

## CHAPTER FIVE: A DISCUSSION OF THE PROCESS

My study is composed of three interlocking parts in a sequence that constitutes the practice of ethnography: fieldwork, analysis, and presentation. The foundation for my fieldwork is an “archeology of the structure of the perceived world” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), using the holding environment of the rehearsal process and the structural process of an acting technique called Del-Sign. Del-Sign is a fusion acting style that I created by combining American Sign Language and the Delsarte method. I also employed contemporary qualitative methods described as “performance ethnography” (Denzin, 2003; Pelias, 2004).

### The Fieldwork—“Salons”

In the Deaf community when two or more are gathered, a conversation starts. Once the conversation is initiated the enjoyment of interaction and clear communication can keep folks talking until the lights are put out or some formal announcement is made that people must stop conversing. My intention was to collect stories from this community. Through these stories, I hoped to illustrate a glimpse of my community for an outsider. In order to do this I devised a plan. I would videotape conversations in a variety of settings. By inviting people to, say, a discussion group, a pool party, or an art gallery opening, I knew the conversation would start itself.

At these events, which I dubbed “salons,” I would pepper the conversation with open-ended questions with no assumed answer. This type of questioning is comparable to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty (1962) begins his phenomenology by

giving primacy to perception. He says the phenomenologist returns “to the world which precedes (scientific description), (the world) of which science always speaks, and in relation to which every scientific characterization is an abstract and derivative sign language as is geography in relation to the countryside” (p. 32).

Beginning with things as they show themselves perceptually, Merleau-Ponty’s existential phenomenology discovers that things do not simply impose themselves on consciousness, nor do we construct things in our minds. Rather, “things as we experience them” are discovered through a subject-object dialogue.

I might have initiated this dialogue with a single question to a single participant. However, the nature of Deaf conversations, in which each person is paid attention to (cross conversations are rare), would lead the group to take up the subject posed. This often gave me the ability to watch and videotape, only entering the conversation occasionally to add my own personal colors to the rainbow of discussion.

My participation, as well as my observation, was crucial in encouraging participants to reveal themselves. However, the perennial spectre of the lurking menace in Deaf people’s history of struggle with the problem of voice, self-expression, and the struggle for community was present. Deaf people’s bodies have been labeled, segregated, and controlled for most of their history; “advances” in cochlear implants and genetic engineering embody the fear that this legacy of “colonization” may still be a huge danger in the future. There were moments in Deaf history when threats to eliminate sign language nearly overtook deaf education at the turn of the twentieth century. Well-meaning hearing people (like me), who observed and analyzed the community, made

these threats. Through participation, though, I was able to acknowledge the value of the community and culture and I attempted not to change it.

At many of the salons I began the event with an acting warm-up, which I have developed, using the basic elements of Francois Delsarte's codified movement studies of the late 17<sup>th</sup> century combined with foundational elements of American Sign Language (see appendix). I call this technique Del-Sign. During one of my acting contracts I was introduced to the Delsartian Nine Laws of Motion as outlined in Ted Shawn's book *Every Little Movement* (1954, p. 47). The elements that stayed with me and which I have employed in my own work are based on the Delsarte Laws of Expression: to know, to do, and to be (Shawn, p. 29). I have taken these laws to mean: *to know* – acquiring training and method; *to do* – using that training in practice; and *to be* – the energy or presence that an actor emanates.

Also, central to the development of Del-Sign are the basic Delsarte character forms: intellectual, emotional, and physical. These three types are detailed in gestural charts, full body positional charts, facial expressive charts, and in written explanation in the writings of Ted Shawn (1954) and John W. Zorn (1968). It was by accident that I compared these various charts to the American Sign Language dictionary. When I did, I found that the emotions that the books on Delsarte's techniques suggested, especially in the positions illustrated by the charts, were in direct agreement with the drawings of words in the Sign Language Dictionary (Sternberg, 1981). For example, in the nine-fold chart of basic positions of the hand (Shawn, p. 43), the third position of the hand shows all of the fingers curled into the center, as a fist but with the index finger knuckle raised.

