

PERFORMING IN AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE – SHARING WINTER FAIRY TALES
FROM AROUND THE WORLD
by Brooke Palmer

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Abstract

Ever since elementary school, something has drawn me to American Sign Language. The concept of communicating with your hands, body, and facial expressions has always interested me. It was not until college I realized it was because of ASL's similarities to another great interest of mine, theatre. Communication, whether it is using ASL or performing on stage requires expression, attention, focus, and listening skills beyond simply hearing the words. With these similarities, my goal for writing, directing, and producing this project and show was to not only bring the hearing and deaf communities together to enjoy an evening of theatre, but to introduce a group of performers to the world of sign language, and have them discover these similarities for themselves.

Artist Statement

In the Professional Acting program at East Carolina University, we study the Meisner method, which, in part, is based on the concept of listening and answering. This is not just listening to words, but listening and watching your acting partner's body language and intonation; just like in real life, you cannot always take what they say at face value. The same is said for American Sign Language. While half of the language is made up of the physical signs, the other half of ASL is the facial expressions and body language; you cannot have one without the other (Lara). When I discovered this in my sophomore year of college in my first American Sign Language class, I knew I wanted to share this discovery with others. I felt the best way to demonstrate this similarity was for my peers to discover it firsthand by producing a show to be performed in ASL and English simultaneously.

The Magic of Winter from Around the World is an original play written by me and performed in English and American Sign Language (or ASL). The story is an adaptation of three

winter fairy tales from three different corners of the globe: “The Wooden Shoes of Little Wolff” from France, “The Christmas Tree Forest” from North America, and “The Little Girl and the Winter Whirlwinds” from Belgium. The play is woven together by a Santa Clause figure known by different names in each story (Papa Noël, Father Christmas, and Father Frost respectively, and for the rest of this statement will be referred to as Father Christmas). Father Christmas weaves the three stories together, narrating each tale from beginning to end.

The show is simultaneously performed in both English and ASL. When Father Christmas speaks in his narration spot stage left (the un-bolded lines in the script in Appendix A), he says his lines while an interpreter signs along with him. However, when characters engage in dialogue with one another, (the bolded lines in the script in Appendix A), the actors are speaking in English and signing in ASL.

Background: American Sign Language in Theatre

Language and theatre go hand-in-hand. Theatre education authors Cecily O’Neill and Alan Lambert state that language is the “cornerstone of the drama process” because no matter the physical activity on stage, “language is directly and necessarily involved” to move the story along (O’Neill 18). No language embodies this definition more than sign language because of the importance of body language. While in hearing and speaking cultures body language and facial expressions are processed subconsciously and may not be necessary to get a point across, in Deaf cultures, the use of the body parts such as the head, face, and upper torso are used for the intonational context speaking languages get naturally (Tyronne 121). Body language is also an important part of theatre, as it gives both the audience and fellow actors clear clues as to how the character is feeling or doing.

Many theatres across the country have brought the hearing and deaf communities together by providing ASL interpreters at their shows. This inclusion, however, sometimes introduces a struggle. For example, with an increase in interpretation, there has been a decrease in theatres producing material entirely in ASL (Richardson). Even then there is the worry about the interpretation itself. There is concern that inter-lingual translation from text to sign language will cause inaccuracies, or that the interpreter has inefficient space or lighting to sign (Richardson). One solution to this problem is to be rid of the interpreter all together and have the play performed entirely in ASL and English.

There are multiple Deaf theatres across the United States that accomplish this goal, such as the first Deaf theatre in the United States, the National Theatre of the Deaf in Connecticut (Berke). One theatre, the Deaf West Theatre, even produced an English/ASL performance that was so successful, it found its way to Broadway (BWW). Their 2014/2015 revival of *Spring Awakening* had no interpreter; hearing and deaf actors simply performed together on stage (BWW). This show is my inspiration for my project. This production proved if the story is compelling and every member of the audience is provided the means to understand what's being said, the show can be extremely successful. What's more, hearing and deaf audiences can experience art together.

Playwriting Period

The first step of this project was writing the script I planned to translate into ASL. The reason I chose to write a show instead of translating a preexisting one was so I would have control over the dialogue and narration. I could choose the words and sentences that my actors would go on to sign. Since I had no preconception of the signing proficiency of my actors, I

wanted to make sure the dialogue wasn't overly complicated or impossible for a beginner to memorize and perform.

Many factors contributed to the global theme of this show. Since I was a freshman and started participating in Theatre for Youth activities and productions, a clear pattern among them was their integration of global stories and various cultural influences. For example, the Theatre for Youth program often offers global linking sessions to universities in Japan and Poland. Also, many of the adapted skits and short stories performed by Storybook Theatre are based on stories from countries like Mexico, China, Russia, and more. Participating in these vast global experiences, even though I never physically left North Carolina, allowed me to mentally travel and learn about other cultures, and giving me a widened world view. I wanted to provide this experience to the audience of my show.

