Theatrical Interpreting:

Providing Accessibility or Policing the Deaf – Hearing Border?

Introduction

Despite a long tradition of theatre within the Deaf community, the contemporary paradigm is for Deaf people to participate as spectators at sign language interpreted performances (SLIPs). In this paper I will explore how SLIPs are constructed, and expose the current challenges faced in delivering SLIPs that lead Deaf spectators to report that they are ineffective. I will subsequently question whether the main impact of SLIPs is one of accessibility; or if instead they represent one more weapon in the arsenal of majority hearing cultural oppression, their more significant outcome being the creation of a border which obscures Deaf culture and makes Deaf theatre traditions invisible.

Sign Language Interpreted Performances

SLIPs are theatre performances that are interpreted into sign language for Deaf spectators (Rocks, 2015). Initially requested from within the Deaf community, theatres presenting SLIPs are now driven more by audience development goals and access requirements (Simpson, 1997) and the interpreter’s role is seen primarily as providing access to Deaf British Sign Language (BSL) users (Gebron, 2000; Signed Performances in Theatre, 2015).

The impetus for improved accessibility coincided with the rise in awareness of British Sign Language in the 1980s. There had previously been sporadic SLIPs in the South-East of England, but it was 1981 that saw the paradigm shift: a single performance of The Mousetrap (Christie, 2014) in London’s West End. Later in the same year, Children of a Lesser God (Medoff and Zachary, 2004) toured the UK: the play has a Deaf character who uses sign-language and consequently attracted large numbers of Deaf spectators; sign language interpreters were used to interpret the speaking characters (Depledge, 1995). The National Theatre produced its first SLIP in 1990, a performance of Bent (Sherman, 1998) and seventy Deaf people attended; in the same year English National Opera presented its first signed performance (Touche-Ross, 1994). London’s West End, and then the regional repertory companies followed in quick succession.

1 The capitalised form Deaf is used throughout to signify those people who self-identify as Deaf and use a sign language as their first or chosen language. I will examine this further in the second half of the paper.
Choosing an approach: platform or integrated

Gebron (2000) describes a number of different positions in which the interpreter can be placed for an SLIP. The simplest and most typically used (THEATRESIGN, 2009; Signed Performances in Theatre, 2015) is platform interpreting, with the interpreter on the auditorium floor or in the downstage corner of the stage. It requires little rehearsal and is therefore relatively cheap; the interpreters do not intrude on the stage picture; and it is thought not to distract hearing audience members: hence its popularity. Hearing people, however, do report that it is distracting; and the separation of the interpreter from the stage means that Deaf spectators are required to watch both at the same time, which is effectively impossible (Gebron, 2000). Consequently the dominant model is the least preferred by the audience.

In Australia and much of the US more integrated approaches to interpreting are commonplace (Signed Performances in Theatre, 2015; MacDougall, 2015a). Of these, zone interpreting places the interpreters close to the action, allowed to move around within defined areas: dialogue can still be difficult to follow if the interpreters are far apart and not associated with individual characters; but by placing them within the stage picture accessibility is unquestionably improved. Further enhancement follows from using shadow interpreting: the interpreter is placed close to the actor and fully integrated into the production with costume, mannerisms and movement matching those of the character (Gebron, 2000). More accessible still is simultaneous characterisation, where each character is performed by two actors, one speaking and one signing, recommended by one group of Deaf theatre-goers questioned at London’s Almeida Theatre (Lauritzen, 1999). Such integrated approaches are more challenging and demand more resources; but as we shall see the simpler cheaper approach has limited impact in engaging Deaf spectators.

Testing the effectiveness of SLIPs

The response to platform SLIPs is predominantly unfavourable. Deaf theatre-makers question whether they offer genuine accessibility (Bangs, 1994; Sealey, 2000; Conley, 2001); hearing actors find platform interpreters distracting and assume that they will also be a distraction to the audience (Stewart, Schein and Cartwright, 1998; Conley, 2001); and surveys of Deaf theatre goers have revealed frustration, dissatisfaction and a lack of consistent standards (Hay, 1993; Russell, 1996; Liddy, 1998; Fenlon, 2002): in one study,
only 35% of Deaf audience members at an SLIP claimed to fully understand the show (Depledge, 1995). It is clear that the “ping pong effect” (Bennet, 2009) in platform interpreting causes the Deaf spectator to choose between watching the interpreter or the performance on stage (Gebron, 2000; Rocks, 2011; Sign Language in the Theatre: Shadow Interpreting, 2012; Rocks, 2015). My own research shows similar results: Deaf focus group participants at an SLIP reported following approximately 50% of the stage action and an equivalent proportion of the interpreting; but without knowing where to focus at any particular time, important points of plot development were missed.