This is labeled “strife-conflict.” This is the same position in Sign Language for the words problem, revenge, fight, rebel, oppression, and overcome.

However, the connection between American Delsartism and American Sign Language goes past individual hand positions or gestures. The American Deaf community is a minority group with its own culture and language analogous to other minority groups (Padden & Humphries, 1998; Parasnis, 1996). American Sign Language is not simply a series of gestural movements meant to convey meaning. It is a language in its own right. The expression of this language is dependent on movement, including facial expression, eye contact, handshape, and direction of the gesture. The linguistic base of American Sign Language is in agreement with the basic outline of Delsarte’s theories as illustrated in Shawn (1954) and Zorn (1981). This provides a foundation for building cross-cultural bridges between Deaf and hearing cultures.

Gesture is the agent of the heart, the pervasive agent. The language of the hand is universal language; some communication can be made with descriptive pantomime, but many gestures are universal “words.” We all recognize movements, which say “come here,” “hello,” and “goodbye.” I am sure the list is virtually limitless. Gesture has been given to man to reveal what speech is powerless to express. If we desire that a thing shall always be remembered, we must not say it in speech; we must let it be divined in gesture. Gestures relate us to other beings, expressing our emotions from the biggest to the lowest. (Shawn, 1954, p. 25)

This methodology in acting parallels Merleau-Ponty’s philosophies for research. As Merleau-Ponty discussed, we are our bodies, and consciousness is not just locked up inside the head. In his later thoughts Merleau-Ponty talked of the body as “flesh,” made of the same flesh of the world, and it is because the flesh of the body is of the flesh of the world that we can know and understand the world.

For Merleau-Ponty, however, the body cannot be understood as separate parts but must be understood as a whole, as it is lived. The body as it is lived is an experiential body, a body that opens onto a world and that allows the world to be open for it. Physiology is not pointless; it has value, no doubt. However, it does not get at the lived body. If we want to understand the body as it is lived in our experience, we have to use a phenomenological method that addresses not only parts but the whole. So allow me to discuss the next aspect of my fieldwork – the development of the performance script.

#### The Analysis—Script Development

Oppression, according to August Boal (1979), is when one person is dominated by the monologue of another and has no chance to reply. Similar to Boal's work in poor communities with his *Theater of the Oppressed*, when he served as a facilitator to help volunteers create dramas around problems that affected their lives, I used my writing skill to take the real life dramas shared and center them relationally. Any basic course in script analysis will reveal that conflict is the essence of drama and that relationality's dynamic tension, or its refusal to settle into either extreme, which becomes dialectic, can be parallel and equal to dramatic dialogue. Relationality, as a phenomenological research tool, was most valuable in this situation. It was through the complex interplay of relationships that I determined which stories to use, how they might intersect, and how to maintain the original "voice" of the participant.

As a hearing person asking the Deaf community to reveal itself, the use of relationality was crucial to my ability to collect data. I have seen the cold shoulder given to other hearing people who try to enter the community without having participated,

learned the language, or done anything other than to show interest in deafness. This particular minority community has been analyzed, researched, and experimented on throughout the centuries. Most of the research done has been from a physiological perspective in an attempt either to “cure” deafness or to analyze why Deaf people seem to have different learning needs. This history is deeply embedded in the cultural consciousness and research is often viewed with suspicion and distrust.

The additional danger of a hearing person recreating these stories in a different setting was that I might alter the integrity of the participant’s “voice” in an effort to make a cohesive script. By changing the gender, age, or personality of the storyteller in the play, the subtextual tone would necessarily alter as well. In changing the context, the references, and the relation of the speaker and listener, what began as a real story could teeter precariously toward fiction.

But as a theater person it would be against my ethical beliefs to offer a mere recitation of the stories gathered without providing the audience with a through line or imaginative reality to allow them to suspend their disbelief and experience catharsis. An evening of monologues gathered from real life might be data but it is not really theater.

