



*Photogram Collage by Monique Wilkins*

# ***SEEING VOICES:***

A Creative Exploration into the World of Signed Language  
and  
The Deaf Experience in Relation to Thought and Dramatic Narrative

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for The University of the  
Arts Honors College Program

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## Introduction

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Drama, as an art form, seeks to represent the human experience on stage. I have spent four years at this university learning the tools and techniques that come with taking on the burden of embodying the human condition. It has been a long and arduous journey, and I'm nowhere near the end of my pursuit to understanding my craft or even what it means to be human. As a female-identifying artist of color in the year 2016, I am hyper-aware of what my body, my skin, my hair, my *personage* means in space; especially when taken in dramatic context. I am one of four black women to graduate from the Ira Brind School of Theatre Arts this year. We, as a group of black women, are constantly forced to examine the ways in which our bodies and our womanhood intersect in space. It's often been a frustrating conversation. I have often felt that there is not a place for me in my profession, where I am either sectioned off to be the slave, the sassy friend, or the slut. I know that this experience is shared by many other minority groups, whether they be on the LGBTQIA+ spectrum, other people of color, or are disabled. As stated earlier, if theatre is meant to represent the *human condition*—which is not exclusive to white, able-bodied *males*, why is it that that is what is most common in the theatre: both in the seats and on the stage. Our world is filled with all different races, all different bodies, and all different experiences. As a creator, I want to emphasize our diversity by creating work that takes into account everyone, and adamantly strives to exclude *no one*.

Throughout my four years at this institution I have embarked on a journey to knowing myself, and the world around me *better* through my art. And while the climate of art-making is

changing and becoming less and less white, and less and less male I am noticing yet another integral portion of our society left out of the discussion: the disabled body.

Our disabled brothers and sisters are not just left out of the discussion artistically but they are also often relegated to the fringes of society because of our ableist dismissal of their complete personage: they are viewed as broken, defective, incomplete. American Theatre Magazine, a leading publication, published an article in their October 2015 issue entitled "Theatre Artists With Disabilities Are Ready, Willing, and, Yes, Able." This article came to me at the perfect time. The article perfectly encapsulates the irony of American theatre and its relation to the disabled body, referencing the popularity of circus sideshow acts in the 1920s, and iconoclasts like Hellen Keller. Our world has made such figures like Keller pop culture icons; taken her legacy and made it into a slew of films, plays, and even disgraceful internet memes. We know that people with disabilities exist, yet we somehow cannot fathom their bodies taking up space on stage. "One in five Americans identifies as having a disability, and performers with cognitive, mobile, and physical disabilities span all ethnic groups, gender identifications, and age groups. So where are their stories, and who gets to perform them onstage?" (Considine).

As my final creative act of my undergraduate career, I wanted to confront why we are so uncomfortable with the disabled body on stage. My first goal was to work with people with physical disabilities that restricted their movement; but I did not have the resources or the time to responsibly coordinate workshops and rehearsals to include performers with corporeal disabilities. My thoughts immediately moved to the world of the deaf, whose culture and

language, are so independent of our own, but who still manage to be highly functioning in everyday society. The majesty and complexity of signed languages has always fascinated me, for their innate ability to communicate something so complicated in such elegant gestures. Sign language, to me, seemed so foreign, so much so that I couldn't—upon starting this project—even identify a single deaf person that I knew personally. Yet I am so constantly reminded of the presence of disabled American through popular and social media, which exploits the disabled experience by aligning their day-to-day lives into “the usual tropes inspiration or overcoming adversity,” a phenomenon that many disabled Americans and disability rights advocates have dubbed “inspiration-porn” (Considine).

The question of inclusion is so present in our discussion about social progress, and this forward-movement *must* be echoed within American theatre: the purpose of drama (in its origin) is unification, for community. If we are so consistently leaving people out of the discussion, are we really making *any* real change? The world of drama, as it stands, is exclusive and elitist on many fronts because it predominantly tells the stories of one kind of person: straight, white, able-bodied males and females through the conventions of dramatic narrative expressed through speech. Communication, however, can exist fully and dynamically without speech. Because the majority of American theatre is controlled by the elite, even the most basic, the most human concepts are filtered through an elitist glance.

Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia*, which I saw produced by Philadelphia staple The Latern Theatre Company, is a stunning example of this very elitist slant. Set in the drawing room of a mansion, the play flips back and forth through time, spanning centuries of the lives of the

Coverly family. The young protagonist Thomasina, living in the year 1809, discovers fractal geometry and the mathematical chaos theory, stunning her in-home tutor. Centuries later, a woman researches the legend of a hermit who she believes lived on the estate grounds. The



Arcadia by Tom Stoppard, Lantern Theatre Company

play, at its core, is a very human exploration into the never-ending thirst for knowledge: whether it be through books, through lust, or through curiosity. As human beings, we are born curious, always working for a greater sense of

understanding our purpose. Tom

Stoppard's *Arcadia* deals with very real, very human ideas. But as a young, well-educated black female I felt left out of the discussion: because I could hardly understand what was being said. These very human issues lost their humanity because they were doled out in insufferable academic language which is alienating to most of our society, especially in our Philadelphia community, whose educational structures underserves more than half of the youth living within city limits.

This paper posits the many ways in which signed languages, may be the uniting force to creating dramatic works that can appeal to anyone: regardless of their propensity to speak, their education, or their cognitive ability—bringing the art of drama back to its origins as a unifying force.

## Signed Language: The Deaf Experience in Relation to Thought

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NOTE: The following information is taken from Oliver Sacks' 1989 book *Seeing Voices*, unless otherwise specified. See bibliography for more information.

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### ***How Many Deaf People Are There Living In the United States?***

The National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (NIDCD) found the following information in a 2015 study:

- About 2 to 3 out of every 1,000 children in the U.S. are born with a detectable level of hearing loss in one or both ears.
- More than 90% of deaf children are born to hearing parents.
- Approximately 15% of American adults (37.5 million) aged 18 and over report some trouble hearing.
- Men are more likely than women to report having hearing loss.
- One in eight people in the United States (13 percent, or 30 million) aged 12 years or older has hearing loss in both ears, based on standard hearing examinations.
- About 2 percent of adults aged 45 to 54 have disabling hearing loss. The rate increases to 8.5 percent for adults aged 55 to 64. Nearly 25 percent of those aged 65 to 74 and 50 percent of those who are 75 and older have disabling hearing loss.

