Deaf Actor Best Practices for Stage Managers

Creating an Inclusive Environment

1. Start with the stories. As a producer or presenter, it starts with the stories you are looking to tell. Think about selecting playwrights who are from marginalized communities and are writing stories of these communities and lived experiences. As a playwright, you can also include a clause in your contracts → if not cast by an actor of a specific identity or identities, pull the play. Playwrights can also include a note in casting breakdowns for plays that are not racially/disability/gender/age specific. The note can say something around expressing a desire for inclusive casting.

2. Budget for "extra" time and resources: DASL (Director of ASL), ASL Interpreters, etc. When working towards inclusive casting, you might have to allot more time and resources (financial and human) than that which you normally do to be able to find the right actors. You need to do the work to find them and gain their trust. After years of being ignored (whether by you or the larger societal actions) you can't expect an actor of a specific identity you are looking for to first off find you and secondly trust that you have good intentions. So, you need to put in the extra work. You may want to use avenues you've never tried before like reaching out to networks and outreach organizations. Putting up a single casting notice is not enough. Also remember, when casting for a culturally or identity specific role do not stop looking until you have found them.

3. In selecting your hiring team, acknowledge your own diversity or lack thereof within the decision-making team and those who will be sitting in on an audition. Make your team aware of where conscious and unconscious bias could occur when thinking about race, gender/gender identity, race/ethnicity, disability, age, sexual orientation, national origin, religion, and veteran status. These are the legally protected areas. However, you should also consider "secondary" areas where bias can occur like education, socio-economic status, marital status, if someone is a parent and beyond. Another tip here is to bring on a dramaturg or consultant early on to support this step. For Deaf actors, for example, it makes a big difference to have a Director of Artistic Sign Language (DASL) on the other side of the table during that audition.

4. Have inclusive conversations early. Before calling in actors, decide if there actually needs to be restrictions on any roles. You can ask yourself and your team, "Can this role be played by a woman, someone who is trans or gender non-conforming, someone with a disability, a person of color, an older person, etc." Another way to phrase the question is, "Are we open to the idea of a woman, person of color, disabled actor, etc. playing this role," and, for example, "Does this character have to be played by a nondisabled, white and cisgendered male, and if yes, why?" Only pin down what is integral for the storytelling by the playwright and if a play does not have an element of race, gender/gender identity, age, disability, etc. specific for the storytelling, bring everybody in. Be open to seeing underrepresented communities play a character that was not necessarily "written for them" or a role that was not previously cast with an actor from their community. For example, a Deaf actor doesn't only have to play Deaf characters, but hearing characters too; a transgender actor doesn't only have to play trans characters, but cisgender characters too; etc. However, do make sure to never take opportunities away from underrepresented communities in established roles. For example, don't cast a hearing actor to play a Deaf character. Always try to have these conversations early on so it is not a surprise in the audition room for anyone. For example, when bringing in an actor who is female for a role you may have unconsciously assumed would be cast as male, the moment of processing this shift may take away from watching the actor's performance. As a playwright, consider your own bias when writing characters and be open to going through this exercise in your process.

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Casting:

1. In the casting breakdown:
    1. After having the inclusive conversations early, when casting for a role that could be played by an actor of any race/ethnicity, disability, age, or gender/gender identity, make it clear in your casting notice that you want to see actors of all these backgrounds. List them out specifically so that individuals can be sure you are talking about them.

    2. In your casting notice, offer contact information to schedule auditions and a way to contact about any accessibility accommodations, for example an ASL interpreter, wheelchair accessibility, or any other accessibility accommodations.

    3. Keep the breakdown about the character and not about the actor. For example, if casting Hamlet, talk about the character Hamlet is instead of the actor you are looking for. This keeps it about the job that is playing the character. E.g. Hamlet (male-identifying, 30 years old, any race/ethnicity, nondisabled or disabled).

2. In the search:
    1. See your options. Make sure to audition actors representing all identities and backgrounds to really be able to see your options.

    2. Support the community. Find ways to support the community that you are representing in your artistic work. Be in conversation early and often. For example, this could mean connecting with local advocacy groups, churches, choirs, dance groups, culturally specific theatre companies and arts groups. Also be sure to develop a relationship that goes beyond your production.

3. In scheduling auditions:
    1. Send sides in advance. Your process of sending sides could be one of the simplest shifts that allow for more inclusive casting. Remember to send sides in advance, at least two days, to everyone. You don't need an actor who can memorize lines in a few hours, so why audition for this kind of skill?

    2. Ask about additional accommodations around sides. Ask if actors need any other accommodations when it comes to sides. For example, a Deaf-Blind actor who has low vision might need their sides and any other written materials sent to them in advance so they can reprint them into large print. Some actors may have a great method that works for them. If you are sending a PDF or non-editable form of sides, you can also ask if an actor needs it in an editable form i.e. word document so that they can make accommodations for themselves.

