

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### A Beginning: Positioning the Researcher

My dissertation investigates how theater can be used to uncover and characterize Deaf leadership. Leadership in the Deaf culture seems to take on a form that is frequently not apparent to the mainstream hearing culture. It is my hope that this study will allow a Deaf cultural leadership style to be accessible to others so that it can be understood more fully. As I begin to explore a Deaf cultural leadership style with you, I feel I should address the natural first question that is often asked of me: “Why are you, a hearing person, so involved in the world of the Deaf?”

“Deaf” and “hearing” can be seen as polar opposites conceptually similar to black and white or to us and them, i.e., two separate communities divided by a language barrier. In this work, the terms are used in a cultural rather than an audiological sense. In the cultural framework, I am a member of the Deaf community. I can determine this without sharing the physical impairment because Deaf people have varying degrees of hearing loss; in fact, the exact point of being considered legally deaf is not always a determining factor in being considered culturally Deaf. The choice of sign language as a primary language and self-identification with the group, i.e., using the sign DEAF to describe oneself as opposed to HH (hard of hearing) or HI (hearing impaired), are the principal indicators of group membership. “Hearing people too are considered a part of the community if they participate in the Deaf community in a significant way – as a family member or by sharing a large part of their lives” (Padden & Humphries, 1998, p. 32). The English understanding of the meaning of “Hearing” as “can hear” is incomplete. Padden

and Humphries point out that in Sign communication the Sign for “hearing” is often used to represent “the opposite of us.” The example used was from a Deaf football game in which one deaf team referred to the other deaf team as “hearing” even though both teams were deaf. That is why I find it awkward to label myself “Hearing.” I do not feel I am an outsider.

Although I self-identify as and am physically hearing, I have a place in the Deaf community as an artist, as a teacher, and as a friend. My closeness to the community creates a bias, no doubt, but it also positions me as an intimate observer – neither really an outsider nor passing as a natural member of the community. My self-identification as a community member was reinforced by the treatment I received in the creation of this project. I expected some hesitancy in the sharing of personal stories with a researcher perceived as “hearing;” but, that did not happen. Instead the stories were shared openly and the attendance at the various salons I arranged made rooms full to overflowing. I often was asked to explain my connection to the community, and some discussion about what my label might be caused some ruffling of feathers. “Am I culturally deaf?” The answer is no, since this is taken to mean life members of the deaf community who are often physically hard of hearing. However, I found that it was easily agreed that I have a place in the community even though no recognizable standard label easily suits me.

What began as a question of clarifying my membership in the Deaf community actually helped to illuminate an example of Deaf culture in miniature. It is culturally appropriate that a person in the Deaf community be given a sign name. Often it is based on the handshape of the first letter of your English name and used in a physically

descriptive way. For example, my English name is Luane but my sign name is the letter “L” jumping up and down to signify my continual energy and excitement. It is not appropriate for individuals to name themselves – they must be given the name by someone in the deaf community acknowledged to be culturally adept. In my case my close friend George Garcia, who is a deaf poet, storyteller, and Sign Language instructor as well as a Broadway show Sign coach and advisor, gave me my Sign name. My cultural labeling of my identity developed in much the same way. Although I am physically hearing, my bias is in favor of my membership in the Deaf community.

George Garcia also labeled me a “visual person,” meaning my frame of reference is similar to a culturally Deaf perception. In a similar manner Ben Bahan (1989, p. 32) suggested calling both deaf people and “visually centered” hearing people as “seeing” people. By this he means to focus attention on the skills we have, rather than on the physical abilities we do or do not share. My students at NTID express disappointment when I tell them I am hearing, and I have been told that I am wrong to say that; instead, they suggest I say I am from deaf family (please note, this is markedly different from claiming to be a child of Deaf Adults – CODA). Therefore, in the interest of honoring the tradition of being given a “sign name” I accept the labels given to me by the community. I am warmed, though, by the fact that whatever I am labeled it is still a position considered to be within the community.