Source: National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders

When embarking on the journey to understanding sign language, I knew I would have to learn to understand the deaf *experience*. I turned to the expertise of late neurologist Oliver Sacks, whose 1989 book *Seeing Voices*, became the totemic and ideological mainframe of my project.

**Deafness**, as a concept, is hard to define. Sacks says that the term is "so general that it impedes consideration of the vastly differing degrees of deafness, degrees that are of qualitative, and even of 'existential,' significance" (4).

When dealing with deafness “it is not merely the degree of deafness that matters but—crucially— the age, or stage, at which it occurs” (5). Deafness, in its early study, was categorized by the archaic terms “deaf and dumb” and “deaf-mute,” which “referred to a supposed inadequacy of those born deaf to speak.” The **prelingually or congenitally deaf** are those for whom “hearing was absent at birth, or lost in infancy before language is acquired.” This category of deaf people are different from all others, for they “have never heard, have no possible auditory memories, images, or associations, there [has never been] even the illusion of sound. They live in a world of utter, unbroken soundlessness and silence” (7). Because of their unique situation, the prelingually deaf (living in a world reliant on sound) run the risk of becoming severely retarded, in their understanding of thought and language. For the human being who is language defective, living in a world which favors sound and those who can hear it, life presents many unspoken challenges that the hearing could never fathom. “It is only through language that we enter fully into our human estate and culture, communicate freely with our fellows, acquire and share information.” Those who are not able to communicate may be ostracized from normal society, and may be unable to even recognize their own intellectual capacity. Most deaf people are considered “intellectually disabled,” until they learn to sign.

British neurologist John Hughlings-Jackson considered that those suffering from *aphasia* (the loss of ability to understand or express speech) are unable to “propositionize:”

We do not either speak or think in words or signs only, but in words or signs referring to one another in a particular manner...Without a proper interrelation of parts, a verbal



utterance would be a mere succession of names, a word-heap, embodying no proposition...The unit of speech is a proposition. Loss of speech (aphasia) is, therefore, the loss of power to propositionize...not only loss of power to propositionize aloud (to talk), but to propositionize either internally or externally...The speechless patient has lost speech, not only in the popular sense that he cannot speak aloud, but in the fullest sense. We speak not only to tell other people what we think, but to tell ourselves what we think. Speech is a part of thought (17).

It is important to note that human beings are not lacking thought or "mentally deficient without language," for thinking occurs before even the emergence of speech, but before language is acquired humans may be "severely restricted" in the range of their thoughts, finding themselves confined to "an immediate, small world" (34).

Renowned Broadway music director Joesph Church (*Lion King* and *The Who's Tommy*) had this to say about language:

"Language transforms experience...the learning of a language transforms the individual in such a way that he is enabled to do new things for himself, or to do old things in new ways. Language permits us to deal with things at a distance, to act on them without physically handling them. First, we can act on other people, or on objects through people....Second, we can manipulate symbols in ways impossible with the things they stand for, and so arrive at novel and even creative versions of reality.... We can verbally rearrange situations which in themselves would resist rearrangement...we can isolate features which in fact cannot be isolate...we can juxtapose objects and events far separated in time and space...we can, if we will, turn the universe symbolically inside out" (43).

This quote exemplifies the relationship between language and dramatic thought, which are often inseparable. Dramatic language involves an intense inter web of thought processes. As an actor, we are accepting a false reality and bringing it into the world of the concrete, "we manipulate symbols" in impossible ways, and thus we arrive at "creative versions of reality," often which mimic or defy the physical world. Through metaphor and allusion, we "juxtapose objects and events far separated in time and space," allowing us to "turn the universe symbolically inside out." These almost magical abilities are impossible without the vehicle of language; for those who are deaf, even the process of thought itself is manifested differently. When beginning to engage in a creative exploration of the deaf experience, I began to wonder what the creative processes would be like for actors like myself, who have their hearing and the ability to speak, to engage in the expression of human emotion and dramatic narrative without speech. To do this, I wanted to know more about the origins of sign.

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### ***Deafness, Its Biblical Roots, and Signing as Complete Language***

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*

John 1:1

The confining of the deaf to the outreaches of society has been taking place for thousands of years. "The subhuman status of mutes was part of the Mosaic code, and it was reinforced by the biblical exaltation of the voice and ear as the one and true way in which man and God could speak" (13). It was only until the 16th century that the "notion that the of understanding [that] ideas did not depend upon the hearing of words" came into favor (14).

It was not until Abbé Charles-Michel de l'Épée, a Parisian philanthropic educator, who is known as the "Father of the Deaf," recognized that the poor deaf in Paris had their own form of tactile communication: the language of sign. He identified that there may be a "primordial or original human language, in which everything has its true and natural name," a language so "concrete, so particular, that it can catch the essence, the 'itness,' of everything; so spontaneous that it expresses all emotion



directly, and so transparent that it is incapable of any evasion or deception" (Rousseau,

*Language arises—biologically—from below, from the irrepressible need of the human individual to think and communicate. But it is also generated, and transmitted—culturally—from above, a living and urgent embodiment of the history, the world-views, the images and passions of a people. Sign for the deaf is a unique adaptation to another sensory mode; but it is also, and equally, an embodiment of their personal and cultural identity. For in the language of a people, Herder observes, "resides its whole thought domain, its tradition, history, religion, and basis of life, all its heart and soul." This is especially true of Sign, for it is not only biologically, but culturally—and unsilenceably—the voice of the deaf" (97).*

*Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*). The thought that this level of complete communication, free of any predisposition to style, class, or experience was challenging to any conception of thought and expression I previously had.

De l'Épée therefore went against the convention of the time by accepting, rather than condemning sign, calling signed languages a "mimicry of the impoverished deaf," and the "key" to understanding all languages. Opening a free clinic in Paris for the deaf, de l'Épée learned his pupils signed language,

"associating signs with pictures and written words, [teaching] them to read; and with this, in one swoop, he opened to them the world's learning and culture" (15).

But even de l'Épée good intentions were "unaware...that sign language was a complete language, capable of expressing not only every emotion but every proposition and enabling its users to discuss any topic, concrete or abstract, as economically and effectively and grammatically as speech." This truth has been denied by hearing populations for years, who "regarded signing as something rudimentary, primitive, pantomimic, a poor thing." (18).

