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Marginalising the Mainstream: A Signed Performance of *The Miracle Worker* places Deaf Issues Centre-stage.

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William Gibson’s *The Miracle Worker* was staged at the Brisbane Powerhouse June 2009 by Crossbow Productions. In this adaption, people with hearing impairment were privileged through the use of shadow-signing, unscripted signing and the appropriation of signing as a theatrical language in itself. 250 people living with hearing impairment attended the production, 70 had never attended a theatrical event before. During the post-performance discussions hearing audience members expressed feelings of displacement through experiencing the culture of the deaf society and not grasping some of the ideas. This paper argues that this inversion enhanced meaning making for all and illustrates a way forward to encourage the signing of more theatrical events.

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Partaking of theatrical events is something that hearing and seeing members of the community can largely take for granted. In Australia, dramatic theatrical performances are still not accessible to all people. Crossbow Production's 2009 staging of William Gibson's *The Miracle Worker* offered the opportunity not only to explore the issues of the play, but this issue of accessibility for whom the protagonist can be considered the exemplary role-model. Crossbow's aim was to introduce a mainstream audience to some of the life experiences of those living with disabilities. Crossbow achieved this through the exploration of objects apart from their contexts, emphasising the senses of touch, taste and smell, and through the discourse of marginalisation as an integral part of the staging of this theatrical event. Sign language interpreters were given centre-stage and techniques were used to, at times, foreground issues of the marginalised. Post-performance discussions were held which privileged the comments of deaf and blind audience members. This paper argues, through the example and evidence of this theatrical event, that including the marginalised enriches the experience for the mainstream and the marginalised alike and that increased access to dramatic theatrical events is to be encouraged.

In contemporary society where wheelchair access, audio description and assistance dogs are advertised as part of accessibility, it is surprising how many Australian state theatre companies provide very little if any real access for the deaf. Accessibility does not only include physical needs but also social constructs and cultural expectations. In the United States in large cities at least, it would be atypical to attend a large public event, be it a theatre production, a church service or a public event that was not sign language interpreted or open captioned for the deaf. One of the few theatre companies in Australia that offers interpretation for deaf people is Sydney Theatre Company. Yet only one performance of four plays in a season of 13 plays is interpreted. In a progressive incentive, Melbourne Theatre Company invest \$40 000 a year towards accessibility for people who are deaf and/or blind (<http://www.mtc.com.au/yourvisit/index.aspx>). Similar to Sydney Theatre Company, one performance in each production is open captioned for the deaf. Queensland Theatre Company provides access to one performance only in a yearly season of 255 performances. Access for deaf people to attend mainstream theatre productions in Australia is relatively restricted if not totally denied.

Crossbow Productions is an independent, not-for-profit professional theatre company which presented a production that engaged with these issues. William Gibson's *The Miracle Worker* was staged at the Brisbane Powerhouse in June 2009. The play explores issues of

marginalisation, communication and empowerment. Helen Keller (1880 – 1968) was a deaf-blind author, activist and outspoken speaker who became a world famous inspirational presenter and author. She grew up in an influential family in post-civil war Alabama and became deaf and blind after contracting (likely) scarlet fever at eighteen months. Determined to find help, her mother appealed to many high-profile doctors and educators, including Alexander Graham Bell. Annie Sullivan then became Helen's governess, teacher and life-long companion. *The Miracle Worker* explores Annie's beleaguered attempts to communicate with Helen and concludes with an epiphany for Helen as she learns the significance of words, and eventually how to speak. It asks the audience to confront the issues faced by deaf and blind people and questions the audience's perceptions of the sensory world.

Crossbow's production at the Powerhouse included elements to construct a sensory world for the audience. Saturated colours were chosen for each scene and live music was a feature. The senses of smell, taste and touch, however, were particularly emphasised. This gave audience members a sense of Helen's world and how rich it can be without reliance on sight and sound for information and experience. To introduce fragrance, large arrangements of live scented flowers were placed on the stage. Two hot meals were served. Food emerged as a language in itself: as both a communicative tool to pacify Helen and as a reward to access her latent intelligence. Touch was an integral part of the production and was emphasised from the commencement of the rehearsal process. Throughout the play, the character of Helen explored fabric textures and a variety of materials and objects' shapes.