The esteemed ethnographer, Franz Boas, is quoted in connection with this double-edged sword of intimacy and otherness as saying;

In all our thoughts, we think in terms of our own social environment. However, the activities of the human mind exhibit an infinite variety of forms among the peoples of the world. In order to understand these clearly, the student must endeavor to divest himself entirely of opinions and emotions based upon the peculiar environment into which he is born. He must adapt his mind, so far as feasible, to that of the people whom he is studying. The more successful he is in freeing himself from the bias based on the group of ideas that constitute the civilization in which he lives; the more successful he will be in interpreting the beliefs and actions of man. He must follow lines of thought that are new to him. He must participate in new emotions, and understand how, under unwonted conditions, both lead to actions. Beliefs, customs, and the response of the individual to the event of daily life, give us ample opportunity to observe the manifestations of the mind of man under varying conditions. (Boas, 1940, p. 8)

Mindful of Boas' advice, a goal of this research project was to trace language choices, to examine social significance, and to present a theatrical story with a message significant to the participants. This experience formed the basis for a practice of ethnography and an aesthetic and sensory experience. It was my intention to actively integrate and synthesize forms of ethnographic practice and representation with the aesthetic dynamics at work in the social/cultural domain of the fieldwork, through experimentation in intrinsically practical, experientially-based ways of knowing, recording, analyzing, and presenting (Helgesen, 1990). To do this I needed to reinvigorate old questions of what "culturally other" means and how it affected leadership style. I also asked for active participation by everyone involved in the process – my staff, the actor/participants, and the audience. This form of participation has its roots in Action Research as is defined below.

Action Research, according to one definition, engages researchers, students, and community leaders "in a collaborative process of critical inquiry into problems of social practice in a learning context" (Argyris et al., 1985, p. 236). The process of using Action

Research to investigate the present area of inquiry began with engaging people to discuss topics of interest to the community. Those subjects who came and participated in the discussion “salons” then shaped the direction of the conversation and the resulting questions. Action Research also appeared in the rehearsal process when the actors themselves took ownership of interpreting the roles and added details from their own lives. The final stage of Action Research was in the audience talk-back sessions at the end of every performance. The audience felt empowered to add to the information with reflection and to respond to the stories they had just seen.

Since joining the faculty at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) in the fall of 1998, I have consciously tried to increase my understanding of “Deaf culture” and “signed communication.” My awareness of a Deaf community began with my maternal grandmother, who was deaf and with whom I was close. Sadly, I only had my first years to have her imprint as she died when I was only four years old. However, I had believed the signs she shared with me were our own private language. My ownership of the language was challenged, however, when I realized that there was a community of people in the world who knew my secret language. Moreover, this group of people did not recognize me as a member of their community. Thus, getting no further encouragement, I dropped my connection with the Deaf community until much later in my life.

As an adult I was able to find work in the theater, and one of the remarks often made about my performance style on stage was how expressive and physically risk-taking I was and still am. I attributed this largely to my wish to honor my relationship

with my grandmother, and the validity of this attribution was confirmed when I began my graduate work at Goddard College. The motto of the College and a framework for their approach to study is “to know, to do, and to be.” It was expected that reflections on my daily work would be incorporated into my studies. At the same time, I was a Public Education Specialist for New York State Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD). In a skit we performed in high schools titled *Mainstreet*, it was desirable that one actor portray a Deaf professional. I took on the role and there I rediscovered my ability to sign and I vividly recalled my personal remembrances of deafness. Simultaneously, I was in the position of Artistic Director with the company I had co-founded, Interborough Repertory Theater (IRT), and the young actors we were hiring, however well-trained, were simply not expressive enough for the stylized children’s theater tours we were creating. All of this came together as one: my graduate studies and my new appreciation for my experiences with sign language encouraged me to train these young actors in the foundations of sign communication to help improve their physical communication.