It is clear that signing was developed as an act of protest, born out of the innate human desire to communicate. Signing, as a cultural institution, was born out of opposition, much like the theatrical art form itself. The millions of deaf humans who have lived on our planet have fought against the accepted way of communication, building for *themselves* a way to live and *thrive* in a world that has been designed to keep them back due to their disability. The origins of sign, much like the origins of theatre were formed under the same pressures: the dire need to express and communicate, born out of human need to come together, to unify, against all odds.

### **Learning Language and the Concept of Inner Speech**

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"Language and thought, for us, are always personal— our utterances express ourselves, as does our inner speech. Language often feels to us, therefore, like an effusion, a sort of spontaneous transmission of self."

Every language, however complex or basic, requires a structure "of an immensely intricate and formal kind." As those who interpret and understand the language, we are often unaware of its

complexities, as it is the genetic make up of our communication. "But the enormous, unique freedom of language would not be possible without the most extreme grammatical constraints. It is grammar, first of all, that makes a language possible, that allows us to articulate our thoughts, our selves, in utterance." It was not until the 1960s that these principles were accepted in regards to sign. "Sign was not seen, even by signers, as a true language, with it's own grammar," before this time (60).

Helmer Mykelbust's (a prominent U.S. psychologist) *The Psychology of Deafness* prescribes that:

*The manual sign language used by the deaf is an Ideographic Language. Essentially it is more pictorial, less symbolic, and as a system is one which falls mainly at the level of imagery. Ideographic language systems, in comparison with verbal symbol systems, lack pictorial, subtlety and flexibility. It is likely that Man cannot achieve his ultimate potential through an Ideographic language, inasmuch as it is limited to the more concrete aspect of his experience (1960).*

As described above, Mylebust's definition is incorrect, for "true sign languages are in fact complete in themselves: their syntax, grammar, and semantics are complete, but they have a different character from that of any spoken or written language." We cannot compare a signed language to a spoken one, nor can we translate a spoken language into a signed one "word by word or phrase by phrase—their structures are essentially different...It is itself, Sign. Thus, the 'Signed English,' now favored as a compromise is unnecessary, for no intermediary pseudo-language is needed." Yet, deaf people around the world are subject to "learn the signs not for the ideas and actions they want to express, but for phonetic English sounds they cannot hear." Us, hearing Americans, are forcing a language upon our deaf counterparts of which they

cannot understand or conceive of (26-7). As hearing people, we are never in danger of languagelessness, in danger of being deprived of the basic human need to communicate with one another; we were never responsible to create a remarkable new language. The tenacity of the deaf to create an avenue for communication is essential to understanding the vibrancy and complexity of a signed language, it is not a pidgin version of a spoken language, but retains a life and culture all its own.

## **The Acquisition of Language**

When we study language, we immediately think of the “building blocks” of a language: its syntax, structure, semantics, pragmatics, but these things are part of a more superficial study of language and thought. “Therefore, it is not language but language use we must study. The *first* language use, the first communication, is usually between mother and child, and language is acquired, arises, *between* the two...one cannot acquire language by oneself; *this* skill comes in a unique category. It is impossible to acquire language without some essential innate ability, but this ability is only activated by another person who already possesses linguistic power and competence. It is only through transaction with another that the language is achieved” (49).

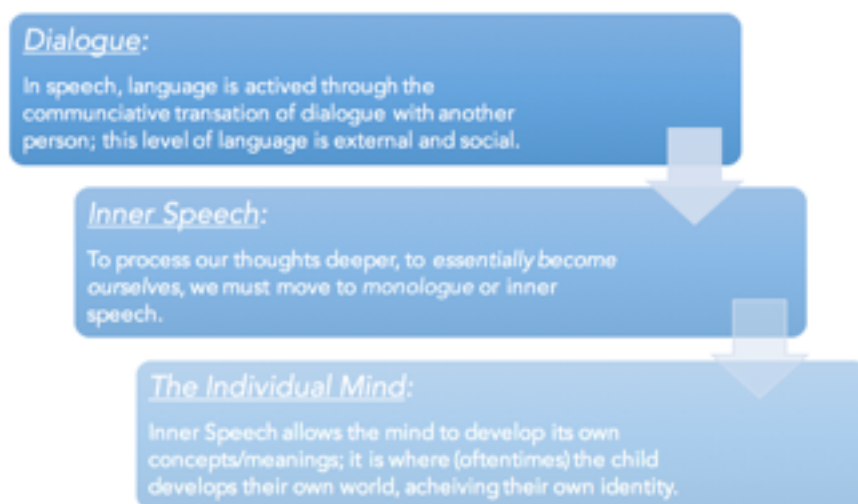
Sacks eloquently notes that language acquisition is born only out of the transaction of human interaction, a transaction that is *typically* essential for dramatic narrative and conflict to occur. He goes on to say that “language is always, and at once, both social and intellectual in function...all communication, all thought, is also emotional, reflecting ‘the personal needs and interests, the inclinations and impulses’ of the individual,” showing with stunning detail, the

critical reliance that drama has on language. For both the human and the performer who are struggling to communicate, a malfunction will cause stunting in “intellectual growth, social intercourse, language development,...[and] emotional attitudes....And this, of course, is what may happen, what does happen, all too frequently, when a child is born deaf” (49 - 51).

### The Process of Inner Speech (as written by Sacks and Vygotsky)

The communicative transaction of dialogue ignites the process of language in the mind, but once it is sparked “we develop a new power, ‘inner speech,’ and it is this that is indispensable for our further development, our thinking. ‘**Inner speech**,’ says Vygotsky, ‘is speech almost without words...it is not the interior aspect of external speech, it is a function in itself... While in external speech thought is embodied in words, in inner speech words die as they bring forth thought. Inner speech is to a large extent thinking in pure meanings’” (59).

Vygotsky describes this phenomena as “essentially solitary, and it is profoundly mysterious, “



Source: *Seeing Voices* (Sacks 59)

considering it to be our

“real language, our real

identity,” made up of

“that ceaseless stream

and generation of

meaning that constitutes

the individual mind...the

inner speech (or inner Sign)

of the deaf may be very distinctive" (59). For the deaf, who have never heard their own voice, and who more critically do not process information in the same lexical fashion as a speaking person, this "inner voice," is completely absent, and often replaced (as found by detailed research) by a complex network of images and symbols that represent the world in a multidimensional plane.