Therefore, the struggle in writing was to remain true to myself as well as to honor the integrity of the gift of trust and vulnerability carried within the collected stories (similar to parallelism). I imagined a structure of an apartment house with the individual stories contained within each apartment. This allowed for an episodic nature in the script, which helped to maintain the stories intact. I then edited many hours of tapes of stories to find the ones that might intersect. I started to imagine how the stories would look on

stage. I started to imagine how to keep the integrity of the work and yet change its color so that there was a through line and a journey for the audience. This first version of stories pieced together like a quilt was given to the RIT Athenaeum to do a play reading. The Athenaeum is a structured class for retired RIT professors and alumni – pretty highly educated theater-going people. After they read the piece aloud, their most clear comment to the writer was they would be interested in reading it again when it was in English. I had been so true to the actual stories that I had written it in a pigeon signed English gloss – neither ASL nor English!

Therefore, I reworked the piece and wrote side-by-side standard script English and ASL gloss so I could keep track of which language I really meant to represent. I then gave the script to trusted friends, colleagues, and to some Deaf militants, just to keep me on the honest (and Deaf-biased) side of the spectrum. Advice came back that traditional Deaf literature and stories should be added to the newer ones to give perspective and depth to the work and to help the audience see that Deaf culture has not just emerged fully developed in the new millennium.

I believed I was ready for rehearsal. But then a colleague mentioned their distaste for Deaf plays that are written in English (hearing cultural language) and then translated back into ASL, and how the stage language never seems natural after all that switching. I believed she had a point so I went back to the original videotapes and edited a special rehearsal DVD to give to the actors first, showing all of the original storytellers, the clips of established poets, and published pieces in the order in which they appear in the script. I gave the actors that DVD for the first week of rehearsals instead of a written script.

I felt I had discovered the secret of real theater. Within that week, the actors were off book, on their feet, and creating characters. This was the fastest move from cold reading to “on your feet” I had ever seen. However, we took major steps backward when I gave them the written version. Not wanting to lose the momentum, I told the actors to “make the script your own.” The actors cast were naturally the exact types of people they needed to portray as characters so their alterations in the lines gave depth and perspective to lines I had merely copied. For example, the teenager playing the character of the child of Deaf adults was very clear that she did not want to be a “CODA (Child of Deaf Adults).” She rejected that label because she wanted to be known for her own identity, not the identity of her parents. That was added to the script. Another actor in discussion before rehearsal was talking about a fight she had with her best friend that day. She has a cochlear implant and the friend does not. That scene was added also. It was a natural fulfillment of a researcher’s hermeneutic circle and I was delighted.

That is, I was delighted until the cultural and linguistic consultants came to rehearsal. They felt that the published works were almost unrecognizable. A man was now signing the staging of a poem by a woman writer; details of published stories were missing. What to do? From my perspective, the traditional works were being adapted to fit more comfortably into the structure of the play. This might be similar to how one might reference a piece of a Robert Frost poem without quoting the entire poem verbatim. There were also practical issues to address. For example, one of the most famous and loved poems draws an allusion between baseball and the women’s rights movement and it ends with the double entendre of the sign for “understand” being done



with the middle finger. None of the female actors who would have been a correct choice for this poem according to the plotline wanted to swear on stage. I went through three women, none of whom wanted to perform this poem about feminist pride! Not wanting to perform this piece was unexpected, since in my *Analyzing Literature* class none of the students could wait to get their hands on that particular poem. However, since I was asking a great deal of my actors along the lines of exposing their inner selves, I compromised. The male actor who did perform the poem was one of the best actors we had at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID); he had been featured in nearly every production for the last ten years. I hoped that his presentational skills would allow the poem to be recognizable even in its new setting.

When three actors resigned their roles during the rehearsal period for the production *Windows of the Soul*, I complained to Dr. Matt Searls, Chair of Deaf Studies and one of the Deaf Cultural consultants for *Windows*, that “student actors were so unreliable.” He made the point that I was overlooking an important factor. I was taking risks with Deaf individual identity expression in a public forum. In order to risk reflecting the Deaf community accurately we needed to show the extremes of the community on an individual level. Being extremely different is not a comfortable feeling for anyone, especially a person from a minority group.