The continuation of a practice that is viewed so negatively suggests that theatres are responding more to the idea of accessibility than to the real needs of Deaf people (Lauritzen, 1999; Pollard, 2004): that the interpreting is “symbolic” (Frishberg, 1990) or “cosmetic” (Turner and Pollitt, 2002), publicly demonstrating a response to access requirements rather than actually providing accessibility. Certainly the number of Deaf theatre goers at SLIPs is proportionately lower than expected (Lee, 2004), and, although there is no tradition amongst Deaf people of attending mainstream hearing theatre (Rocks, 2011), the fact that numbers are remaining low suggests that SLIPs are not sufficiently effective in providing access and subsequently encouraging Deaf people to participate (Simpson, 1997).

**Exposing the challenges faced in delivering an SLIP**

Some writers propose that only by shifting to integrated interpreting, despite its additional planning and financial burdens, will this problem be resolved (Dodds, 2000; Kearney, 2002; Klein, 2002; Bennet, 2009; Sign Language in the Theatre: Shadow Interpreting, 2012); but in reality, the question of the placement of the interpreter is not the only factor contributing to the ineffectiveness of the SLIP. As I will explore below, other inadequacies in the system relate to the perceived role of the interpreter as performer (or not); challenges in creating a suitable translation; the availability of appropriate preparation time and materials; training needs; and the prevailing attitudes of theatre companies.

**The interpreter as performer**

Community and conference settings constitute the underlying experience of most interpreters, but Frishberg (1990) recommends that theatre interpreters have not only a good working knowledge of theatre processes but also acting skills of their own; and directors of the early
SLIPs at the National Theatre attempted to make the delivery of conference interpreters working in theatre less detached and more appropriate to the stage action (Llewellyn Jones, 2004). More recent literature supports the idea of theatre interpreter as performer: Gebron (2000) claims that interpreting a performance is nothing less than creating a new work of art, for which acting skills are required; for Terry Ruane, founder of the West End theatrical interpreting agency Theatresign, theatre interpreters who are not performers do not provide full access (Klein, 2002); citing Weller (2006), Cho and Roger (2010) define all interpreting as a performing art by virtue of it being an act of communication to participating spectators; and practicing theatre interpreter and researcher MacDougall (2015b) considers it impossible to disengage theatre interpreting from performing, as a sign language translation is itself a physically embodied performative text. Respondents in my own research are very clear that the ability of interpreters to portray characters in a manner that “matches” the actors is of fundamental importance.

Translation challenges

Turner and Pollitt (2002) add literary translation of the dramatic text to the multiple roles of the theatre interpreter, but in fact there is a dual responsibility to translate both dramatic and theatrical texts (Rocks, 2011): by dramatic text I mean the script that is written for the theatre; and by theatrical text, that which is produced from that script in the theatre (after Elam (2002)). The interpreter is challenged to produce target language appropriate for the spectators (Gebron, 2000) whilst maintaining an authentic representation of the source texts, both dramatic and theatrical. However, not all forms within a dramatic text will have a direct translation, such as rhyming poetry, humour (especially word-play), and music and songs (Turner and Pollitt, 2002; Ganz Horwitz, 2014); furthermore the theatrical text will include features that are not entirely conveyed through visual action, such as characterisation, tone and volume of voice, sound effects and off-stage noise (Gebron, 2000; Turner and Pollitt, 2002). Given the complex and multi-layered nature of the source texts, so-called translation equivalence is difficult to achieve (Llewellyn Jones, 2004), although even if the richness of the source language is diminished, this may be less important than conveying plots, sub-plots, characters and emotions. The theatrical interpreter’s aim should therefore be to produce dynamic equivalence of the source and target languages (Ganz Horwitz, 2014); this can most effectively be achieved by considering the smallest unit of meaning to be translated not as a sentence but as a complete scene (Rocks, 2011).
The availability of preparation time and resources