To imagine a world of performance that does not rely on this fundamental transaction is to imagine a creative process that does not rely on the same. A creative arena wherein the ensemble is working to remove the impulse and reliance on spoken language in hopes to reach deeper, more *fundamental* modes of communication. The lack of "inner voice," and complete reliance on an almost cognitive representation of space and time in Sign is extremely similar to the teachings of Anne Bogart and Tina Landau when relating these same topics to the actor. The nine Viewpoints are almost essential to understanding the complexities of Sign, and to comprehending how the deaf signer communicates his three-dimensional world through dynamic, specific, and highly complex hand and body movements.

### **The Syntax and Structure of a Signed Language**

"Sign language is the equal of speech, lending itself equally to the rigorous and the poetic, to philosophical analysis or to making love."

- Oliver Sacks

Upon first glance, a non-signing person may believe that sign looks simply "pantomimic," getting the feeling that with enough close study one can understand the language as if playing a game of charade. But close inspection reveals that sign language is



seemingly not transparent, and rather unintelligible due to its completely unique language structure that exists almost purely in the spatial realm.

One must wonder whether there is not also an intellectual (and almost physiological) difficulty here. It is not easy to imagine a grammar in space (or a grammaticization of space). This was not even a concept before Edward S. Klima and Ursula Beluga conceived it, in 1970 (even to the deaf, who used such a grammar-space). Our extraordinary difficulty in even imagining a spatial grammar, a spatial syntax, a spatial language—imagining a linguistic use of space—may stem from the fact that ‘we’ (the hearing, who do not sign), lacking any personal experience of grammaticizing space ourselves (and lacking, indeed, any cerebral substrate for it) are *physiologically* unable to imagine what it is like (any more than we can imagine having a tail or seeing infrared).

As a hearing-centered world, we are not able (and often willing) to conceive of a universe in which space, time and other intangible things can be described with clarity without words (162).

While the formal properties, the deep structure, of Sign allow the most abstract concepts and propositions to be expressed, its iconic or mimetic aspect allows it to be extraordinarily concrete and evocative, in a way, perhaps, which no speech can be.

Speech (and writing) have distanced themselves from the iconic—it is by association, not depiction, that we find speech-poetry evocative; it can elicit moods and images, but it cannot portray them (except through “accidental” idiophones and onomatopoeia).

Sign retains a direct power of portrayal that has no analogue in, cannot be translated

into, the language of speech; on the other hand, it can ascend to any height of metaphor or trope.

Sign still preserves, and emphasizes, both of its facets—the iconic and the abstract, equally, in complementarity—and thus, while it is able to ascend to the most abstract propositions, to the most generalized reflection of reality, it can also simultaneously evoke a concreteness, a vividness, a realness, an aliveness, that spoken languages, if they ever had, have long since abandoned.

In relation to dramatic narrative, signing's physical nature and unique spatial syntax may actually *enhance* reliability and universality through a more pure communication of narrative than what is provided by a spoken language (96).

### ***William Stokoe's Dictionary of American Sign Language***

It was not until a young linguist, by the name of William Stokoe, found himself teaching a class on Chaucer to the deaf at Gallaudet College (now University), did we develop a written text for understanding and learning Sign (ASL).

In Stokoe's time "sign language was not seen as a proper language, but as a sort of pantomime or gestural code, perhaps a sort of broken English on the hands." Stoke found himself immersed in it, and he discovered quickly that Sign "satisfied every linguistic criterion of a genuine language, in its lexicon and syntax, its capacity to generate an infinite number of propositions...Stokoe was convinced that signs were *not* pictures, but complex abstract

symbols with a complex inner structure...Very early he proposed that each sign had at least three independent parts:"

- ▶ Location
- ▶ Handshape
- ▶ Movement (analogous to the phonemes of speech)

Stokoe further proposed that each part had a limited number of combinations." Stokoe went onto to become the first man to ever notate Sign, his book called *Dictionary*, showed the "lexical structure of the language," arranging the signs systematically, "according to their parts, and organization, and principles



(a) Look at



(b) Stare



(c) Look at incessantly



(d) Gaze



(e) Watch



(f) Look for a long time



(g) Look again and again

Source: *Seeing Voices* (Sacks 68)

of the language...[displaying] the linguistic interrelatedness of a basic three thousands sign 'words'" (62). Stokoe's *The "Dictionary of American Sign Language* lists three thousand root signs," showing Sign's capability to express any phrase that could be communicated through spoken language (63).

## **Ursula Bellugi's Linguistic Space**

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Noted linguist Ursula Bellugi devoted her life to studying the “morphological processes of ASL—the ways in which a sign is changed to express different meanings through grammar and syntax,” she noted that Stokoe’s *Dictionary of American Sign* was only a preliminary endeavor into understanding the complexity of Sign. She believes that “a genuine language is continually modulated by grammatical and syntactic devices of all sorts. There is an extraordinary richness of such devices in ASL, which serve to simplify the basic vocabulary hugely.”

The figure on the next page shows ASL’s distinct ability to adapt a simple sign to represent various meanings and inflections. Research has noted that “the face may also serve special, linguistic functions Sign: thus specific facial expressions, or, rather ‘behaviors,’ may serve to mark syntactic constructions such as topics, relative clauses, and questions, or function as adverbs or quantifiers. Other parts of the body may also be involved. Any or all of this—this vast range of actual or potential inflections, spatial and kinetic—can converge upon the root of signs, fuse with them, and modify them, compacting an enormous amount of information into the resulting signs.”

It is the “compression,” and combination of these varied units, and their spatial existence that qualify Sign as “completely unlike any spoken language, and which, in part, prevented it from being seen as a language at all. But it is precisely this, along with its unique spatial syntax and grammar, which marks Sign as a true language—albeit a completely novel one, out of the evolutionary mainstream of all spoken languages, a unique evolutionary alternative” (67-9).

Bellugi found that “Sign [has], at every level—lexical, grammatical, syntactic— a *linguistic* use of space: a use that is amazingly complex, for much of what occurs linearly, sequentially, temporally in speech, becomes simultaneous, concurrent, multileveled in Sign.” On a superficial level, Sign seems to be mere mimicry, but “what looks so simple is extraordinarily complex and consists of innumerable spatial patterns nested, three-dimensionally in each other” (70).

A new age of linguists, such as brothers Ted and Sam Supalla, Elissa Newport and others, have “demonstrated many types of sequentiality in ASL signing—sequences of handshapes, locations, non-manual signs, local movements, movements-and-holds—as well as internal (phonologica) segmentation with signs.” These discoveries have (as seen in the figure above) made the notation and study of sign more dimensional, resulting in the need to “replace older more static notions and descriptions with new, and often very elaborate, dynamic notations, which have some resemblances to the notations for dance and music.”