The production called for the actors to portray characters who were very close to their real life circumstances; therefore, the division between self and persona recommended in any acting technique (Lewes, 1985) often was blurred in the process. This is far more difficult than playing a role that is very different from your real self since

performing a role similar to who you are rarely reinforces the fact that you are acting. Family and friends, therefore, tend to attribute the character's thoughts to you, and you feel exposed to the world.

Dr. Searls was right: I had missed an important factor. What I had not considered was that this production focused on a minority and so the difficulties of playing a role similar to your own identity when faced by a mainstream cast of actors was exacerbated by the minority tendency to try to assimilate, as opposed to reveal, the extent of their difference. By having the show celebrate the diversity within the community, several actors felt that they were crossing the line between being a Deaf professional and being professionally Deaf. This was explained to me in the following way: a Deaf professional is an actor who happens to be Deaf; on the other hand, a professionally Deaf actor is one who makes Deaf rights their life's work above and beyond their art. Some of the other actors had expressed similar discomfort with their characters. "Be Deaf," the community seemed to say, "But don't flaunt deafness as it appears outside of the mainstream accepted image or the conservative Deaf preference."

The roles which had been left open when the cast returned from a three-week Christmas break were: 1) a child of deaf adults (CODA), 2) an Hispanic lower-class Deaf proud character, and 3) the role of the community shirker – or the person who takes advantage. The actor originally cast in the role of a CODA was in reality a 15-year-old daughter of Deaf parents. The background of the character was that her parents were having marital problems, including domestic abuse. In comparison, the actor's parents were also divorced and it was not an easy break up. The actor gave a great deal of

accurate information to the development of the role, but the rehearsal process became too revealing, particularly when it became clear that her hearing high school friends were all planning on coming to see the show. She had invested too much in being “hearing” with them to flaunt her connection to the deaf community while they watched.

The actor originally cast as the Hispanic character also invested a great deal in the development of her character and the accuracy of the portrayal. She had an easier time than the CODA since so much of the role was a celebration of the bi-cultural pride experienced by this character. There was one scene, however, where the character has an argument with a friend who has gotten a cochlear implant and she reveals that she would never want to have one herself. The actor had gone through this very same argument with not one, but four of her closest friends within the last year. She found that scene too emotionally draining and she was never able to remove herself personally and simply act. She never fully explained her discomfort to the cast; she just drifted away from rehearsals.

That same scene caused the actress playing the role of the friend with the cochlear implant to also lose her objectivity so she stepped down from that role and moved into the role of the community “shirker.” This role had been vacated by an actor who only wanted to be in the show for the free trip to New York. When she found out she might have to pay to go, she simply stopped coming to rehearsals. She also dropped out of the college around the same time. In the end, a hearing actor played the role of the character with a cochlear implant. She also was embarrassed to let her friends in the interpreting department know she had accepted this role. In the Deaf community there is a stigma

attached to the cochlear implant; it is an implication of self-denial and rejection of the community.

#### The Presentation—Performance Discussion

My production intended to show a reflection of the collected data as a cross section of the Deaf community and so I asked the actors to portray characters that were representative of the diversity. This celebration of difference was the heart of the matter Dr. Searls had brought up. When a minority culture is presented to the majority culture, there is a protective urge to assimilate. You frequently hear the phrase, “The Deaf can do everything but hear.” This is not meant to dismiss cultural or perceptual differences between the cultures but to lessen the majority culture’s tendency to see “difference” as negative or less-than. By asking the actors to show their differences, I flew in the face of that need to assimilate.

I wanted to expose the diversity and richness of the Deaf community, not portray a single Deaf character who could be an acceptable and positive role model for mainstream consumption. Some of what is discussed in the production are the negative traits of the deaf community, and although they are often wielded as stereotypes by the mainstream, our exploration and debunking of these traits caused most audience members to express a feeling of freedom and elation. Once the actors confirmed a positive audience reaction to the show, their fear of exposing themselves turned to pride and their willingness to take in their differences became apparent. Their comments in the after show talk-back revealed an unexpected eagerness to reveal themselves, and their presentation of themselves in their daily lives was reported as being more open as well.

