaf in 1971. It was based on the unique perspectives of that ensemble cast, and it “introduced the audience to the world of deafness and to sign language and included an amusing ‘side-show’ where ‘strange’ people *talked* instead of signed.”⁶ The creation of this kind of theatre is tremendously valuable, especially within the Deaf community and at NTID. However, it is neither the approach that I have taken, nor the focus of this paper.

Rather, I build upon a blended practice of cross-cultural creation. One important facet of the artistic decision-making process of *I and You* is articulated in Miles and Fant’s more expanded definition of sign language theatre, particularly the concept of a **prominent position** and the ability to be **less-noticeable**. As a hearing person, my work at RIT/NTID investigates how plays written about hearing characters—that is to say plays written by hearing playwrights with characters who are traditionally assumed to be hearing people—can be re-conceptualized to incorporate Deaf actors into the story. This work is driven by the question, how do you best provide an equal experience to Deaf and hearing audiences at the same time? Attempting to answer this question, the production team of *I and You* strived to equitably raise all performers into prominent positions while eliminating the notion of less-noticeable, for both performers and audiences.

⁶ Jack R. Gannon, *Deaf Heritage: A Narrative History of Deaf America*. Silver Spring, MD: National Association of the Deaf, 1981.

This idea is shared by famed director Jeff Calhoun, who directed a 2004 production of *Big River*. That production combined Deaf and hearing actors onstage and became a Tony-winning smash hit for a then-little-known company called Deaf West Theatre. Recent scholarship has reflected on the production and its significance. At the ten-year reunion for the *Big River* production team hosted by UCLA, Calhoun noted, “I don’t think we’re trying to say there shouldn’t be deaf plays for deaf audiences or hearing musicals for hearing audiences. My experience is when you mix the two cultures together it creates something else that transcends, and for me it’s more of an experience than if you have them on their own.”⁷

The Process

In aiming for this kind of cultural transcendence of a blended Deaf and hearing production, directors must conceptualize a theatrical world where characters from widely diverse communication backgrounds can interact in believable ways. A world that supports Calhoun’s *mixing* of the cultures—not one of assimilation nor erasure, but one that connects the two. For *I and You*, the first challenge of creating such a world was considering how the characters should communicate. In total, five layers of communication needed to be achieved onstage: Caroline’s lines should be signed in ASL *and* spoken, Anthony’s lines should be signed in ASL *and* spoken, and captioned supertitles should appear.

In order to believably double-cast the show, as director I landed on the conceit of the Multiverse. The theory of the Multiverse, briefly, hypothesizes that *if* our universe is infinite in all directions, then there are an infinite number of possible outcomes out there. In one possible outcome Anthony and Caroline are hearing individuals and in another possible outcome they are

⁷ Jeff Calhoun, et al., “Deaf West Theatre and the Broadway musical: Big River and beyond.” *Studies in Musical Theatre* 9, no. 1 (March 2015): 85-104.

Deaf individuals.⁸ The goal was not for the hearing actors to lead the story while the Deaf actors interpreted their choices, nor for the Deaf actors to lead while the hearing actors spoke their choices. The goal was equal prominence onstage—all actors performing their own choices, at the same time as their counterpart performed theirs. *Counterpart* here is used to describe the other actor performing the same role. Both actors playing Caroline were counterparts. The actors playing Anthony and Caroline were acting partners. These terms developed as part of the rehearsal vocabulary to help clarify precisely who was receiving which rehearsal note.



Deaf actors portray Caroline and Anthony on the floor. Photo by Mike Guinto.

To support the Multiverse concept for double-casting and allow for simultaneous “double-staging”, the scenery was designed so that all four actors could perform the play at the same time, without losing the inherent intimacy of the story. In a small black-box theatre space, the primary set of Caroline’s room occupied the stage floor. Directly upstage of her room, on a

⁸ An episode of Radiolab summarizes this well. See Abumrad, Jad and Robert Krulwich. “The (Multi) Universe(s).” Radiolab. Podcast audio. August 12, 2008.

two-foot raised platform, a reduced version of her room was erected. The upper space preserved the major acting areas of Caroline's bed, a desk area, and a window seat. The design choice allowed the "platform actors" to shadow the "floor actors", providing a similar, yet unique, version of the show. In a kind of synchronized dance, both acting pairs shared similar blocking and delivered their lines at approximately the same pace.