Stokoe has remarked that “only signed languages have at their disposal four dimensions—the three spatial dimensions accessible to a signer’s body, as well as the dimension of time. And Sign fully exploits the syntactic possibilities in its four-dimensional channel of expression.” These ideas are echoed by Sign artists, playwrights, and actors, who agree that “signed language is not merely proselike and narrative in structure, but essentially cinematic” (71). Stokoe notes (as quoted by Sacks) that “in a signed language...narrative is no longer linear and prosaic. Instead, the essence of sign language is to cut from a normal view to

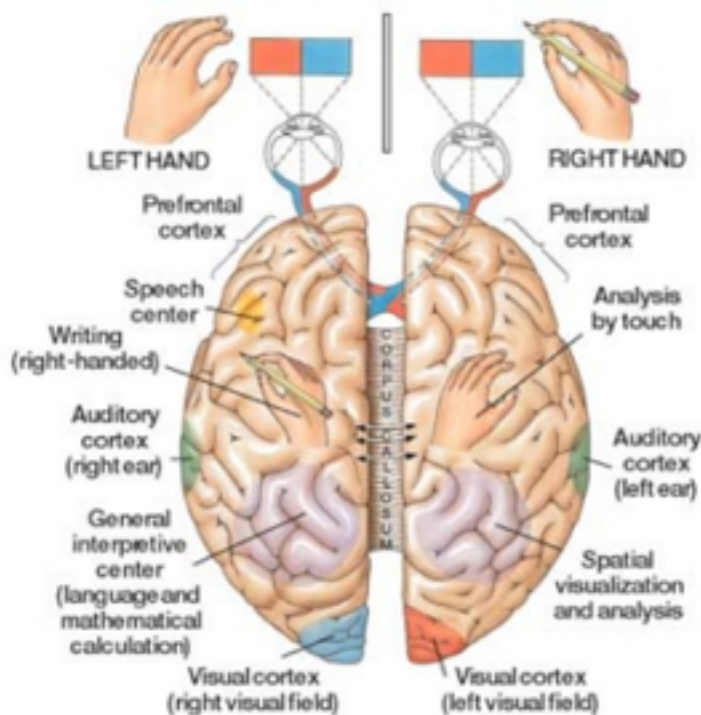
a close-up to a distant shot to a close-up again, and so on, even including flashbacks and flash-forward scenes, exactly as a movie editor works" (71-2).

Stokoe goes on to note that in this equation the sign represents the camera, "the field of vision and angle of view are directed but variable. Not only the signer signing but also the singer watching is aware at all times of the signer's visual orientation to what is being signed about" (72). What is fascinating about Sign is that this four-layered, complex structure is easy enough to be understood by a three-year-old signer.

Newport and Supalla have found that "late learners of sign—thought competent enough, never master its full subtleties and intricacies [and] are not able to "see" some of its grammatical complexities" (169). It seems as if only those who are native sign speakers, or are exposed to the language before they reach five years of age, are able to develop the left-

brained functions that are required for the mastery of Sign. Sacks points out that this is true of speech and language as well.

Ursula Bellugi (and her colleagues) found that the **left hemisphere is indeed critical for Signing**, and that "Sign uses some of the same neural pathways as are needed for the processing of grammatical speech—but in addition, some pathways normally associated with visual processing" (74-5).



Source: [rightleftwrong.com](http://rightleftwrong.com)

It seems that **sign activates both sides of the brain**, and uses them simultaneously to process both lexically and spatially. Even studies on the affects of aphasia due to strokes or lesions show that "sign is a [true] language and is treated as such by the brain, even though it is visual rather than auditory, and spatially rather than sequentially organized" (76).

Bellugi's research have also found that signers develop "a new and extraordinarily sophisticated way of representing space; a new *sort* of space, a formal space, which has no analogue in those of us who do not sign" (76). It is apparent through a myriad of research that signers, especially *native* signers, develop a knack for spatial cognition unlike that of any speaking human.

The signer becomes a sort of "visual 'expert'," because "Sign (though visuospatial) can become a left hemisphere function, and how many other sorts of visual ability—from perception of movement to perception of patterns, perception of spatial relation to perception of facial expressions—by having become part of signing, will be swept along with it, as it develops, into becoming left hemisphere functions too" (84). Research by linguists Gee and Goodhart's found that the brain "moves inevitably toward Sign-like forms, and will even 'convert' non-Sign-like forms to Sign-like-forms." "'Sign is closer to the language of the mind,'" says linguist Edward Klima, and thus is "more 'natural' than anything else when the developing child is called upon to construct a language in manual mode" (89). If signed languages align much more naturally with the brain's natural functioning, when it comes to the thought processes of the actor, expressing human emotion, dramatic narrative, and thought through

sign may result in more impulsive and more emotive response because thought will not be hindered by the mechanisms of speech.

## ***In Summary***

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Signed languages seemed to break down the socioeconomic barriers that prevent human communication in spoken languages, Sacks notes that this was best exemplified by an artistic exchange between the National Theatre of the Deaf and the Japan Theatre of the Deaf in August 1988:

The deaf actors in the American and Japanese acting companies were soon chatting,' reported David E. Sanger in *The New York Times* (August 29, 1988), 'and by late afternoon during one recent rehearsal it became clear they were already on each other's wavelengths.

"There is no universal sign language, but there are, it seems universals in all sign languages, universals not of meaning, but of grammatical form" (91). Sign language, because of its roots in the physical realm seems to reveal similarities in structure "which help to make it possible for their users to understand one another far more quickly than users of unrelated spoken languages could understand each other...Signers are adept at picking up, or at least understanding, other signed languages, in a way which one would never find among speakers (except, perhaps, in the most gifted)" (177-8). Signing seems to point to something more human, and more primal than spoken language; if even animals (like chimpanzee's) can be taught sign language. It seems as Gee and Goodhart found in their research that signed languages seem to be the "true language" of the mind:



One only has to watch two people signing to see that signing has a playful quality; a style, quite different from that of speech. Signers tend to improvise, to play with signs, to bring all their humor, their imaginativeness, their personality, into their signing, so that **signing is not just the manipulation of symbols according to grammatical rules, but, irreducibly, the voice of the signer—a voice given a special force, because it utters itself, so immediately, with the body.** One can have or imagine disembodied speech, but one cannot have disembodied Sign. **The body and soul of the signer, his unique human identity, are continually expressed in the act of signing** (96).

