

The National Theatre of the Deaf speaks visually

By Charlie Krig

It's a theatre company with a special quality: the actors not only verbalize the script but they also speak with sign language.

The National Theatre of the Deaf (NTD) is one of America's most remarkable acting troupes. The company is in its tenth year of creating theatre of visual language, but the NTD's tour director, Mack Scism, said in a telephone interview that the concept of using sign language is not a technique characteristic only of the NTD.

"Everyone uses visual language by moving and gesturing. We're a first class, professional touring group but we have no relationship with rehabilitation of the deaf," Scism said. "The deaf, like many troupes of people, are stuck with stereotyped attitudes. Use of sign language for rehabilitation is not our major aspect, but it is a spin-off of our work."

Raymond Fleming, an actor with the company, had hearing and speech problems as he grew up. As he studied English at Gaulladet College in Washington, D.C., he became interested in theatre and contacted the NTD. He said he could look back on his life as a deaf child and see the biases that Scism mentioned.

"We (the NTD) have improved the image of deaf people. Too many people who've never seen a deaf person, except one who's peddling cards or pencils, don't realize what we can do," Fleming said. "Stereotypes like that are very hard to break."

"For example, we had one extremely beautiful woman in the company who was deaf. But people who met her refused to believe that she couldn't hear because she was so good-looking. That sort of image has passed away due to television and organizations like the National Association of the Deaf," he added.

Gaining reputation

Fleming said the NTD is gaining a reputation not just as a theatre group that deaf persons can enjoy, but also as a company that consistently does good work.

"We sometimes get people who come simply out of curiosity, out of a 'do-gooder' attitude to help the handicapped. But they leave with the feeling that this is what theatre is all about," Fleming said. "Others come just because they know it will be something good, something called 'art' that is beautiful."

Fleming explained that about 85 percent of the NTD audience can hear while the remaining audience members are deaf. Fleming said this made the NTD a "cultural entity" for deaf people.

Scism said audiences generally are open-minded and receptive and that they are "just as sophisticated in Topeka as in Toronto" so there are no regional differences.

"We occasionally have people call and ask—they always speak euphemistically—about 'objectional material.' They want to know if there might be something in the show that their Aunt Maude might not like," he said.

Work on each show takes about four weeks, Scism said, and the process of selecting a cast begins in late June of each year.

"We consider which plays are best suited to the company we have at hand. We could run off to Hollywood or New York to find actors but we have to find talented deaf people and train them to be actors. So, we do the opposite of most theatre companies that choose the play first and then the people," he said.

Scism continued, "Our rehearsal technique depends on the work we're doing. . . We like to be challenged. Working with challenging material is much more interesting. In addition, comedy requires more energy and movement, more physical fitness. But our movement is organic. We never superimpose a movement or take a movement for granted. We think the writer tells the story in the best way and we just try to illuminate it and make it clear."

More preparation

Preparation includes more than just acting, Fleming said. It also means classes in movement, direction, costumes and theatre history, a class that Fleming teaches. "We try to expose ourselves to as much culture, as much theatre as is possible and then integrate it into our work," he said.

The NTD has done 19 national tours, two Broadway runs ten tours of Europe, Asia and Australia, three films and numerous national and international television shows such as *Sesame Street* and *A Child's Christmas in Wales* (a CBS-TV special). Accordingly, Scism said, the company has to alter its style for each medium.

"In a theatre the audience is an active participant, much more than an audience in TV. Material has to be redone for film or TV because of camera angles, for example, but so much of the good work you see is done by an editor and his skill," Scism said.

Fleming said he prefers the stage over the other media "because it's alive, much more alive to me. The audience is there, not like TV where you do the show and then you



Photo by Bob Pearson

The National Theatre of the Deaf has completed 19 national tours, two Broadway runs, ten tours of Europe, Asia and Australia, three films and appeared on such shows as *Sesame Street*.

have to wait for the ratings to come out. Also, TV must be done over and over again due to camera angles, technical problems, etc."

Praise for the NTD also comes from all the media. A *Los Angeles Times* reviewer wrote: "In finding new modes of actor-audience communication, the National Theatre of the Deaf has opened up theatre for all of us. Words are ghosts. The National Theatre of the Deaf puts flesh around them."

On the NBC-TV *Today* show, Judith Crist called the NTD a "...wonderful company, a superb company, one of the most exciting kinds of theatre that I have encountered. A starting new theatrical form."

Last June the company was given a special Tony award for theatrical excellence. Scism said it was "certainly a prestigious award" but that the company's goal is not to win accolades.

"Or course it's rewarding to be honored, but our real intent is to please the audience. We don't want to be afraid of trying new or hard things. If we tried to be too general we'd have to be too bland and then the others who want more out of theatre would be upset," Scism said.