I then was hired by the National Improvisation Company to work at the Javitt’s Center portraying historical characters. Because our work was improvisatory, the required two-week rehearsal period that the Actor’s Equity Association contract called for was used by the company to train actors in the acting techniques popular in the eras appropriate to our characters. I was playing Susan B. Anthony, and someone called François Delsarte was all the rage in American theater during her lifetime. It was there I learned about Delsarte’s codified movement studies. I set about trying to blend Delsarte

and my knowledge of sign language, but I found myself falling short of my goal. I was forced to admit to glaring holes in my understanding of and my ability to use sign language. Therefore, I studied in and graduated from the Interpreter Training Program at the New York Society for the Deaf. In addition, I attended all levels of Interpreting sessions at The Julliard School, which has a program for theatrical interpreting supported by the American Theater Wing. I joined the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) in 1992 and studied privately with some of the best theatrical interpreters in New York City. I was honored to study under acknowledged masters like Alan Champion, Stephanie Feyne, Lynnette Taylor, George Garcia, Al Berkowitz (“Al B.”) Roy Doliner, Manny Hernandez, and Bruce Hlibok (whose brother Greg led the Gallaudet College protests demanding a Deaf President for the College in 1990).

This training, the use of my skills as an interpreter, and the exercise of my observational skills as an actor resulted in a heightened awareness and understanding of body language, facial expression, and non-verbal communication. This new awareness and understanding led to analysis of how these features of communication affected relationships, partnerships, and the work environment at my theater company. This allowed me a view “from the balcony” (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997), a perspective from which to analyze and improve conditions at my theater company as well as to develop the Del-Sign acting technique. I found I not only had a different view, but also a different manner of viewing.

## Meta-Culture

Although I had trouble finding studies on Deaf cultural leadership, I did find a different research method tradition that supported many of the beliefs and perspectives I used when I approached my work. Suppose, for example, I were asked by an interested acquaintance:

*What Is the Subject of Your Work?*

I would respond by saying that my focus is the anthropological significance of Deaf leadership in balance with hearing cultural norms while in the holding environment<sup>1</sup> of a theatrical rehearsal process. My research question targets a very specific pool of participants. My participants are the creative people who inhabit the edges or “margins” of their cultures (Deaf or hearing) because of their relationship to the arts. These theater people, whose tolerance and innovation bring them into contact with each other, create a third pool of people who inhabit a cultural bridge area allowing for both cultures to experience successful cultural change and shared power in leadership. It is in this pool of participants that a previously unrecognized form of Deaf leadership was evidenced.

Through my years of living and working in the Deaf<sup>2</sup> community I noticed a style of leadership that seemed to be unique to the Deaf. Yet it is a style rarely shown in “mixed” company, that is, Deaf and hearing people working together. Unlike the usual work or academic environment in which this “mixed” group often functions and which

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<sup>1</sup> Heifetz uses the term holding environment to describe the time frame and treatment of participants in a case study.

<sup>2</sup> “Deaf” denotes the cultural community comprised of people whose members use sign language “as a primary means of communication among themselves, and hold a set of beliefs about themselves and their connection to a larger society” (Padden & Humphries, 1998, p. 2).



abides by hearing cultural norms, like Spoken English and hierarchical structures, the environment of the rehearsal was consciously weighted in favor of Deaf cultural norms, like Signed communication and collaborative structures.

My subject domain, or my “native” participant pool, was comprised of a group of people who have a theatrical or performing background. This theater knowledge created a sense of initial bonding with shared jargon and a foundation of behaviors appropriate to working and playing in theater. My participants (and myself) were also able to communicate in various forms of signed language, which was be the primary communication style used during the rehearsal (or treatment) process.

#### *So Are Your Subjects Deaf?*

My answer would have to be found in the place where yes meets no. It is an answer finds a place where the boundary between cultures, which rub up against each other, exists. It is the bridge area, a place that becomes the home of people who are on the “margins” or edges of both cultures. From an audiological perspective, my participants were physically both deaf and hearing. From a cultural perspective, they shared an interest and a linguistic ability that leaned more toward Deaf community. The theatrical technique of Del-Sign is a method that intentionally favors an experimental form of Deaf styles of theatrical presentation. The term Del-Sign is a fusion of Delsarte codified movement studies and American Sign Language. The aspects of the technique that focus on skills enhancement are a blend of known acting methods from a range of disciplines. Acting exercises from Stanislavski, Miesner, Grotowski, and Meyerhold’s bio-Mechanics are blended with linguistic games borrowed from Deaf culture that are intended to

enhance poetic skills and build signed vocabulary. The presentational aspect of the technique requires that an actor who cannot hear and an actor who can are partnered and must work together to create a single character. They create their character within a framework in which one person represents the corpus of the character and the other represents the character's spirit. By working together, they create a single character that functions on two reality planes, which I call doubling.<sup>3</sup>