Adequate preparation is required to mitigate the impact of these translation challenges. Choosing appropriate repertoire, which is visual rather than wordy, is important (Conley, 2001), although Allen (1977) cautions against limiting repertoire as this might act against the development of sophistication amongst Deaf spectators. Sufficient preparation time, effective communication, sufficient rehearsal time and a Deaf community consultant to act as a Sign Language Master are all recommended by Bennet (2009). Frishberg (1990) adds the importance of preparing an effective translation of the dramatic text in advance as well as working with the director so as to fully understand the theatrical text; similar recommendations were developed at the National Theatre when they first introduced SLIPs (Touche-Ross, 1994). Gebron (2000) asserts that the interpreter’s preparation should be similar to the preparation and rehearsal of the actors, although she is writing in the context of working on a new production rather than interpreting a touring show. Llewellyn Jones (2004) adopts a slightly different position, with which Rocks (2011) broadly agrees: the source text is the performance itself and hence viewing the show as it is performed to an audience is one of the most important elements of the interpreter’s preparation. In her research into SLIPs, however, Rocks (2011) discovered that many of these preparatory steps are not taking place to a significant enough degree: most of the theatre interpreters she spoke to liaised with administrators rather than theatre-makers; were booked on the basis of availability rather than skill, and only after the rehearsal process was completed; were often not allowed to attend rehearsals when booked by producing companies; usually worked alone; and typically would meet the company just before starting the performance.

Theatre interpreter training

Also contributing to the ineffectiveness of SLIPs is the inadequacy of training for theatre interpreters. Gebron (2000) recommends that theatre interpreters are immersed in theatre, attend performances regularly as an audience member, and take theatre appreciation classes; alongside receiving regular feedback on their own theatre interpreting from a fluent sign language user who is knowledgeable about theatre. Rocks (2011) points out, however that sign language interpreting is a relatively new profession, and both sign language interpreter training in academic settings and specific training in fields such as theatrical interpreting are rare in the UK. Consequently interpreters delivering SLIPs may have little theatre experience; they thus rely on strategies gleaned from community or conference interpreting in
their work, focussing on the dramatic text at the expense of the theatrical text. The result can be incomprehensible (for example producing literal translations of English idioms) with little attention to meaning, subtext and visual information from the stage.

The responsibilities of theatre companies

Rocks (2011) recognises that the flaws lie predominantly in the system rather than with individual interpreters. Of her sample, 75% of interpreters wanted to talk with theatre makers to improve their own work, but only 9% had achieved this. She suggests that theatre-makers need to take more responsibility for delivering SLIPs effectively: to see them as more than fulfilling an access requirement and to approach them with commitment and artistic integrity, as much a feature of staging a production as casting the actors or designing the set. Recommendations for improving access at SLIPs have been published since the 1990s, and encompass all aspects of the theatre event. Of those easier (and cheaper) for theatre companies to implement are: consulting with and involving the Deaf community in all aspects of planning, from choosing repertoire, casting interpreters, deciding on the placement of the interpreter, advising on other access issues and evaluating the service; programming a wide range of repertoire for SLIPs, and varying the day of the week they are provided; developing accessible marketing materials; improving Deaf awareness and sign language use amongst box office and front of house staff; ensuring good communication between theatre departments on all matters relating to the SLIP; providing accessible pre-show material, for example interpreted pre-performance talks or synopses in sign language or easy to read English; and installing a visual version of the interval bell (Touche-Ross, 1994; Depledge, 1995; Lauritzen, 1999). If contemporary theatre makers of today were more willing to implement such recommendations, even without improvements in the contributions made by interpreters, then the response from Deaf spectators might be more positive and the numbers of Deaf people attending such theatre performances might increase.