Scism then reflected on the company's past and possible future: "We've had ten years of remarkable growth, but as we continue, we'll never abandon the stage. We'll look for more work on TV, look for more film, more international work. I can even see where we could have two touring companies."

Even then, Scism said, the new company would have to maintain the "same care, same thought, same professionalism and excellence" that the National Theatre of the Deaf puts into each current production.

daytime

THURS THRU WED

MORNING

6:55 FARM AND RANCH REPORT
 7:10 NEWS
 7:15 UNO SCENE (WED.)
 7:30 BLINKY'S FUN CLUB
 LUCY SHOW
 SUNRISE SEMESTER
 VARIOUS PROGRAMMING
 ROMPER ROOM
 7:00 ARCHIES
 TODAY
 CBS NEWS
 GOOD MORNING AMERICA
 MORNING SHOW
 SESAME STREET
 7:30 MICHAEL'S NAVY
 FLINTSTONES
 8:00 GOOD MORNING AMERICA
 CAPTAIN KANGAROO
 IN-SCHOOL PROGRAMMING (UNTIL 3:30) Age of Uncertainty (THUR.), Nova (FRI.)
 POPEYE
 8:30 CARTOONS
 SULLY WINKLE
 I DREAM OF JEANIE
 SANFORD AND SON
 ALL MY CHILDREN
 PRICE IS RIGHT
 PHIL DONAHUE SHOW
 700 CLUB
 9:30 BEWITCHED
 HOLLYWOOD SQUARES
 LOVE AMERICAN STYLE
 WHEEL OF FORTUNE
 HAPPY DAYS
 MATCH GAME
 HAPPY DAYS (EXC. FRI.)
 Martha's Kitchen (FRI.)
 ROMPER ROOM
 ELECTRIC COMPANY
 10:30 NOT FOR WOMEN ONLY
 KNOCKOUT
 FAMILY FEUD
 LOVE OF LIFE
 IN-SCHOOL PROGRAMMING (UNTIL 3:30)
 RELIGIOUS PROGRAMMING
 CHEDIN LINE
 11:00 TO SAY THE LEAST
 THE BETTER SEX
 YOUNG AND THE RESTLESS
 NOT FOR WOMEN ONLY
 11:30 CONVERSATIONS
 RYAN'S HOPE
 CHICO AND THE MAN
 SEARCH FOR TOMORROW
 GOMER PYLE

AFTERNOON

12:30 FATHER KNOWS BEST
 NEWS

NOON SHOW
 ALL MY CHILDREN
 SESAME STREET
 GONG SHOW
 FARM ACTION
 MAYBERRY R.F.D.
 DAYS OUR LIVES
 CROSS WITS
 DAYS OF OUR LIVES
 AS THE WORLD TURNS
 DICK VAN DYKE SHOW
 1:00 MOVIE "Listen Darling" (THUR.), "San Francisco Story" (FRI.), "Jungle Goddess" (MON.), "Postmark For Danger" (TUE.), "As You Desire Me" (WED.)
 \$20,000 PYRAMID
 IN-SCHOOL PROGRAMMING (UNTIL 3:30)
 LUCY SHOW
 1:30 DOCTORS
 ONE LIFE TO LIVE
 GUIDING LIGHT
 BEVERLY HILLBILLIES
 ANOTHER WORLD
 MARCUS WELBY
 2:15 GENERAL HOSPITAL
 DENVER NOW
 ALL IN THE FAMILY
 FLINTSTONES
 GONG SHOW
 EDGE OF NIGHT
 TATTALETALS
 IN-SCHOOL PROGRAMMING (UNTIL 3:30)
 2:30 MICKEY MOUSE CLUB
 GILLIGAN'S ISLAND
 FLINTSTONES
 MATCH GAME
 PHIL DONAHUE SHOW
 I LOVE LUCY
 THREE STOOGES
 KALAMITY KATE'S CARTOONS
 ELECTRIC COMPANY
 TOM AND JERRY
 SUPERMAN
 4:00 GILLIGAN'S ISLAND (EXC. TUE.) NBC Special Treat (TUE.)
 I DREAM OF JEANIE
 DINAH
 BRADY BUNCH
 MIKE DOUGLAS
 MISTER ROGERS
 GILLIGAN'S ISLAND
 FAMILY AFFAIR
 4:30 MY THREE BONS (EXC. TUE.)
 BRADY BUNCH
 SONAZZA
 ADAM 12
 SESAME STREET
 EMERGENCY ONE
 I LOVE LUCY
 BEWITCHED
 5:00 ABC NEWS
 ANDY GRIFFITH SHOW
 NBC NEWS
 BEWITCHED
 CBS NEWS
 NEWS
 OVER EASY
 ROOKIES

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