I further specified the tales to take place in the wintertime for two reasons. First, I knew it would be performed in the latter half of the fall semester, so I thought it would be enjoyable to produce a show that paralleled the season. Second, I could pick stories with similar themes and subject matters, which meant many of the signs would be repeated by multiple actors and thus, easier to memorize.

Rehearsal Period

The rehearsal period, which consisted of eight weeks, was broken up into two parts: teaching the blocking and teaching the sign language. Blocking, or the direction and physical actions the actors take while saying their lines, took the first three weeks of the process. My assistant director, Bonnie Boykin, and I took two days to block each tale with one day to review all three back to back. Then, we moved on to teaching the sign language.

I practiced teaching sign language in the first semester of my project, in the spring 2019 semester. Not only was I adapting the script, but I also became president of the ASL Theatre Club. I taught members of the club the ASL alphabet, how to sign their names and majors, and a Storybook Theatre adaptation of *One Fish, Two Fish* by Dr. Seuss. In the fall semester, my co-faculty mentor, Nancy Ausherman, and I recorded videos of the signed lines from *The Magic of Winter from Around the World* for the cast to watch and learn. While they consistently had access to these videos throughout the rehearsal process, as many of them had little ASL experience, I blocked three weeks of our rehearsal schedule to work with the actors directly on their individual signed lines.

On November 2nd, we also had a workday in Messick Theatre Arts center to work on the set, props, and costumes for the show. My cast and crew gathered to work on these materials for about five hours. Once completed, they were ready to be implemented into our next rehearsal. The funds for these materials, along with other costs such transportation expenses, were provided by the Undergraduate Research and Creative Activity Award and the Honors College. Their contribution helped put the finishing touches on this project.

The final step was putting everything together, from the blocking and the lines to the costumes, props, and the set. We did this in ten days, and on November 14th, we had our first performance at the Eastern North Carolina School for the Deaf (or ENCSD).

Performance Period

We staged three performances of the production: one, as mentioned above, at ENCSD in Wilson, NC, and two in Messick Theatre Arts Center on November 22nd and 23rd. The audiences at all three performances loved the show and were impressed by the actors' ability to speak and sign simultaneously. At ENCSD, we had the opportunity for a brief discussion with

the children immediately after the performance, and they were surprised and impressed to learn that the actors were new to ASL, and learned parts of the language for the show.

The success of this show would not have been possible without the helpfulness, dedication, and hard work from numerous parties. From my production team who helped bring elements of the set, costumes, and props to life to the cast for not only learning an entire show but a whole new language; the show was a success because of each of them, and I am thankful for them and their enthusiasm and devotion towards my project.

Survey Results from Actors

One of my goals for this project was to not only introduce a group of actors to the beginning stages of American Sign Language but for them to understand the similarities it has to theatre. Watching the actors through the rehearsal and performance process, I witnessed moments where the realization of the similarities clicked. I also asked them a set of survey questions to have them reflect on what they learned about ASL and theatre. Questions included their competence at signing, their ability to introduce themselves in ASL, their confidence to fingerspell the ASL alphabet, whether or not they agreed that body language and expression relate to theatre and ASL and if learning ASL is beneficial in the theatre world. At the end of the process, each actor grew in their signing abilities with a majority feeling confident that they could introduce themselves or sign the alphabet if asked. All also grew in their belief that body language and expression relate to theatre and ASL, and understand why knowing ASL is beneficial in a performance setting, which they elaborated on in the second survey section.

I also asked two short answer questions: one asking how the actor planned or hoped to implement ASL into their future personally and professionally, and the other asking how ASL and theatre impacted them personally and professionally. The most frequent response I saw was

the number of actors who have a newfound interest and desire to keep learning ASL, some saying they would like to become fluent. Other patterns I noticed were their newfound understanding of how body language and expression go hand-in-hand with the physical signs, a perspective on a new community and culture, and an eagerness to be a part of ASL/theatre productions in the future.

Closing

American Sign Language is a beautiful language, and it has great potential to be implemented into – if not the central base for – theatre arts performances. This is the epiphany I came to when I started studying the language years ago, and it is an idea I demonstrated with this show. The next time *The Magic of Winter from Around the World* is produced, there are many ideas with the set, the costumes, and even the script that I could alternate and change to enhance the story and experience. However, its foundation and importance of the combination of American Sign Language and English, along with the morals that were exemplified with the global tales I used for inspiration, will follow this play everywhere it is performed, by audiences of all ages. In the meantime, I am encouraged to know every person who came into contact with this project, from my cast to my crew to the audience of the performances, has also discovered this idea, and hopefully may use it to implement elements of ASL into their own lives.

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