### Cast Comments on Performance

I always wore my hair down to cover my cochlear implant and I rarely ever used my voice even when I was with hearing people. Now I don't care who knows and I try not to censor how I express myself. I am proud of being Deaf; it's who I am, even if I show it differently than is proper. – Jeanna Rebecca Randall

My Uncle is Deaf and he was always taken care of. In Spanish culture, we take care of our own. But the result is he never had his own life. My Grandparents kept him as a pet or a slave and when they died, he had no skills or education. That's why this show is important to show hearing people that Deaf culture is beautiful and important. – Idalia Vazquez

In our rehearsal process, two levels of concrete experience were shared. First, the process of creating a character, memorizing lines and movement, and portraying a character close to your own life's experience was deepened by sharing the interviews which were the foundation of the script. Secondly, the actual interviews were shown to the cast before they saw the script and, therefore, the living reality of the characters added a layer of commitment to the script's integrity. Reflective observation was enforced by an academic calendar that required three weeks of time off for winter holidays. The cast was given a wide-open space of time to reflect on the work and the process. This reflection caused disruption in the normal production process but that reflective time allowed for an added depth to the work.

Actors who were uncomfortable with their roles were able to drop out or move into new roles without any feeling of pressure and the ensemble had time to process the individual's reaction to their roles as well as to the ensemble's decision to continue work on the production. The ensemble brought the play to a new level with discussions on the deeper layers of the script, i.e., the metaphors and symbols hidden throughout Deaf

cultural literature. For example, we began to notice how often the metaphoric image of a tree was mentioned in the literature and history. Images for nature are often found in Native American storytelling and Afro-American story telling, but we hadn't realized how this parallels the Deaf folklore as well.

The repetition of the tree symbol was surprising. Most of us hadn't noticed it before and there is some irony in a culture that is passed from child to child rather than down a "family tree" using a tree metaphor. However, as we explored the idea of the tree and reflected on how its roots are strong and hidden – similar to Deaf pride and the use of a signed language regardless of country or culture – we could see the reasons behind its emergence as an important symbol for the community. The idea that many branches or individuals are upheld by the same solid trunk of deaf shared experience became very powerful.

One example during the show was when the character of the hearing mother of a Deaf child is shown the poem titled "To a Hearing Mother" by Ella Mae Lentz (1995). In that poem the child is compared to a tree that will be "sawed in half" by the arguments of Mother vs. Deaf community. In "Deaf World" by Clayton Valli (1985), the perspective is from a deaf person's view and the natural world symbolized by trees are "deaf same as me." In our show the custodian tells a comic bit of folklore about a lumberjack who cannot cut down a deaf tree because it can't hear "timber!" and so the lumberjack needs to learn to fingerspell "T-I-M-B-E-R" (Carmel, 2006). The actor who played the role of the custodian is a world-renowned Deaf folklorist who literally wrote the definitive book on the subject, Dr. Simon Carmel. He also has magic skills and in his monologue about

Deaf history, his creative magic naturally suggested he make a growing tree out of newspaper to symbolize the continuing growth and developments in the Deaf community.

In a more practical application of abstract conceptualization, we had difficulty with the technical aspect of the show. Simply put, we were not given a set design until very late in the process. However, this too led to shared brainstorming, and the ensemble brought in images and ideas for the set that reflected the essence of our shared analysis.

#### Post Production—Audience Response and Feedback

In Deaf Theater, marketing requires that the performances be “voice interpreted” in order to sell more tickets by offering access to the hearing as well as the deaf. The danger is that the involvement and actual use of the hearing physical voice can change or manipulate the story. The key to Boal's Theater of the Oppressed is the "spect-actor," an audience member who is invited onstage to take part in the drama. In the performance of *Windows of the Soul*, which forms the core of this study, the audience is asked to participate by joining the actors on stage in a dance, by coming into the metaphoric house of Deaf community at the end, and by being given a voice in the after show talk-back to express their observations and feelings.