## The Creative Process

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After I felt that I had adequately understood the experience and mind of the deaf, I began to explore on the ways in which I could adapt their unique proclivity for expressing complex ideas through gesture and their understanding of physicalizing space and time to help to create a dramatic work. First I assembled participants. For this ilk of work, I knew that I needed to assemble a team of individuals were interested in engage audiences in new and alternative ways, and who weren't afraid to make themselves uncomfortable to achieve a goal. Here is the list of participants in the workshop of *SEEING VOICES*, who may or may not appear in the final production of the piece:

### **BILL BUDDENDORF** (Adjunct Professor, Viewpoints Technique and Freelance Director)

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My Mother became disabled when I was 4 years old in 1977. It was a very confusing and traumatic experience for me as a child and strongly impacted my levels of empathy and understanding. My Mom lost a good portion of her motor skills and basically suffered the way a stroke victim would, but her damage was caused by complications of epilepsy. She has been unable to walk since the incident and uses a wheelchair. As a child I saw how people behaved toward her and toward me and my brother and father after they met her and found out about her disability. Very few people were fearless enough to try to understand the situation. Mostly there was fear, awkwardness and pity. My Mom began working as a bookkeeper/accountant for a disability advocacy group when I was in High School. This organization hired people with various disabilities both visible and invisible and I met many of them. I was forced to face those feelings within myself that I witnessed/experienced in others when they met my Mom. I thought I was better than that and was way beyond being afraid of what is different than me. One of the main reasons I am a performing artist is the constant effort to understand the characters in the projects I work on. Working to understand their stories and the worlds they live in is challenging and rewarding. Understanding the actors and designers and figuring out the best way to help them illuminate these stories is also very satisfying to me. No matter what chaos is swirling around me during this process I stay grounded knowing that I am strengthening my muscles of understanding. It seems that one person can never fully understand another. Perhaps trying to understand without ever expecting to fully do so is what really matters and will lead to a kinder and healthier society. I believe this is what Nia is trying to accomplish with this project – an experience that will help the artists involved and the audience strengthen their understanding muscles and realize or remember how important these muscles are in our everyday lives. We are all different. We are all the same. We are all afraid. We can all do better. I think this project will help us all do better and that's why I wanted to be a part of it.

**MICHAEL BURGOS** (Freshman Acting Major, BFA Candidate)

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**IZZY CASTALDI** (Junior Acting Major, BFA Candidate)

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One of my first introductions to ASL was when my mother, for the school-wide talent show, volunteered to teach my whole first grade class the Beatles song "Love Me Do," completely in sign language. As a kid, my mom taught me different signs here and there, words like "toilet" and "thirsty" and "I love you." All signs that helped us communicate better in loud, crowded places, or when words failed us. She had learned ASL years before then because her mother in law, my grandmother, had had a stroke that left her nearly deaf. So my mom, against the stubborn will of my grandmother, taught herself ASL as an attempt to ease my grandmother's pain and confusion. My mom teaching us sign language acted in a similar way for my sisters and I, because as children communication can sometimes be painful and confusing.

This project is incredibly exciting and interesting to me not only because of my connection through my mother and my fascination with sign language, but also because communication has never fully come naturally to me. Articulating my thoughts with words can often be difficult and frustrating. Existing in a world where sound is not available to you, forcing you to communicate some other way, is something I am very interested in exploring. Also, being able to work with an ensemble of artists whom I feel close to and respect, communicating and making art in a genuinely new way, is an amazing opportunity.

**ABBY GARBER** (Junior Acting Major, BFA Candidate)

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Movement was my original introduction to the theatre. Dancing at a young age brought me into this artistic and theatrical world that I am completely in love with. This is such a special and important project to me because sign is a beautiful beautiful language that I have always been attracted to and it has not had much light shed on it, especially in the theatre. As a theatre artist, movement is one of the most powerful forms of expression. A moment of silence can speak volumes in a play and not having any type of known speaking language in an entire piece is such an exciting thing to explore. I also wish to connect with as many people as possible as an artist, especially the minority and people who are not always represented. I wish to not only connect with my electric collaborators on this piece, but also to connect with a wide audience in a unique and moving way.

**CIERA GARDNER** (Senior Acting Major, BFA Candidate)

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I'm incredibly happy to be a part of this project for a multitude of reasons. First being that I have recently been captivated by the origin of communication, and how much of human connection relies on the ways we communicate to each other. Communication on the surface can be seen as just verbal speaking but we all know that communication goes deeper than that. The various factors of body posture, gestures, facial expression, and even previous opinions and impressions made, all have an influence on what is being communicated. Being someone who's always had a difficult time verbally communicating, I've been attracted to movement as alternative form of expression and connecting to others.

Sign language has always fascinated me and I'm so excited and curious to see what we come up with!

**CHRIS GAROFALO** (Senior Acting Major, BFA Candidate)

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**BAILEY ROPER** (Senior Acting Major, BFA Candidate)

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From left to right:

Bill Buddendorf, Michael Burgos, Izzy Castaldi, Abby Garber, Ciera Gardner, Chris Garofalo, Bailey Roper

Without these participants, this project would've stayed forever in the realm of ideas, and never made its way onto a stage. Through a series of workshops, we worked towards answering one essential question: can we make theatre that resonates with all humans, across gender, socioeconomic, physical or cognitive boundaries. With an emphasis on the deaf experience, I created a work book (included in above: 7 - 28) which introduced them to the ways in which deaf people interpret their word differently. We gathered once weekly over the span of 7 weeks to think about what these ideas meant and how they translated into their bodies and their experiences.

This what not a traditional devising process, through which an ensemble of participants comes together to build a piece of theatre from the ground up. In *this* process, we had the experiences and syntax/grammar of American Sign Language, which provided a wealth of information to draw from, to be guided from, and to draw inspiration from. Because I was working with a group of speaking actors, we were working against the paradigm for creating work. In many devising processes, participants are asked to rely on their words to create conflict/structure/meaning; but words were the very thing we wanted to do away with in this process. In essence, I was handicapping my actors<sup>1</sup>; giving them a restriction to their personal expression that was far outside their natural modes of communication.

