



Signed Performances In Theatre

Registered Charity No. 1038247 www.spit.org.uk

Autumn 2002 Issue 30

NEWS

The BSL – Captioning Debate

Cath Hunter, Chair of SPIT opens the debate, with a view from Terry Ruane opposite.

We have had a few queries lately relating to the difference between captioned and signed performances, so we wanted to clarify the distinct audiences that each serves.

Sign language interpreted performances (SLIPs) benefit the Deaf community who use BSL, often as a first language, and who prefer to see an interpreter translate the text and characterisation into their native language. Some prefer to see a real person interpreting the mood and "performing" the interpretation too. First-language BSL users can find written English difficult or laborious, and may find following captions perhaps a bit too stressful for an evening's entertainment.

However, some Deaf people, especially those with a hearing loss or those who have strong command of English, prefer to follow captions rather than a BSL interpreter. Captioned performances often pull a larger audience because there are greater numbers of Deaf or Hard of Hearing people that prefer this service - the BSL community is relatively small. However, SLIPs are the only way that native BSL users can access theatre.

Captioning and Interpreting are not 'either/or' options, but two *different* ways for two *different* audiences to access your performances.

SPIT aims to promote all forms of access for Deaf and Hard of Hearing people, which is why we have recently decided to add captioned performances in our listings.

BSL and Captioning: Comment from Terry Ruane

Signed performances have had a bad press just lately with *See Hear* using dubious research to suggest the average audience is no more than two or three. In *British Deaf News*, James Kearney claims that '... Deaf people are less and less interested at staring at a spot lit interpreter at the far end of a large stage.' So what's the reality?

In the last 2 months, I have counted 20 people in the auditorium of the Donmar Warehouse for Gwyneth Paltrow's **Proof**, a group of around 50 for **Joseph** at Crawley, and 50 again for **Fame** at the Churchill Theatre Bromley, which incidentally has the largest stage in the south east! In all cases the audiences were elated and enthusiastic at the end of the show.

The truth is that Sign Language Interpreted Performances are alive and well in London and the south east. In the West End, 150 turned out to see **The King and I** at the London Palladium, but this was on a Saturday and obviously attracted audiences from outside London. The FNT seems to have a regular audience of about 50 every time I go there. Maybe the *See Hear* team should go and see for themselves instead of researching from their ivory tower in White City!

What of outside London? Well, there seem to be problems in the regions. It has been said that there are only about 10 really good Theatre Interpreters in the country and most of them centre around London and the south east. Is training the problem? Many just go on stage and interpret without realising that to do Theatre, you need performance skills.

Continued on page 2

**BSL/Captioning article by Terry Ruane
cont'd from page 1**

And what about marketing? The Theatres we have worked with at Bromley, Crawley and Canterbury have their own mailing lists and have successfully built up Deaf audiences, yet I have often gone into a regional Theatre and often found a small audience who tell me they have no way of knowing when there is a signed performance! The training of Interpreters and the marketing of SLIPs is clearly something that needs looking at in the future.

And captions? They have their place; I do not believe that Shakespeare or Oscar Wilde can be successfully interpreted, so it makes sense to me that the RSC have installed their own captioned equipment, but no caption board can give a Deaf audience the experience of actually feeling a musical and being part of a real Theatre experience that a top-rate Theatre Interpreter can give - ask anyone who went to see **Fame** at Bromley recently!

Caption boards too have their limits and we all need to realise that in the end Deaf people must have a choice, not one option at the expense of another.

Terry Ruane runs Sgn Away, an interpreting agency and is a regular Deaf theatre goer.

DEAF FOCUS GROUP:

HIGHLIGHTING GOOD PRACTICE

Donmar Warehouse, London – has front of house staff with BSL to meet Deaf patrons and offer assistance if necessary.

Kings Theatre, Edinburgh – ‘the staff I met on the evening of the performance obviously had gone through customer care and/or disability training and were extremely helpful’

Grand Theatre Leeds – ‘headsets & neck loops available, good choice, all working, shown how to use and told to ask for help if any problems’

Hampstead Theatre, London – Interval length in the programme. Also notices gave lengths of interval and each act.’

DEAF AWARENESS WORKSHOPS & BSL COURSES 2002-03

SPIT will be running **full-day workshops on Deaf awareness** this autumn, led by our experienced trainer John Wilson, SPIT board member and Deaf Arts Officer for SHAPE London.

Leeds, West Yorks Playhouse Mon 21 Oct 2002

Bath, Theatre Royal Mon 25 Nov 2002

London, Sadler's Wells Mon 20 Jan 2003

Birmingham, Hippodrome Wed 5 March 2003

Further dates from April at the Drill Hall (London) & Traverse Theatre (Edinburgh) to be confirmed.

We hope to run the **10 week BSL Introductory Course** in Southampton; contact Sarah Sills if interested.

SPIT Members have priority booking for 2 SHAPE Courses aimed at hearing people working in the arts:

CACDP Level 1 Certificate in British Sgn Language (1 yr course), Thursdays from 26 September 12.30–2.30pm. Drill Hall, London WC2, fee £350+VAT.

Deaf Culture & Community (Foundation) & Communications Tactics (8 week course), Wednesdays from 9 October, 12.30–2.30pm.

Drill Hall, London WC2, fee £95+VAT.