While developing this technique I have directed several productions with the entire cast doubled in this way. In addition, in 2001 Ed Waterstreet used this style in the Broadway production of *Big River*, produced by Deaf West Theater Company. Mr. Waterstreet, the Artistic Director, used this idea primarily with one character that had been originally cast with an actor very familiar with Del-Sign (Iosif Sniederman<sup>4</sup>). There were also other cast members who had studied and performed in the Del-Sign technique, most notably Michele Banks<sup>5</sup> and Guthrie Nutter.<sup>6</sup> Although no acknowledgement or credit was given to Del-Sign in the *Big River* press or program, I understood the use of

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<sup>3</sup> In theatrical jargon this means a single actor playing more than one character. It should be noted that I am using this term to express an opposing situation where two or more actors share the playing of a single character.

<sup>4</sup> Mr Sniederman appeared in the Interborough Repertory Theater (IRT) production of *Noises Off* in 1993 at the Samuel Beckett Theater in New York City. He also appeared in the co-production between IRT and the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) of *The Tempest* in 1999 at the Panara Theater in Rochester New York and at the Quintero Theater in New York City. He was also an instructor in several Del-Sign workshops from 1994 – 1999 and the development of the technique is indebted to and influenced by his contributions.

<sup>5</sup> Ms. Banks appeared in the IRT production of *Noises Off* in 1993 and collaborative work between her theater company ONYX and IRT was comfortable enough that it nearly resulted in shared office space. She participated as an instructor in one Del-Sign workshop in 1994 and the development of the technique is influenced by her involvement.

<sup>6</sup> Mr. Nutter appeared in the co-production between IRT and Wings Theater of *Twelfth Night* in 1995 at the Wings Theater space in New York City.

the technique to be a form of acceptance and validation of the concept. I continued development of the technique by using it in this study as a way to provide a structure for the sort of partnership work that created a safe place for the Deaf leadership style to emerge in a mixed group (deaf and hearing). Use of the Del-Sign technique allowed me to observe and analyze the Deaf leadership style as it emerged in theatrical collaborative work. The technique called for close collaborating between two actors in order to create a single role. As the partners worked out how to collaborate on the role, they embodied a cooperative work environment. The partner's language of choice in this environment was ASL, giving the Deaf approach to the work an ease of access rarely found. The life stories of the participants illustrated the tension that existed as the Deaf community faced changes brought about especially by a decrease in the support of residential schools for the deaf and the advances of medical technology.

#### Theoretical and Practical Foundations

The design for this dissertation is comprised of three interlocking parts that form the practice of anthropology: fieldwork, analysis, and presentation. I have used, as the foundation for fieldwork practice, a phenomenological model, "archeology of the structure of the perceived world" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), by doing a series of group interviews, which I called "salons." I rendered myself "present in the body," and I encountered elements of pre-understanding that guided me into appropriate forms of analysis. This analysis resulted in a dramatic manuscript comprised of personal stories culled from the salons. Next, I examined anthropological and folkloric theories of performance and style, and I considered the semantics of "social sign" and the resulting

performance using conversational sign (rather than stage elocution) as an analytical approach to an ethno-epistemology, i.e., an approach to a cultural way of knowing. I discussed how the grounding of the specific formal elements of text, technique, and understanding of theater industry behaviors contribute to alternative forms of consciousness and new ways of imagining, which led to a response that impacted the face-to-face social relations between the Deaf and hearing communities. I was also able to note how a Deaf cultural leadership style was nurtured and can thrive in a theatrical environment that emphasizes the group over the individual.