    3. Scheduling ASL Interpreters. One option for scheduling ASL Interpreters is to schedule a period to see Deaf actors with an ASL interpreter present that you hire. In selecting an ASL interpreter, first ask if the actor would prefer to bring their own interpreter. Hiring an ASL interpreter can financially be compared to hiring a piano accompanist in a musical theater audition. The ASL interpreter voices for the actor and like how some actors prefer to use their own accompanist, some actors prefer to use their own interpreters. In selecting an ASL interpreter yourself, make sure they are certified/licensed and choose someone you know will do well in a theatrical setting. Some ASL interpreters may lack a theatrical awareness when voicing for a Deaf actor. Schedule to have as many Deaf actors come in during the time the interpreter is hired for the audition period.

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    4. Translation & translators. Do not engage in a practice of having actors translate sides for you in any given foreign language. That is, unless you are paying them as a translator. Have sides in the language you are asking actors to speak in and if you need actors to translate, pay them.

4. In the audition room:
    1. Using ASL Interpreters. During the audition, make eye contact with the actor not the interpreter. Do not say, "Tell him/her/them…" Have the interpreter stand behind the casting table so the creative team can focus on the actor. It is also important to understand Deaf culture, which describes the social beliefs, behaviors, art, literary traditions, history, values, and shared institutions of communities that are affected by deafness, and which use sign languages as the main means of communication. Uppercase "D" Deaf refers to a person who is culturally Deaf and a member of the Deaf community using American Sign Language (ASL). Lowercase "d" deaf refers to a person who has a hearing loss. Only people who self-identify as belonging to Deaf culture are appropriately referred to as Deaf (using the capital D).

Pre-Production

1. Basic ASL — The best way to start off a working relationship with a Deaf actor is to make an effort to communicate with them. Even if you're slow and forgetful and mess up, it's about the effort more than anything else. I recommend learning the ABCs and numbers 1-10 to start. Almost anything can be spelled out if need be. Other vocabulary words that you may find helpful are: break, back, thank you, start, stop, hold, ready (also places), scene, again, understand, don't understand, director, actor. (Note: links may say the vocabulary definition is different but, in this context, the sign is correct)

2. Director of Artistic Sign Language — Any production with sign language in it should have a Director of Artistic Sign Language. The DASL works in collaboration with the Deaf actors, so they are not burdened with translating their own material. Additionally, the DASL acts as a set of eyes who can see all of the signed language onstage and tweak it to be clearly understood and to match the tone of the piece artistically. You will need to build rehearsal time with the DASL into the schedule to work one-on-one with anyone (Deaf or hearing) who uses any signed language in the production. The DASL should be able give a ballpark of the amount of time they need with each performer and that time should be set aside when making the rehearsal schedule. The DASL should also be involved in notes sessions and production meetings. Think of them along the same lines as a Choreographer or Fight Choreographer: the DASL works in conjunction with the director to accomplish a specific vision but will need dedicated time for work and notes as the rehearsal process continues. Frequently, layering two languages into one piece will require more rehearsal time. If you don't have a DASL, feel free to reach out and I will give some tools on how to advocate for this position. (Contact information at end of document.)

3. Information access — One thing that is crucial to understand about the Deaf experience is that Deaf folks are frequently left out of the loop, either intentionally with a "we'll tell you later" or unintentionally through honestly not realizing that the Deaf person missed the information. It will probably happen at least once during the rehearsal process. (It still happens to me, and I've been doing this for a while.) The best thing to do is to make sure that any time *any* announcement is being made, the interpreter is interpreting it, and the Deaf person can see the interpreter (and is paying attention to them). Even if the announcement doesn't affect the Deaf actor directly, it's their right to have full access to that information, and saying "it's not important" or "it doesn't involve you" may be upsetting for a Deaf individual.

4. Turn taking — Interpreters can only interpret one thing at a time, so conversations that overlap or people that tend to interrupt will need a bit of extra regulation to enforce turn taking so that the interpreter can

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get everything that's being said. Also, it's crucial to remind cast and staff that an audible voice is not the only voice in the room. If the Deaf person has their hands up, they are making a statement and speaking over them is considered just as rude as it would be if they were speaking out loud and someone did it.

5. Attention getting — In Deaf culture, it is appropriate to get someone's attention in a number of ways. Waving in their direction or tapping a shoulder are common, as is stomping on the floor so they can feel the vibrations or flashing the lights in a room. Here is a good video expanding on some of these uses. If you are far away from the Deaf individual, it's also common to ask someone near the person to tap them, then direct their attention to whoever needs it.

Rehearsal

1. First Rehearsal — It might be nice to give a short crash course on what you learned from the above pre-pro section to reduce the amount of cultural mediation that the Deaf person has to do. Things to emphasize: nonverbal communication is happening in the room so eye contact is important; review how to use an interpreter; everyone should get in the habit with communicating directly with Deaf individuals; go over communication ground rules such as turn taking and attention getting; review function of DASL and emphasize that all Deaf culture or sign language questions go to them.

2. Interpreters — Interpreters are typically scheduled in teams of two for any assignment longer than 2 hours. The interpreting team may work out a different schedule based on how light or heavy the load is, what work is being done, etc. When in doubt, err on the side of too many interpreters, and feel free to check in with the Deaf individual and the interpreters about whether they feel they need additional support. Interpreters are required in the following situations: rehearsals, tech rehearsals, performances, fittings, press events, post-show mingling and stage door. (As a side note: I also work in the interpreting field so if you have questions about best practices for *that*, I'm happy to answer them. Message me!)

