

Signed opera - it ain't over til the lady in black signs

One of the most animated discussions I've had about opera was with a group of deaf people, in the bar of the Wolverhampton Grand after a performance by English Touring Opera. Conversation (and drink) flowed: what they'd liked and disliked, what had moved them and, yes, their reactions to the music. Some had heard quite a bit, some only certain frequencies, others heard nothing but had felt the vibrations of the orchestra ('the power of the music', as one person put it).

The sign language interpretation of the performance was also the subject of discussion. The overwhelming consensus was that the interpreter had 'made' the evening by giving people real access to the theatrical event and enabling them to enjoy something – OPERA! – that they'd never have done otherwise. It had been a great night out. The Front of House staff had to kick us out of the bar as midnight approached because they wanted to lock the theatre up.

I mention this story because sign language interpreted opera has come in for some heavy stick recently in the press. A number of journalists – all from papers that appear to share certain political 'traits' – have attended opera performances on nights when they were being interpreted. And they didn't like what they saw. Being journos (and influential ones too, such as Max Hastings) they felt compelled to share their annoyance with the nation: sign language interpreted opera was 'preposterous' and 'utterly pointless' they howled. Having written something in his column in *The Spectator*, Hastings presumably told a staff reporter on the *Mail on Sunday* to stir it up further and a piece appeared soon afterwards; more recently there was one in *The Times*. *Spectator*, *Mail on Sunday*, *Times*: go figure. The voice of 'Middle England' (whatever that is) isn't happy. So spectacularly ill-informed have these articles been (interpreters are mad people flinging their arms around with abandon, I kid you not), that they're almost funny.

Except that, as Lesley Knight (Federation of Deaf People) observed when responding to one of these attacks: ignorance breeds prejudice. The trouble is that when pieces appear in the papers that are so ludicrously wide of the mark, and written without any attempt to research even the most basic facts, how do you even begin to respond? You might, if you're lucky, get something (probably heavily edited) in the letters page. But, as many of us are well aware, the issues around SLIPs are complex and take time to adequately explain. And believe me, they're

nothing compared to the complexities around sign language interpreted opera (SLIPs v surtitles to name but one). If I were to go into it here there would need to be a special supplement to this issue of SPIT News.

In any case I would guess that most journalists of the type we're dealing with here simply aren't interested in getting a full picture that would at least enable a proper and informed debate to take place: something I'd welcome fully. It's right and perfectly natural that people should ask the basic question: opera for deaf people – why?

It took an American to show up our reactionary hacks. A couple of years ago, opera critic and writer Patrick Dillon attended a performance at the Royal Opera House that was being sign language interpreted. He too hadn't seen one before, his first response too was one of cynicism, but he was also intrigued and curious to find out more. He interviewed an interpreter, a deaf opera goer, people at ROH and English National Opera involved in putting on SLIPs. The resulting article about sign language interpreted opera, published in the US's foremost opera magazine, was thoroughly researched and well balanced. Probably too much to ask of *The Times* or *Mail on Sunday*.

Still, despite the recent battering that the organisation I work for has suffered for its policy on SLIPs, I console myself with the thought that if papers like that are having a go at you, you must be doing something right!

Paul Reeve is Head of Schools & Youth Learning at the Royal Opera House and a member of the SPIT Executive



Wendy Ebsworth interpreting at the Royal Opera House

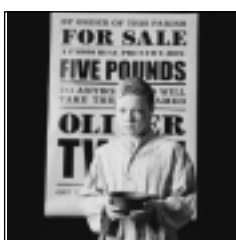
SPIT DFG update



Children of a Lesser God
Salisbury Playhouse,
April 2004



We Will Rock You
London Dominion Theatre,
March 2004



Oliver Twist
London Lyric Hammersmith,
March 2004

Keep in touch!

To join SPIT's free mailing list, simply send us your name, address and contact details.

If you received this issue by post, you are already on the list!

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SPIT's Deaf Focus Group reports back since the last issue on the same old problems: head sets that are not working, patrons being asked if they want the 'audio description'; the interpreter not being lit well or seating not to their preference. Here, however, are some of the more positive, personal views:

Children of a Lesser God

SALISBURY PLAYHOUSE, APRIL 2004

Interpreter Anne McAllister

"...the interpreter was marvellous, she was well lit and I did not have to move my head to watch her and the play." "...overall they score well and this location can certainly be recommended to deaf patrons."

We Will Rock You

LONDON DOMINION THEATRE, MARCH 2004

Interpreter Donna Ruane

"..I was impressed when offered assistance on arrival at this very busy theatre... the interpreter was superb."

Very Little Women

MANCHESTER LIBRARY THEATRE, MARCH

2004 Interpreter Mavis McCue

"...the show was very visual and a great choice for a deaf audience. I had no problems booking via typetalk and staff at the theatre were 'deaf aware'. This was the first time I had been to an interpreted performance where there were so many deaf people (30+). This really added to my enjoyment."

Oliver Twist

LONDON LYRIC HAMMERSMITH, MARCH 2004

Captioned by STAGETEXT

"..this is a pleasant and friendly environment. I could see the LED display clearly and found that the loop system was working well. I will visit the Lyric again."