Policing on the Border

It is clear, then that SLIPs are not as effective as they might be, and many areas of potential improvement have been identified: but is improving the accessibility of hearing theatre for Deaf people an appropriate goal? My argument is that in drawing Deaf people into hearing theatre performances, SLIPs represent a checkpoint on the border between the Deaf and hearing worlds: Deaf people are allowed to pass if they are willing to assimilate into hearing
culture, but their own traditions are on the list of restricted items that may not be carried. In the second half of this paper I will shift my attention away from SLIPs, to focus on what is perforce left at the border: a rich and vibrant culture with theatre traditions that successfully withstand comparison with hearing theatre.

**Deaf Culture**

For Deaf people, the central point of cultural reference does not derive from nationality, ethnicity or religion, but from the fact of being Deaf: not as hearing impairment or disability; but as Deaf gain, a positive way of approaching the world visually and physically (Bauman et al., 2014). Additionally the use of sign languages\(^2\) is foregrounded as a central facet of Deaf identity; those in the Deaf community who use a sign language as their first or chosen language refer to themselves as Deaf (with a capital D) rather than as suffering from the physical condition of deafness. As with other minority groups, Deaf people’s sense of oppression by and concomitant reaction against the majority (hearing) community provide solidarity through adversity (Ladd, 2002): cultural colonisation of the Deaf minority has been most significantly expressed in education (where historically speech has been enforced and sign languages banned); in social policy (where Deaf people are regarded as impaired or disabled rather than as a linguistic minority); and in health care (where the medical model of disability sees Deafness as a problem that can be cured).

Additionally, Deaf people have a shared experience of Deaf schools and Deaf clubs, a “Deaf-world” (Lane, Hoffmeister and Bahan, 1996) that provides separation from hearing culture and contributes to a sense of community (Padden and Humphries, 1988). This Deaf-world also creates a suitable environment for the maintenance and transmission of Deaf culture (Atherton, 2009), a process facilitated by the peer-to-peer telling of personal experience stories in Deaf schools (Avon, 2006): as ninety percent of Deaf children are born to hearing parents, the vertical transmission of Deaf culture from parents to offspring is unusual (Padden and Humphries, 1988). Furthermore, Deaf culture is an oral (traditional) rather than written culture (Peters, 2001): in common with other oral (traditional) communities, Deaf culture is passed on through storytelling.

**Indigenous Deaf Theatre**

\(^2\)As with spoken languages, different countries have different sign languages, and there are often significant regional variations.
Storytelling in Deaf schools is an informal part of everyday discourse, but in Deaf clubs the progression along the performance continuum from conversation to platform storytelling and eventually theatre (Wilson, 2006) is commonplace. The form is developed by performers eager to entertain their spectators in ever more innovative ways, until it becomes the “raucous vaudeville that made up amateur Deaf club performances” (Padden and Humphries, 2005). This is “indigenous Deaf theatre” (Peters, 2001) a form noted for its humour, creative use of language, and strong actor-spectator interaction.

**Humour**

If the building blocks of indigenous Deaf theatre are the different creative uses of sign language, then the cement that binds it all together is Deaf humour. Bienvenu (1994) claims that Deaf people still have five senses: hearing is replaced by a sense of humour. He goes on to argue that for Deaf people humour does not only reflect their culture, it is also intimately involved in transmitting that culture. His identification of four categories of Deaf humour helps to clarify this: visual jokes, usually exaggerated forms of storytelling (sharing the Deaf experience); jokes about deafness as the inability to hear and it subsequent benefits (Deaf gain); linguistic humour such as the mis-production of signs for comic effect (celebrating sign language); and humour in which Deaf people get the better of hearing people (rebellion against oppression).

**Creative use of language**

Creative use of visual language is as integral to indigenous Deaf theatre as is Shakespeare’s use of English. Just as the latter structures his writing as prose, iambic pentameter and rhyming couplets, creates neologisms where the existing lexicon is insufficient, and manipulates the language to comic effect (puns and other word-play); so Deaf theatre maximises the potential of the components of sign language[^3] to create performances of variety, intelligence and visual beauty which many Deaf theatre makers have employed to translate the plays of Shakespeare (Boyce, 1997; Wilson, 1997; Neve, Hirshman and Wilson, 1999).