Two anthropologists supplied two definitions of culture which I found useful: John Friedl (1980, p. 88) and Clyde Kluckhohn (1949, p. 24). I merged them form the following explicit statement:

Culture may be referred to as the distinctive lifeways of a particular group of people—their customs, beliefs, values, material belongings, and shared understandings and socio-cultural patterns of behavior – that permit the group to share a degree of similarity and to live together *harmoniously* [my emphasis], but separate them from others.

Culture is always linked to a group of people, not to individuals (Friedl, 1980, p. 90).

Culture is created and maintained by members of a given community or society that shares the same *lifeway* (Carmel, 2006, p. 2). It is the socially acquired and repetitively patterned lifestyle of a particular group of people. This signifies that there are patterned, predictable, and repetitive or recurring ways of perceiving, thinking, feeling, and acting that are uniquely characteristic of the members of a particular group who stay and live within the same socio-cultural boundaries, belong to each other, and share the same

worldviews everyday. This can be easily compared to the patterned, predictable, and repetitive environment of the theatrical rehearsal.

My work also parallels the work of feminist anthropologists who have studied women in the male world of work. Much of my analytic process, which resulted in a rehearsal script titled *Windows of the Soul*, was informed by Benedict's (1934) process as outlined in *Patterns of Culture*. I culled monologues from a range of stories that allowed me to represent different "characters" within the community. I then patterned the script to place these individuals in the context of community to reveal how they interact within the framework of current issues of interest within the Deaf community. I then stretched the comparison a bit by bringing in feminist anthropological concepts that deal with the roots of theater and ritual, like Ruth Benedict's work, which emphasizes the concepts of cultural configuration, national character, and the role of culture in individual personality formation. I structured the material and the environment, and I chose actors who would have a strong Deaf identity, share that pride with the group, and be eloquent enough to help illustrate their own personality formation in their work as actors. The work of Catherine Bell (1983) influenced me to create an opening scene that was tied directly to ritual tradition. In that scene, each individual steps into a heightened reality plane to address the audience, directly using language that is stylized; I also used a Japanese haiku poetic structure to heighten the feeling of ritual. This same pattern was repeated in the closing but without the stylized language. In addition, the influence of Denzin (2003) helped me to form my plan for the method of performance ethnography in my research. However, my final analysis and reporting of rehearsal process reflected styles suggested

by Ron Pelias' (2004) writing style. True to Pelias' style, I decided to use my director's (or field) notes as a base from which to write a series of articles expressing my observations at various points in the process. This renders them more accessible to readers unfamiliar with theatrical habit and jargon as well as allowing me the ability to reflect and record.

Ultimately, all of these approaches to methodology were informed by Deaf uses of performance as a frequent element of everyday and naturally occurring discourse. This discourse rendered a theater environment the appropriate place to illuminate leadership within the Deaf community. I began by outlining the historical oppression of Deaf people as evidenced in the stories and poetry found in mainstream literature. I then compared the same situations as they appear in Deaf literature. This research was reflected in the theatrical production by the inclusion of various pieces of Deaf literature, which helped to transition the plotline and often directly addressed feelings of oppression. This oppression was often symbolized by physically containing sign communication. Because of this control by the majority culture of the minority preference for gestural communication, performance practice that features sign language can be seen as a representation of the body's own acts of resistance, self-determination, and celebration. This artistic presentation featuring what was once a "forbidden" language (Lane, 1992) offered a clear example of storytelling as a Deaf leadership trait (Gardner, 1995). In order to add to feelings of ownership and empowerment for the actors, I also broke the standard of having actors use no voice and sign in standard theatrical American Sign Language (ASL). I intended to let the actors communicate their characters in the sign style most

comfortable for them and I trusted that the small size of the theatrical space would help the audience's comprehension.



*Figure 1.1.* Rehearsal photo from the first Del-Sign production of Michael Frayn's *Noises Off* done at the Samuel Beckett Theater on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street in New York City, 1993. The technique I used in this project was first initiated with this group of people. They are (left to right) Monique Holt, Carla Crowe, Michele Banks, George Garcia, Simone Gucciardi, Roy Doliner, Richard Chamberlain; (front) me and Andrew Jones.