Further feedback can be seen at

www.spit.org.uk 'feedback & review' pages.

If you are interested in joining SPIT's Deaf Focus Group please contact SPIT.

Letters

This highlights the need for SPIT members to make use of the anti-clash diary in order to offer greatest choice and opportunities for deaf theatre-goers to attend all kinds of theatre.

"I am concerned about the number of 'clashes'. Please ask those involved to co-ordinate with each other. There were six either Captioned or BSL interpreted shows in London alone on the 1st April."

A wonderful choice for the deaf/hard of hearing community or very frustrating,

if this date is the only chance to see a certain show! What do you think?

SPIT runs a no-clash diary where all forthcoming dates nationally are held on a list. Theatres should contact SPIT before finalising a BSL or captioned date for a show to check that this does not clash with anyone else.

This system only works if everyone uses it – up to date listings can be seen at www.spit.org.uk/search.asp or contact SPIT for more information.

Access to the arts presents... play without words?

RNID is currently running an Access To The Arts campaign, which works with cinemas, galleries, museums and other entertainment venues.



THEATRE SNAPSHOT

The Royal Court Theatre, London will soon be testing out their new free text messaging service. With the permission of Deaf and hard of hearing customers, information about interpreted performances will be sent to their mobile phones. If you are interested in joining this new service please send your mobile phone number to Alix Hearn, Marketing Officer, Royal Court Theatre, Sloane Square, SW1W 8AS, or email alixhearn@royalcourttheatre.com.

As part of this campaign they have brought out a stylish ticket wallet specifically aimed at theatres, 650 of which have already been sent to theatres in the UK, telling them how to open their doors to everyone, by providing things like fax bookings, working induction loops, and captioned and signed

performances (featuring SPIT).

Join the campaign by lobbying your local theatre; contact the RNID and they will send the flyer to you to take or post to your theatre. *Textphone* **0207 296 8268** or *email* lynne.bateman@rnid.org.uk.

Summer Schools

Polka Theatre London –

inclusive summer school for deaf and hearing young people aged 13-16

9TH – 13TH AUGUST 2004.

A packed week of drama, music and dance leading to a live performance on the Main Stage for an invited audience of friends and family. The week will be led by local deaf director Lisa Mills. Contact Beth in Polka's Education department for full details on text **07762 800 821**, voice **0208 545 8349** fax **020 8545 8329** or beth@polkatheatre.com



Cambridge Arts Deaf and Hearing

Summer School

MONDAY TO FRIDAY,
9TH – 20TH AUGUST.

All deaf places are already filled but for further information contact NDCS, Amanda Gwilt

voice/text **0121 2349 820** or trainingeventsag@ndcs.org.uk.

The summer school still has places for a couple of hearing technical crew aged 15-18. A fabulous training opportunity.

Contact Roberta Hamond on **01223 578 926** (voice) rhamond@cambridgeartstheatre.com.

The Civic Theatre Chelmsford will have its first BSL interpreted film for children on Saturday 6th November. They also hope to start captioning their pantomime in the New Year. Contact the theatre for details.

SPIT's News

We are pleased to welcome Darren Saunders onto the SPIT Board of Directors. Darren feels passionately that "...*theatre experience should be made available to all, including deaf and hard of hearing people, whatever form their theatre experience may take*". He looks forward to developing SPIT's involvement in interpreter standards and training, and progress in all means of access with the advances in new technology. Darren currently works for the BBC as an in-vision signer to interpret BBC programmes into BSL for TV transmission.

Administrator Sarah Sills will be on maternity leave for the next few months. We are delighted that Caroline Bradley (former venue manager at Oldham Museum and Gallery and SPIT Treasurer/ Board Member) will be covering during this time and can be contacted on the usual SPIT numbers.

National Deaf Theatre Summer School

ARE YOU A DEAF OR HARD OF HEARING
ADULT age 18 years upwards?

- Do you have training or experience in performing arts?
- Are you interested in gaining a qualification in Deaf Theatre Arts?
- Are you free from 16th - 27th August 2004

Come and spend two weeks training intensively with leading Deaf Theatre practitioners using British Sign Language in acting, improvisation, physical theatre and technical skills?

Auditions/Interviews to be held in London on
Saturday 3rd July 2004

For an application form and information please contact John Wilson, Deaf Arts Officer. Minicom **020 7619 6164**, Fax **020 7619 6162**, Voice **020 7619 6174**. Email John@shapearts.org.uk or Julia Hendry, the Project Manager at Shape on julia@shapearts.org.uk

London Calling Announces Success of New Deaf Run

Following initial trials of its 'Deaf Run', London Calling Arts, the capital's leading print distribution agency is now able to offer this unique marketing opportunity to any arts organisations looking to increase awareness of their programmes among the deaf and hard of hearing.

The 'Deaf Run' provides opportunities for arts and leisure organisations to market their events at up to 50 venues across the capital visited frequently by members of these communities.

For further information call Lee Rotbart on 020 7275 7225, e-mail lee@londoncalling.com.

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