3. How to use an interpreter — Any time anyone is speaking, the interpreter should be interpreting. Be sure to address the Deaf person directly instead of saying "can you tell them xyz?" Frequently, the interpreter will move around the room for best sight lines. Try to work with them so they have a few positions that are easy for the Deaf individual to see them, but not disruptive or blocking anyone else's view. The interpreter may ask for someone to repeat something or may ask for them to pause while they expand or clarify something related to their ASL translation. It's a bit of a learning curve but you will catch on quickly. I must emphasize that any creative sign language decisions should come from Deaf performers or creatives, *not* interpreters.

4. Seating arrangements — When setting up a table read or any other sort of set seating arrangement, ask the Deaf individual where it would be best for them to sit and where they'd like to place the interpreter. They might also have input about where the actors they interact with most should sit. Sight lines and being able to see faces/mouths clearly is important.

5. Lighting — Ensure that there is adequate lighting to be able to see the Deaf person's hands. Keep in mind that Deaf folks have more sensitive eyes and are sometimes more sensitive to certain kinds of lighting. (Looking at you, fluorescents.)

6. Announcements — As mentioned in pre-pro, always make sure to have the Deaf cast's attention during announcements such as breaks, back from break, going back to a specific place in the script, starting from the top, etc. Flashing the worklights in a room is a great way to get the attention of everyone, Deaf and hearing alike.

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7. Developing visual cues — Rehearsal is when the Deaf actor starts to get an idea of when they will need visual cues. Keep an eye out for where the actor seems to be struggling to follow and see if there is something that can be done to cue them. Help protect your Deaf actor by setting aside time for those conversations instead of allowing the rehearsal to continue and railroading over this request. If the cue is some kind of visual tech cue (lights/projection shift), it's helpful to flag it with which direction the Deaf actor is facing at that moment, so you know where there needs to a be a visible shift.

8. Masks – Whether or not Deaf folks do or do not lipread as a survival skill, they rely on visual facial cues while communicating. Masks with clear windows to allow access to the face improve communication greatly and are highly recommended. Please do not pull down masks to allow for lipreading, as this puts Deaf individuals at risk! Apps like Cardzilla, Big, or any notes app are great in a pinch if no interpreter is available.

Tech Rehearsal

1. Lighting — Some things to consider when layering in lights: Make sure the Deaf cast member sees and registers the "going dark" warning before actually blacking out. Tech rehearsal sometimes needs more interpreters and interpreters might move around between onstage and in the house depending on need. Find a good spot for the interpreter where the Deaf cast can see them and ensure that there is always light on this spot (similar to a parked maestro light for an opera).

2. Holding — Ask your lighting designer to set up a submaster with a lighting look that varies wildly from anything else in the show. (Example: bright pink or something similar.) This is how you will let your Deaf cast know that we are holding. Keep it up as long as the hold continues, then resume to normal lights when the hold is done. This convention can continue through into pickup rehearsals, understudy rehearsals, etc.

3. Cue lights — It is incredibly helpful to have cue lights backstage to cue entrances. Failing that, someone backstage who can hear the action onstage, such as a PA, may be able to cue the performer as well. If cue lights onstage or in the house have been discussed in the rehearsal room, check in to ensure that they are all happening where and when the Deaf actor needs.

4. Backstage communication — If there isn't an interpreter backstage (which would be ideal), a whiteboard is very helpful in communicating. I even had one show where the dresser printed out a sheet of paper with action words and a sheet of paper with pictures of the costume pieces so the Deaf performer could point to "help" "skirt". Err on the side of providing too many resources instead of too few. Monitors backstage that allow performers to see what’s happening onstage are beneficial to all involved. (That’s called a Deaf gain.)

Performance

1. Most everything that has been established in rehearsal and tech rehearsal will carry through to performance. The few things that may be additional or different are listed below.

2. The many uses of LED strip lights — An LED strip in the dressing room and green room can be very useful. If the dressing room strip is connected to a switch outside the door, flashing that light can substitute for knocking before entering the room. If the lights have a programmable color, setting a color code can help the actor understand where we are in pre-show. Example: purple = half hour, green = 15, blue = 5, red = places.

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3. Interpreters – Once a show opens, the interpreters' presence decreases to an as-needed basis. Examples would be: announcements, understudy rehearsals, press events, post-show events, etc. With this in mind, make it a goal for cast, crew, and creatives involved in day-to-day interactions with Deaf creatives to comfortably communicate with their peers by this point.

4. Interpreted performances – HIGHLY encouraged. If you are incorporating Deaf culture into your show, you should make the show accessible to the Deaf community.

Hopefully this is an ever-changing, ever-updating document so feel free to pass me any tidbits you learn in your process! I am always available for questions or anything else.

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Resources:

BHO5 – Deaf-run organization that does Deaf cultural mediation for stage and screen