Being “handicapped,” can be traumatic, and so to remedy and/or hopefully avoid any trauma, I set in place a series of fail-safes, that would take place during every rehearsal. These fail-safes became a series of almost ritualistic events, that became deeply personal and revered. These fail-safes comprised of:

- Highs and Lows: A common practice in collaborative spaces, wherein the participants each list their highest and lowest moment of their week. Each member of the group would participate. These highs and lows were recorded every week, and sent to the participants in a silenced video format. We noticed that our bodies are always commenting on what we are speaking, and by paying attention to how the body is moving, we could use these natural, physical reactions as generative material to create

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that the concept of *being handicapped*, is of course relative. The participants in this study were only handicapped through the confines of the workshop, and allowed themselves to be constricted in an experimental manner to assess how this would influence/change dramatic thought. In actuality, deaf people are handicapped by the world around, they are not born handicapped. If everyone in the world signed, they would not be handicapped at all. It is in fact our *reluctance*, to consider their method of communication as valid and natural that handicaps them. Imagine...a blind man is not handicapped in the dark.

our world of sign. Participants were told to watch these recordings each week and pick a gesture from another member of the tribe to assign a meaning to. We would then reconvene during the next session and teach these new “signs” to one another.

- A List of Objectives: This fail-safe was originally created by me (Nia-Samara Benjamin), to keep myself on track during the rehearsal process; but because I value transparency throughout all of my creative endeavors, I decided to share these objectives with the group. After we listed our highs and lows, we would review our objectives to remind ourselves of *why* we were journeying in this way. We would all offer comments, criticisms, and concerns. Those objectives are outlined below:
  1. To strip communication down to its essence.
  2. Communicate creatively without speech.
  3. To form a TRIBE that understands each other deeply enough to not have to speak.
  4. To create a world in which the audience feels that they belong.
- Permission to Make Noise: In my original conception of the structure of the rehearsal process, I had intended on slowly taking away speech all-together. This, honestly, felt abrasive and too harsh for the tone of work we were trying to make. We are striving to emphasis communication and understanding, enforcing a lack of speaking may have worked against that goal. No one should ever be silenced, metaphorically or physically.
- Reference to a Tribe: During one of our pre-meeting discussions, someone brought up Nina Raine’s 2010 play *Tribes*, which tells the story of a young deaf boy being raised by two-hearing parents and his struggles to find himself a part of a world in which he was not understood. The play settles on the idea that deaf people, or any marginalized group, are all part of the same tribe, and that they must rely on each to be accepted and supported. This resonated with us, and we began to refer to ourselves as a tribe, and we all agreed

to actively strive towards viewing each other as a family. I think this fail-safe broke down a lot of barriers.

After we had set up this structure of fail-safes, we began to delve deeply into what it meant to communicate.

Because one of our objectives was to strip communication down to its essence, we began to assess what it was not needed when it came to effective communication. Because I know we did not have the time, nor the resources to completely create our own signed language and/or mimic/recreate American Sign Language, we began to dissect English Grammar as contrasted with Sign Grammar to construct a pidgin sign that would work for our participants.

### **Creating a Pidgin Sign**

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*Grammar* is defined as the whole system and structure of a language or of languages in general, usually taken as consisting of syntax and morphology (including inflections) and sometimes also phonology and semantics. Essentially, the grammar of a language is decided by those who speak it.

Contrary to popular belief, American Sign Language (ASL) has its own grammar system, independent from that of English (lifeprint.com). ASL grammar follows a few simple rules that can be reworked and interwoven in a myriad of ways to produce the most complex sentences. ASL grammar relies (primarily) on the following:

- **Word Order:** The order of your words in sign determines what you are communicating to your audience.

- Conversations tend to follow **Subject-Verb-Object** or **Subject-Verb** order.
- ASL does not rely on **BE verbs** (am, is, are, was, were) or anything indicative of a stage of being.
- Each sign also has four major components:
  - Handshape
  - Hand Orientation
  - Location
  - Movement / Facial Expression

When we compared this basic framework with our knowledge of English grammar, as we spoke it, we found that many of the tenants of signed grammar aligned with the things we wished to be rid of with English grammar. We came up with the following list of things we believed English grammar could do without to achieve deeper, more effective levels of communication:

- Removing Gendered Pronouns (He/She, instead using I/Me/My, You/Your, They/Their/Them)
- Inactive or Unstressed Words (Articles)
- Definite Articles (Of, The, Is, Are)

We decided that we *needed* to keep these things for ensure deeper, more effective levels of communication:

- Articles: which would be translating in our pidgin sign by connecting movements together
- Opinions: using active facial expressions to express the signers point of view)



- Physicalizing Space: where you place yourself in relation to the thing you're describing (through hand gestures)
- Intention: possessive pronouns (I/Me/Me) would happen closer to the body.

Once we created this basic grammatical framework for our world of sign, we began to think collectively of what exactly the dramatic *narrative* of the piece would be. This part came easily. We began to notice that because our bodies were always commenting on our words, they were actually expressing something truer, and more revealing than what our words could create. As the leader of the ensemble, I came up with a simple prompt:

**WHAT DO I WANT THE WORLD TO KNOW ABOUT ME THAT MY WORDS CAN'T/DON'T EXPRESS?**

Because we had built such an intricate tribe mentality, where we put emphasis on understanding each other as the complex beings that we are, I felt it redundant to create a dramatic narrative wherein we tried to understand each other. In the larger discussion we are having with the piece about human communication and language, I felt that it would be more interesting and more important for an *outside* audience (people who aren't part of our tribe) to be pushed into the journey of understanding.

Each participant was given the above prompt and told to write down an answer. The text was given no restrictions, I could have flowed in a stream of consciousness style, as a list, as a series of nonsensical words, even pictures; it was meant to be authentic to their thought process and to what they felt essential to communicate to the world through the piece. I choose to allow to freely expressive themselves through written word because it has been proved that sign aligns more closely with the brain's natural processing. I wanted to give the

participants space to explore their thoughts (visually), which is what sign does, in a prescribed space. After text was generated, I had each participant condense their thoughts into a few essential words or ideas, that would help them create a sort of outline of what their commentary would be.

The next step after generating the written piece was to allow the participants to spend time with their words and their thoughts, and brining them to life in the world of physical gesture that we had created in previous rehearsals, mimicking the general structure and eloquence of sign without exactly copying or transcribing their words into a signed language. Making this decision was *truly* the most difficult part of the process for me as a creator, I could not shake the phantom feelings that we were in some way negatively appropriating a culture that I so earnestly respect. In the quest to make something equalizing and accessible, were we actually appropriating the very thing we were trying to illuminate and make visible? Through the bulk of our rehearsals, the ensemble all agreed that we would not go further with the project if any one participant felt that we were, *in any way*, fetishizing this culture and these people that the world so often casts aside. Almost 5 weeks into the rehearsal process, I was shocked to think that I could possibly have led my ensemble down the path of fetishization. But then I had to question myself, is **all** appropriation *bad*?