[^3]: Handshape, orientation of the hands, location of the hands on the body and movement of the hands through space.
Different performance styles in sign language are still developing: official recognition of sign languages was recent and there is little tradition to guide Deaf theatre makers. As a result, there has been an atmosphere of innovation in Deaf performance in the last half century that mirrors the creativity of language development in Elizabethan theatre. New forms of poetry are being developed by structuring the components and visual qualities of sign language in formal patterns just as sounds are structured in a spoken language poem (Novak, 2008). Uniquely physical features are used such as the congruence or otherwise of handshapes, flow between adjacent signs and the interplay of the two hands. Peters (2001) describes how handshapes are used as both form and content in storytelling, for example ABC or number stories, in which alphabetical or numerical handshape sequences are used; and whole poems created using a single handshape, for example Who Am I, using only the handshape for the number 1.

A less formal performance language is visual vernacular: mime with added iconic gesture but few non-iconic signs, using cinematic techniques such as close-ups, long shots, shifting perspectives, role shift, freeze frame and slow motion (Bragg and Bergman, 2002). Bernard Bragg claimed to have developed this while working in Deaf clubs in the US, although it is arguably a pre-existing feature of everyday sign language communication; later, when he joined the National Theatre of the Deaf in 1967, Bragg developed his stage language further still into sign-mime (he was influenced by the mime Marcel Marceau): here the signs were extended and modified to make them more artistic and dramatic, more controlled than everyday Deaf conversation, a style that the NTD’s then Artistic Director David Hays called “sculpture in the air” (Miles and Fant, 1976; Baldwin, 1993; Bangs, 1994). The difference between the two styles is not entirely clear: indeed Conley (2001) described sign-mime in almost exactly the same terms that Bragg had previously described visual vernacular.

It is perhaps more accurate to consider these different performance languages as a spectrum, ranging from everyday conversational story-telling to heightened poetic language. Indeed, Pollitt (2014) brings them all together as Signart, which she defines as the “performed and performative, visual and embodied art-form of sign language communities.” She is clear: for Deaf people, sign language communication is performance.

Engaging with the audience
The final feature of indigenous Deaf theatre is its active actor-spectator relationship. Bauman and Murray (2013) develop Derrida’s thinking on self-awareness to conclude that whereas hearing people are aware of their own presence because they can hear themselves speak, Deaf people are unable to see all but a small part of their own language production and only develop awareness of their own actions through the reactions of others: Deaf culture is inherently interactive. By inference a Deaf actor is only fully aware of his/her performance by seeing the responses of the spectators; consequently, Deaf theatre is typically performed without plunging the spectators into darkness. The result is a strong performer-spectator interaction reminiscent of that experienced in the open-air Elizabethan playhouses, and much sought after by theatre theorists and practitioners of the twentieth century trying to remove the sense of separation and audience passivity engendered by the proscenium arch theatre.

**Conclusion**

Whilst the intention behind SLIPs is well-meaning, they are not consistently well delivered; furthermore they ignore Deaf culture and reinforce the idea that Deaf people should participate in theatre using hearing models of practice: SLIPs are almost exclusively hearing theatre interpreted into sign language rather than Deaf theatre voiced into English (Gebron, 2000; Conley, 2001); and they draw funding away from Deaf theatre (Turner and Pollitt, 2002).

This is of further concern because for half a century in the UK, indigenous Deaf theatre has been in decline. Local drama groups tended to be leader-dependent rather than self-sufficient and would not survive the departure of a successful leader (Hay, 1993). Deaf schools have been closing following the drive towards so-called integrated education; and Deaf clubs are closing as a result of both the rise of the Deaf middle class and technological advances (Padden and Humphries, 2005). The traditional performance venues for Deaf theatre are being closed down.

Consequently, the options for Deaf spectators are inadequate. Crossing over the border into the hearing world, enticed by the promise of accessible theatre, Deaf people are left disappointed and frustrated by the inconsistent delivery of SLIPs. But looking back to Deaf-world, all they see is their tradition of inventive, culturally appropriate and engaging Deaf theatre slowly disappearing, withering due to a lack of resources, and excluded from the mainstream by the hegemony of hearing, speaking culture. Theatre-makers and arts
managers might easily be regarded as unquestioning foot-soldiers in the relentless cultural colonisation of Britain’s Deaf community.

References


Pollard, S. (2004) 'Opera...it ain't over til the gent in black signs', *The Times*.