To uphold the idea of equal prominence for actors and equal language access for audiences, after each performance the acting pairs rotated positions. For example, Friday night opened with the Deaf actors performing on the floor; Saturday played with the hearing actors on the floor. This rotation schedule was included in marketing materials, allowing audiences to attend a performance with the staging they most wanted to see.

Despite the paralleled acting concept for *I and You*, the actors were strongly encouraged to bring their unique perspectives to the characters. It is in this way that the Deaf actors became co-creators as I relied upon their lived experiences as Deaf individuals to inform their versions of the characters. For example, in the process of creating Anthony, we started with the given circumstances told to us by Gunderson, including the description that Anthony is "a boy, 17. He is neat, poised, mature for his age. African American. He's an 'A' student, a team player, a nice guy. He's not really great around girls. He takes his homework very seriously."⁹ Tablework sessions became back and forth conversations towards creating culturally responsive characters. The two actors playing Anthony formulated their own unique vision for the character. To keep the acting interpretations "in the same play" connections were embraced and differences were discussed. One actor connected more to Anthony's moments of awkwardness while the other felt the least connected at these times. Like Anthony, both actors are from athletic backgrounds and

⁹ Lauren Gunderson, *I and You*. New York, NY: Playscripts, Inc., 2014.

both could relate to his compassion for Caroline. One of them shared Anthony's love of Coltrane and jazz. For the other, playing the saxophone wasn't realistic, but he had Deaf friends who played the drums. The playwright graciously allowed us to change Anthony's instrument from saxophone to drums. Making this alteration necessitated that Anthony's lines for describing the saxophone also be changed. In emails back and forth via a Playscripts, Inc. representative, Gunderson said, "My stipulation is that they cannot alter words unless the replacement is the same syllabic length." Such adjustments in Anthony support the argument for more cross-cultural encounters and understanding made by Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren, a hard-of-hearing performance artist and scholar. "When social identities are contested and revised onstage, more options are made manifest for both the performer and the audience members."¹⁰

Throughout tablework, the four actors, but particularly the two Deaf actors, and I took time to discuss how their backgrounds and experiences could help inform the characters. This especially assisted in translating Caroline and Anthony through a Deaf lens and embodying them in each Deaf actor. For example, the show begins with pop music blasting in Caroline's room. The actor playing Caroline has an extensive background as a dancer and grew up learning different strategies for memorizing choreography. During rehearsal she shared that, with the use of hearing aids, she also can enjoy listening to music. In writing about the need to investigate connections between hearing and deafness, Kochhar-Lindgren also asserts, "There is a mainstream assumption that to be deaf is to not be able to hear at all, that such an individual lives in a world of silence. There are many scales of what deaf individuals can and cannot hear; as a result, it is more useful to think about how deafness functions as a multisensorial experience cutting across what the mainstream tends to think of as the registers of hearing and deafness."

¹⁰ Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren, "Hearing Difference across Theatres: Experimental, Disability, and Deaf Performance." *Theatre Journal* 58, no. 3 (October 2006): 417-436.

The average hearing audience member might assume that because Caroline was portrayed by a Deaf actor, her version of the character wouldn't be enjoying music in her bedroom. This assumption is false. Later in the play, Anthony and Caroline share their musical favorites of John Coltrane and Jerry Lee Lewis. Again, both actors confirmed their experience as dancers and their connection to pop music culture. To make these moments more accessible for audience members, all songs played onstage were accompanied by captioned music videos projected upstage of the actors. The benefit was two-fold: Anthony and Caroline could watch the YouTube videos on her desktop computer, and those moments were shared with audiences through both auditory and visual storytelling.

Tablework revealed another challenging dramaturgical convention. At various places in the play Lauren Gunderson writes moments where Caroline shouts to get her mother's attention. The Deaf actors agreed this didn't make sense from their perspectives. In their own lives, they would go to the room to communicate directly with that person. However, the playwright also uses the convention of Caroline texting her mother throughout the story. One example of this occurs in Act One when Caroline offers Anthony a Coke. After he says yes, she replies, "Cool. I'll text my mom...It's like drive-thru." Buoyed by Caroline's attachment to her phone, the production team made the decision to present her shouted lines in three ways: the hearing actor always spoke the lines, the Deaf actor always texted them, and they were projected as animated text messages on the set. This triple approach further solidified our goal of equal prominence onstage and in the audience.