Further information from John Wilson at SHAPE text 020 7619 6164, voice via switchboard 020 7619 6160, fax 020 7619 6162 or email john@shapearts.org.uk or www.shapearts.org.uk

DEAF FOCUS GROUP:

PERFORMANCES REVIEWED TO DATE

Dr Faustus, Young Vic, London (Reviewed in SPIT News 29)

The Clearing, Tricycle Theatre, London

Sweeney Todd, Opera North at Grand Theatre, Leeds

After the Gods, Hampstead Theatre, London

Proof, Donmar Warehouse, London

The Real Thing, King's Theatre, Edinburgh

Bloodlinks, Barbican (Pit Theatre), London

Mother Teresa Is Dead, Royal Court, London

Carnival Messiah WYP, Leeds

The Bible Reduced Shakespeare Company, Royal Lyceum, Edinburgh

FEEDBACK FROM THE DEAF FOCUS GROUP

Our thanks to members of SPIT's DFG who have checked out and reported back on theatres.

Unfortunately, Deaf and Hard of Hearing people still have 'bad' experiences when they go to the theatre. As well as highlighting good practice, here are some of the common negative comments.

SPIT runs Deaf Awareness Workshops and BSL Courses designed for people working in theatre. SPIT will continue to promote Good Practice and encourage venues to participate in these training opportunities to raise the standards offered to Deaf and Hard of Hearing people.

THEATRE STAFF

'Front of House staff seemed to have an attitude problem towards Deaf patrons. I didn't like the fact that they had to repeat what they had said!'

'Yes they were helpful and welcoming but they can't sign!'

'The box office had no knowledge of signed performance and had to locate information from another source.'

DOES YOUR LOOP/INFRA-RED SYSTEM WORK?

More often than not, these systems do not work very well. The following experience highlights many common difficulties experienced by Deaf and hard of hearing patrons. Here our reviewer was not told about the proper equipment in the box office, was not offered both headsets on the night and the mini loop picked up the wrong frequency.

'I had gone to my first theatre performance in ages and what a daunting experience!

On booking tickets by 'phone', I explained I wore hearing aids and asked what facilities they had to help. As usual (this nearly always happens wherever I 'phone') the box office staff did not know, and had to go and check with someone else. I was then told they had infra red and a loop system.

On the evening I asked where did I collect the equipment for Hard of Hearing and was told the cloakroom. No one was at the cloakroom, so had to ask a member of staff directing people, and was told to go to the box in the foyer selling programmes. The box office should have known this in the first place. I did not know that the loop system was mini-loops one wears around your neck, rather than a system installed in the auditorium, therefore I only collected the infrared handset. I was not offered the other one.

Infrared does not work very well with me, it improves sound only slightly, so I switched my hearing aid to 'T' and of course nothing happened. At the interval I approached a member of staff and explained that the loop system was not working. While talking to her the Front of House Manager appeared and apologized for staff not offering the 2 systems at the beginning. A Mini Loop system was fetched for me, and I thought – great! To my amazement, through the system I only heard the audio description for visually impaired! Therefore I really only made out little bits of the play through what I could clearly hear (very little) combined with lip reading. It was all like a jigsaw puzzle with a lot of pieces missing and someone could only describe the picture. After the performance my companion had to tell me the story.

On returning the equipment I met the Front of House Manager and she was astounded that I heard the wrong 'transcription' through the mini loop, and had never heard of it happening before. She assumed it must have been tuned into the wrong frequency (or whatever) and would check it. She was extremely apologetic and offered me free tickets for the following night. I accepted, but by the next evening I was so tired I just did not feel like going, and had frankly been put off.'

INTERPRETER – COULD YOU SEE HER?

'Frankly the location of interpreter was ridiculous. Deaf patrons were placed right at front. It was impossible to watch action of play and interpreter at the same time.'

'The light was very poor and interpreter was standing on very small space too far back. Very bad place for interpreter. My friend and I couldn't follow the play at all so we left at interval. I was very disappointed with interpreter's poor performance, poor light and poor space'

'I was lucky as I was on top row, as on lower rows couldn't see too well due to actors blocking views to the captions'

HEARING DOGS ARE WELCOME!

A member of SPIT's DFG has encountered problems on two recent visits to the theatre with her hearing dog.

'The staff had a seemingly complete lack of knowledge concerning the theatre's own Access Policy which states- Hearing Dogs are welcome!

It was explained at time of booking that I had a hearing dog. They accepted this. However on the day they initially refused to let the dog into the auditorium saying a member of staff would look after him. When it was pointed out this was impossible they accepted the dog could go in. Unfortunately they had allocated seats in the centre of a row (I had asked at time of booking for a seat at the end of a row so that the dog could be taken out quickly and without disturbing anyone in an emergency).

Ideally any dog (hearing or guide dog) should be located in such a way to ensure that people could walk by him to get to and from their seats and so that he could be seen clearly by other patrons (who could thus avoid treading on him). Furthermore, the location should be such as to ensure that he could be taken out of the theatre quickly and quietly if a problem occurred during the performance. This I believe is in fact required from the point of view of fire precautions.

Communication between Box Office and Front of House staff was clearly lacking and all staff must be aware of the theatre's policy on admitting dogs (hearing or guide dogs) into the auditorium.'

No Clash Diary

Avoid clashing with another venue offering a SLIP on the same night as you; use SPIT's National No-Clash Diary to check and register dates for your SLIPs.

Remember - it only works if you use it!

Up to date listings can be seen at
www.spit.org.uk/search.asp

Keep in touch!

SPIT, 1 Stobart Avenue
Manchester M25 0AJ

Tel/fax: 0161 773 1715

Email: sarah@spit.org.uk

Website: www.spit.org.uk

To join SPIT's free mailing list, simply send us your name, address and contact details. Remember, if you received this issue of SPIT News by post, you are already on our database!



CALOUSTE
GULBENKIAN
FOUNDATION

SPIT relies on Trusts and Foundations for a third of its income. All donations large and small are vital if SPIT is to continue its work. If you would like to support SPIT please consider Give As You Earn (GAYE) or contact us.

www.spit.org.uk

We are re-launching our website in September with full listings, interpreter information, training details and your comments and reviews.

Take a look and let us know what you think.