The expression of feelings and reactions continued for weeks after *Windows of the Soul* had closed. An e-mail discussion occurred on the Rochester Institute of Technology's campus wide e-mail about the production. Political militants argued that only the Deaf community's noble and positive role models should appear in a stage production for mixed audiences. Interpreters, who are often in the position of advocating for Deaf clients, pointed out that civil rights cases are peopled with folks who are

punished for being different. They cited cases of workers fired for lapsing into Spanish in English-only workplaces (or Sign language in an all hearing environment), of women fired for being too feminine at work, and of gay workers forced to change the way they dress in the workplace. These interpreters feared we were doing a disservice by advocating a celebration of difference rather than warning the Deaf community to “blend in more.”

The resistance to allowing this modern generation the ability to express themselves in a way that feels natural to them seems at first to be repressive. Voice is more about personal expression than it is the sounds we make (or do not make) with our mouths. Why shouldn't this newer generation use their bodies, their language, and their culture to express their unique experience of the world? Many would argue that they are reversing the culture because they have no knowledge of its history. With fewer residential schools and more mainstreaming Deaf children can go through school without ever having learned the history of their own culture or even the linguistic structure of their language. Ironic, considering that ASL is the second most frequently taught language after Spanish, and is also a language that is taught as a foreign language to American hearing students but is often forbidden to the deaf (Padden & Humphries, 1998). The members of the community who advised caution in the exuberant diversity of our presentation were valuing a tradition established by the President of the National Association of the Deaf in 1912. (George Veditz to Roy Stewart, Mar 29, 1915) The President said, “We will all love and guard our beautiful sign language as the noblest gift God has given to Deaf people.”



In the Deaf theater community there is a core group of Deaf professional actors who work very hard at refining a style of American Sign Language for the stage. This stage elocution of ASL is a style that was refined in the 1970's by the "Deaf Baby Boomers" (Ayres, 2005), the name given to the increased numbers of Deaf children born between 1964 and 1969 because of the Rubella epidemic. This bulge in the number of Deaf individuals had increased opportunities, improved accessibility, created a strong sense of identity, and encouraged an almost militant confidence in confronting the challenges of life. It is significant to note that the pinnacle of Deaf-pride occurred at a time when the deaf baby boomers were young adults.

The new generation of Deaf performers, however, has not often trained in the performance style preferred by their grandfathers and so they use what they know – storytelling, dance, mime, and contemporary sign styles developed by a mainstreamed, MTV-influenced populace. The identity that was developed by the deaf baby boomers is often not shared by many members in this newer generation. They can share the deaf experience of life but the specifics of their upbringing have changed their understanding of what it is to be deaf and, sadly, the older generation is often perceived as telling the younger generation that they are not "Deaf enough." Therefore, it is a logical result that this newer generation's way of expressing themselves may be seen by the older generation as being improper. In fact, one comment by a renowned and respected colleague, Patrick Graybill, was very hurtful to the actors.

They don't respect Dr. Simon Carmel. When he is speaking, they are not all looking at him... This show disgraces the language... NTID should be taken off of the list of credits on this show. It is an embarrassment and greatly saddens me.

Deaf adults coming of age at the turn of the millennium have had educational mainstreaming due to Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and Public Law 94-142 in 1975 (later renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act – IDEA). They have had a more secular upbringing. The Deaf community shares a great spiritual legacy traceable back to the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. However, America in the 1990's had become more secular in general, and the Deaf community had experienced a parallel shift in expressing faith. Traditionally a large percentage of the Deaf had worked in relatively few trades and many of their educational opportunities were vocational. This too had changed greatly.

Thus, there is a new culture of Deafness emerging (Parasnis, 1999). All of these rapid changes over the last thirty years have given children born after 1975 an experience of deafness unique from their predecessors. This generation has a culture of technology. Physical contact is not as important now that communication can happen at a distance through video relay, e-mail, and pagers. This generation has had a wider variety of education settings. Previous generations might identify each other by which residential school they had attended; this generation does not have any strong connection to the established schools for the Deaf.