As rehearsals shifted into blocking, the process mirrored that of tablework. Connections were embraced and differences were discussed. A method of rotation and observation was established. One pair would begin and be onstage for several pages as the other pair viewed from

the house. At a designated stopping point, the pairs would switch places and the new pair would review what had previously been staged. Necessary alterations were made and then that pair would continue forward in the script for several more pages. In this way, all actors were allowed to make choices onstage and observe the choices of their counterpart. When disagreements occurred, both choices were tried. Occasionally a choice was made due to the needs of one pair, such as keeping sightlines open for the Deaf performers. This method of switching and repeating allowed the team to work through challenges with timing and pacing, stage picture and crossing, and actor impulses and improvisations. In the end, the blocking was mostly the same, however, small divergences offered points where the unique cultural perspectives and artistic choices of each actor were still visible.

Throughout rehearsal, one important goal was to fuse the instincts of each actor together in Caroline and Anthony. The merging process of blocking allowed each actor to essentially mirror their counterpart, with some slight personal variation, which was critical because together the four of them simultaneously told the story. This idea of shared stage presence between Deaf and hearing actors is voiced by Bill O'Brien, the producer of Deaf West's *Big River* at their UCLA reunion, "I think for all of the actors that get involved with this, there's tons of 'Oh shit' moments, because you can't just decide for yourself to run with some new idea that you're improvising in the moment because that's like a three-legged race, you know, trying to go 'Let's hop, skip, and jump now'. So that's a real challenge in the moment, in terms of that you trust each other and you're creating the same moment...But it really turns into 'What is the collective

storytelling that we're doing here?' and that becomes why we're ... it's the unselfish instincts that you have to keep a hold of here."¹¹

In performance, audiences witnessed two Carolines and Anthonys working in near-unison: communicating the same lines, pursuing the same objectives, following the same movement patterns, but each with personally distinct dispositions. For Anthony, the Deaf actor was much more grounded in his delivery, connecting to the maturity of the character. The hearing actor played more into the self-conscious/not-so-good-with-girls side. In Caroline, the Deaf actor related to the character's stubborn defensiveness while the hearing actor felt more comfortable with the playful and sarcastic side of her. Because each actor identified with their character in unique ways, audiences had a choice of which Anthony or Caroline *they* could also relate to.



Hearing actors portray Caroline and Anthony on the floor. Photo by Matthew Sluka.

Conclusion

¹¹ Jeff Calhoun, et al., "Deaf West Theatre and the Broadway musical: Big River and beyond." *Studies in Musical Theatre* 9, no. 1 (March 2015): 85-104.

The production concept for *I and You* achieved the two most essential goals of the RIT/NTID performing arts program: to utilize integrated casts onstage and to make language equally accessible for audience members. In becoming a simultaneous dual-staging with hearing versions of Caroline and Anthony paired next to an Anthony and Caroline interpreted through the lens of Deaf culture and American Sign Language, *I and You* showcased one possible approach to how Deaf and hearing actors can successfully work together to tell a story onstage.

This practice of re-envisioning traditional hearing plays asks that the director and production team think through how every line can be communicated and how each scene can be re-imagined. All plays have distinct parameters for characters; therefore, any adaptation must be treated individually. However, adapting hearing characters into Deaf characters isn't solely about changing lines from spoken into visual. Cultural implications must be considered: decisions about a character's daily life, environment, and even clothing choices are impacted. Making such considerations allows for a production that can fit the categories of both "hearing theater presented in ASL" and "plays adapted fully into Deaf culture for Deaf audiences". This blending is the core of Calhoun's culturally transcendent fusion. It conceives both a process and a final product that allow actors to better identify with the characters they are embodying and offer diverse audiences with a truly accessible theatre-going experience. More importantly, it erases Miles and Font's idea of the "less-noticeable" while elevating everyone to a place of equal prominence.

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