Being a black woman in the 21st century, I have seen the ways in which elements of my culture have been appropriate for the "greater good," whether it be through fashion fads, slang vernacular, or generation characterizations. It is painful to see your people's legacy adopted by others with no real regard for its history. American Sign Language, is a culture that

deserves to be respected (like all others) for its tenacity and survival in a world that has so desperately tried to stamp it out. Katie Roberts, an ASL instructor, advocate and native singer wrote an open letter to the Seattle Men's Chorus after they appropriate sign in a performance and for selling inaccurate ASL instructional videos, without any regard for being actually correct or true to the grammar of American Sign Language. In her letter, entitled "The Cultural Appropriation of ASL: The Unfiltered Truth," she emphasizes that because of ASL's uniqueness it is common fodder for people to adopt bastardized versions of the language and call it their own. She writes:

While ASL is much more popular, well liked, and used widely, it is not respected, embraced, or honored. It has become a commodity of which any con artist can appropriate a few signs for themselves to create a persona. They film themselves, stand on stage, teach classes, and strut with pride. They know ASL! They have a right to use ASL!

No. You do not. It is not yours to use for your financial benefit. You are a thief. You are stealing our language, mangling it, and regurgitating a weaker, inaccurate version. You smile in your YouTube videos, on your spot on the stage, in your classes, smiling, basking in the spotlight. You do not care about our language. You do not take the time to learn about what ASL really is. You do not care about Deaf people. You only care about the accolades that you receive.

ASL is not a toy for you to break down, pull apart, mangle, and vomit out to an unsuspecting public. There is nothing irrational about how we feel. Your contempt for our language, our culture, and Deaf people comes across loud and clear.

To know ASL is an honor and a privilege. Somewhere, there was a teacher who loved the language, who shared it with you. You have dishonored them by your actions. When you stand up in that classroom, on the stage, in a YouTube video, you need to think about what you are doing. Why are you there? Are you working with the Deaf community or against their wishes? Or is it all about your ego?

Her words struck me. They stopped me in my tracks. Had we, as an ensemble, been toying with the legacy of American Sign Language, as Katie Roberts wrote

(openlettertosmc.blogspot.com)? Was I doing to the deaf community what so many people had done to people of color for centuries. At this point in the process, I wanted to stop. To scrap the whole project and try to reevaluate exactly what I felt was so important about us, a hearing people making this work in this way.

I confronted by group, which contained some people who are the children/grandchildren of signers and disability right's advocates. We had a weighty discussion that took up almost an entire rehearsal. My faculty advisor and rehearsal participant Bill Buddendorf, calmed my fears that I had been moving into the world of appropriation by reminding us all, that we weren't benefiting from their cultural directly. We weren't using actually ASL in the piece, nor were any of us claiming to be experts on the language. We were merely considering a world in which all people unlocked a deeper level of listening, one that reaches back before the spoken and or written word: the language of the body. His word's calmed me, focused me and gave us all confidence that this piece: now more *experience*, than narrative was important, just because of its thought and idea. Just because we are willing ourselves to do it. By stepping outside of our comfort zones, we have unlocked something within us that so many able-bodied, hearing people don't: an earnest consideration for those who function—*live*—differently.

### ***Constructing the Piece***

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Now that we had developed theme, concept, and had some material written, I had to understand how we would communicate this narrative to an audience. It would be essential to

create an environment through the audience could temporarily suspend their own reality (in this case: a world dominated by sound and spoken word), and enter our own.

Being that I am a fan of immersive works of theatre, which by (often contended) definition challenges the traditional convention of audience look at actors by removing the line of demarcation between the observers and the participants, I decided that this would be the best way to engage the audience in the discussion rather than merely allow them to watch a discussion happen. Too often in rehearsal the participants had been asked to turn to each other and communicate through our tribe's language of gesture and pidgin sign, but this treatment felt closed in and non- theatrical. But by *allowing* the audience to be a part of the discussion, will actually allow them to (hopefully) unlock this deeper level of listening that we had discovered through our rehearsals.

We, as an ensemble, were lucky enough to be afforded a space wherein we could invite the audience on stage to listen with us. The conception for the piece then evolved to be a sort of "happening," which is a mode of performance originally conceived by Allan Kaprow in 1957 as a part of the theatrical movement birthed out of Black Mountain College. This mode of performance lacks stringent definition, but usually consists of an event occurring anywhere at anytime with a mostly non-linear narrative wherein the audience is encouraged, but not required to participate. The Arts Bank Stage (where the performance will take place) gives enough space for my 8 participants to move and communication throughout the space.

Each participant developed a movement topography, which is a tenant in Anne Bogart and Tina Landau's Viewpoints Technique, that gives the performing body a clear defined

trajectory for movement in a space. The participants topography was developed by using their written prompts to create a path based on how their words were transcribed down on the page. I made this choice because it aligns with the way in which signing people navigate space. By creating movement throughout the space, the ensemble activates the room in a way that the stationary performer does not.

When constructing the piece, I struggled with deciding whether sound was an integral part of the experience. I first believed that no sound would be made, but that felt a little appropriate of the deaf experience. We are hearing performers, who cannot rid ourselves the inner speech that takes place in our brains because of our reliance on speech. Instead, I decided to create a soundscape of sounds that function as white noise for hearing people: the hum of streets, rain falling, sirens in the background. I thought that by constructing an assemblage of everyday noises, it would allow audiences to focus more intently on the action/communication taking place on stage. Too often music, or rhythmic sounds sound intentional in a space because of the paradigm of performance, but I believe that this soundscape actually fits within the world we are trying to create, suspending the audiences reality by tricking them into thinking that what is happening on stage is just another form of reality.

## **Conclusion**

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The journey to creating this piece, *SEEING VOICES*, named after Oliver Sacks 1989 book, was arduous, but I pride myself in knowing that I can create something with this much thought and structure while working towards challenging the conventions of the normal human experience by asking audience members to listen *more* closely, to consider *thinking with their bodies*, and to understand that sometimes the biggest truths are born out of silence.

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