This generation is strongly influenced by the media (Ayers, 2005). Closed captions, MTV, and the quicker access to current trends and events are reflected in the Deaf community's communication tolerance. Relationships in this generation are a higher priority than loyalty to a particular language preference. English has become more visual (because of technology and the media) and sign language has been influenced by more

contact with spoken, written, and signed English. Primary value in this generation is on successful communication and connection between friends and acquaintances. This translates into tolerance for “whatever works” in getting an idea across, including signing, speech, gestures, written notes, e-mails, instant messages, and so forth. In *Windows of the Soul*, the variety of communication styles used on stage reflected this change and it was challenging to some of the older more traditional audience members. Yet there were many older Deaf audience members who could see the intention of the work and often defended the show as well.

I can see a parallel between this production and Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*. It also has all of the elements – music, poetry, monologues, personal experiences, and SEX that *A Chorus Line* is famous for. – Robert Panara

#### Cultural Sensitivity and Transformational Learning

These e-mail post-production discussions might have led some to have a transformational learning experience. Transformational learning occurs when participants reexamine their normal assumptions and realize new perspectives (Mezirow, 1991). There were several ways that stories were used in our production to produce transformational learning. First, the real life stories of the community taken from interviews provided a mirror for the cast to examine their own lives. Second, as cast members socialized and worked through the scene work required in rehearsal they learned from each other and added details from their own experience to the foundation of the interviews. Gardner (1995) has also observed this ability to use stories as tools for leadership which causes change in society. Third, the audiences were invited to participate in the performance. They danced on stage with the actors, at the end of the

play they are invited into the metaphoric “house” of Deaf culture (and some nights half the audience leapt out of their seats to do that), and they were also asked to give comments to the actors after the bows. The last level of this transformational learning process was in the e-mail post-production discussions that presented an opportunity for collective readership and response. Thoughtful, uninterrupted written expression was able to be read by a body of people who were free to respond – some did anonymously. This collective readership and expression of responses to the production continued for nearly a month illustrating the resonance of the stories in the community’s consciousness.

One of the scenes in the second act of *Windows of the Soul* discussed the natural bi-cultural requirement of Deaf families. Deaf parents with hearing kids who occasionally ask the kids to interpret adult situations or hearing parents of Deaf kids who never learn to sign were held up as painful common realities. The actors added their own personal stories to the discussion. The scene ended with the character of “T” telling the actor’s own story of communicating with his hearing sister by writing long letters to her even though they lived in the same house. This character also discussed the pain of never having had an in-depth conversation with his parents. The father of the eight-year-old actress in the show watched this scene at every rehearsal in fascination. He had decided when Yolanda was born that he would not learn Sign language in order to encourage his daughter to be more oral. After the last bow of *Windows of the Soul*, though, he told the assembled cast and audience that he had registered for Sign language classes and planned to start the following Monday. It seemed the show had influenced him to have the idea

that his little girl would never have an in-depth conversation about her life with him and this caused a catharsis that motivated him to take an action.

#### Analysis and Interpretation

Analysis of the data indicted that this performance bridge was the critical element of potential “change” in my study, thus addressing the previous gap in scholarship. The initial step of data collection gave free expression to lived stories and began a process for the storyteller and the listener to reach shared understanding. This place of sharing was expanded when the actors were drawn into the conversation and added their interpretation of the character and the action within the living moment of performance. The ability to share and reach a place where understanding of both cultures was at maximum potential peaked when the audience was added. At that point, with the use of theater as a tool, the stories were able to expose the majority of people to catharsis through the experience of theater. Documentation of cathartic change through exposure to theater has been noted throughout human history and is most clearly outlined in Aristotle’s work *The Poetics*. Our production merely followed upon that tradition, resulting in individuals in both the audience and the cast reporting a change in perception about the opposing culture.

For example, in the after show talk-back sessions other audience members voiced an intention to take action. Although we do not know if this actually happened, the intention seemed to be inspired from the show. Some described how they might ask relatives to learn sign. Others bought a DVD of the show to watch with family members in order to help them appreciate Deaf culture better. The most notable expression of change came, as I previously noted, from the father of the eight-year-old cast member,

who told the cast and audience that he had reversed a previous decision to not sign to his daughter and was beginning Sign language classes the following Monday.

In theater, the word “ensemble” has a specific meaning. It usually refers to a collaborative group of actors without a hierarchy of stars (Goldfarb, 2004). In *Windows of the Soul* we entered into the rehearsal process intentionally creating an ensemble that was a collection of equally recognized actors with an intentional, equitable distribution of power within a collective organizational structure. The ensemble was a community, gathering in one location – the theater space (community of space) – with common goals, and espousing the values in the message of the play (community of interest). We worked within the four elements of the hermeneutic circle – spatiality, temporality, relationality, and corporality (Van Manen, 1989). Because of this, as the Director I made a point of reinforcing a feeling of inclusion. There were a few times when I failed but the ensemble righted itself. For example, when the actor playing the role of the custodian of the culture flew in from West Palm Beach Florida and joined the cast, I referred to him as “our star.” He gently corrected me, saying, “I am a star joining a cast of stars – we are all brightly shining.” When we had replacement actors join us, another actor made a ritual out of welcoming them into “the family.” This was one of the ways the cast created a reality for themselves that transcended the divisiveness of their own personalities, their roles, and the negative response of some of the older members of the community.

If you were to compare the original script that I dreamed up in my head and the rehearsal script, you might think two different writers had been set to the same task. The process of script development and the very real human considerations that go into

creating a final production script are illustrative of the ensemble nature of theater. A playwright (or researcher for that matter) might envision a dramatic work of Nobel Prize proportion, but as soon as the messy, human theatrical process gets its hands on it, the script must change.

If you were to look at this research in the framework of Action Research, you would find even more to discuss. In one definition, Action Research 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). My process in using Action Research to investigate my area of inquiry began when I noticed a gap in scholarship on leadership styles in the Deaf community. There was an invisible style of leadership that differed from the mainstream culture and that had not been previously addressed in the literature at any depth. Although I had often felt the presence of a unique leadership style, I could not define it and I wanted to use my skills in theater to see if I might uncover aspects of this leadership for future research. The resulting action was the creation of a series of salons to encourage Deaf people to share their stories, leading to the writing of a script and the producing of a play as I have discussed.

#### Action Research

According to Kurt Lewin (1989), who coined the phrase, Action Research displays the following characteristics:

1. A change experiment on real problems in social systems that focuses on a particular problem and seeks to provide assistance to a client system. (In the case of *Windows of the Soul*, the change experiment was to change perceptions between Deaf and

hearing and between older and younger generations in the Deaf community, hopefully bridging some of the gaps.)

2. Reeducation to change well-established patterns of thinking and acting that express norms and values. (Allowing the actors to portray diversity and not simply assimilate into a single acceptable type of Deaf character.)
3. Challenges to norms and values of the status quo from a perspective of democratic values. (For the hearing audience to be placed in a Deaf environment was a challenge and for older Deaf people to be open to a younger generation's way of expressing Deaf cultural norms.)
4. Contributions to basic knowledge in social science and to social action in everyday life (Argyris et al., 1985, p. 9). (Small gestures by audience members in the talk-back session indicate there may be some individual actions taken for change – like the Dad of a Deaf daughter learning Sign Language.)

Several colleagues who had already achieved their Ph.D.s advised that in order to accomplish the requirements all I really needed to do was observe and write. I did not have the words at that point in time to try to explain why that was only going to yield limited data of suspicious content. I needed to take the ideal concept as an abstraction and let it live in the real world. I had to allow for designers who do not give you images or designs until a week before opening. I needed to allow actors to so fully invest themselves in the character that you cringe with their honesty. I was forced to accept this uncontrollable imperfect world because that is what was needed to turn the abstract concrete. Theater is an ongoing conversation between writer, craftspeople, actors, and



finally audience. Each step of the process informs, shapes, and is essential to the creative process for this art.

When I imagined myself writing this piece, I saw a calm person sitting at a desk near a window ready to write. That person sitting calmly before a blank screen was a lovely image; however, upon reflection I knew I preferred the messy, conflicted, inexact reality needed in the process of writing a theatrical piece. Through this method, I was able to create and study a bridge of performance that connected a hearing audience and a marginalized and often oppressed Deaf culture.