The actor playing Helen, Louise Brehmer, was blindfolded and wore earplugs for much of the rehearsal period. Immersed in a dark and soundless world she discovered how to read situations, people and objects by touch. This exploration translated into Brehmer's performances on stage. The audience vicariously experienced discoveries of explored objects with Helen. As Helen explored found objects such as the contents of a suitcase, the audience was confronted with the Heideggerian question: what is a thing? In Helen's situation things could be examined apart from their function, accepted meaning or name. This was emphasised by Helen exploring the form and material of each new object and thinking less about their function or context. Annie Sullivan's glasses became "that hard thing", her scarf "that soft, light thing", her suitcase "that cube-like thing." People may often miss out on the richness of objects' attributes because they are placed quickly into a functional context.

Helen's discovery of found objects asked the audience to consider their unexamined assumptions about what a suitcase or a flower was (Heidegger 49-50). It is interesting to note that Brehmer's acclaimed performance was so convincing that many audience members thought that she was indeed deaf and blind. All of the above enriched the experience of the mainstream though sensory communication.

The sensory discourses of the play forced hearing audiences to question their perceptions. The following excerpt from a post-performance discussion illustrates this:

I thought I would be thinking more about sight and hearing. But it was actually touch and smell that intrigued me. But even more than that, I found myself trying to conceive of the timeframe. What time must have meant: a totally different dimension of time. I was dwelling on that quite a bit through the play: Helen was floating in her own individual time.

And to add to that gentleman's comment: what stimulates the mind, in those blank times when there is no tactile, no communication with reality: what keeps the mind alive?

The most important addition to the production of *The Miracle Worker* was the inclusion of "shadow-signing" a process in which a signer closely follows actors playing certain characters. Sign interpretation was not originally intended to be a part of Gibson's play. The added signing exemplified a central issue of this production: sign interpreters are usually marginalised by being placed at the sides of the events they are interpreting. This becomes a metaphor for the continued marginalisation of people with disabilities. In *The Miracle Worker* they were placed onstage and were part of the production's narrative. Furthermore, the two signers, each representing different characters in the play, interpreted the emotional states of the characters they were shadowing through facial and body expression. At times they stood beside the characters and other times they sat together on the edge of the stage in conversation. The addition of interpreter/actors added new layers of meaning for the audience.

In theatrical performances, layers of meaning are carried to the audience through various texts or public discourses (Knowles 91): the written text, music, lighting, staging, actors' movements and characterisation and so forth. By being placed on stage next to the actors, the

signing became a text in itself rather than merely a means of interpreting a text unavailable to deaf people. Signing is an expressive drama emphasising movement and expression; signers use their body and facial expression as signifiers of meaning. This type of expression was used artistically during the performance. At times, for example, the signers were sitting close together on the edge of the stage, at others they were far apart at the back, and at other times they would offer a commentary on the action of the play through their body language and positioning. Additionally, each non-signing character could be identified by their kinesics. The actor playing Annie was directed to use her hands frequently to express herself. Conversely, the actor playing Helen's mother was directed to use her hands less and be "held together" when it came to non-verbal expression. This carried various meanings to the audience over and beyond the meaning of the words themselves. The language of signing was integral to the core issues of the play.

In addition to bringing deaf issues centre-stage, the sign interpretation was used to give the mainstream audience, unused to experiencing marginalisation in the theatre, something of an understanding of exclusion. The play opened and closed with the interpreters signing to the audience. As this was not underscored by any spoken dialogue the non-signers in the audience did not understand what was communicated. This gave some audience members a sense of displacement. One member commented:

I thought how you started and finished the play with sign language was very powerful. It really raised my awareness of people that feel marginalised. Because I, as a hearing person, couldn't understand the signing and felt left out. It just opened my eyes, just a little bit, to what it must be like. (Heim 2)

At one matinee performance the audience was made up of almost as many deaf as hearing people. In this performance a number of elements worked to marginalise the hearing audience. The actors playing Helen and Annie were scripted to sign words to each other. During these moments, the words were signed before they were spoken or they were not spoken at all. Deaf audience members understood the meaning of the lines before, or to the exclusion of, the hearing audience. Some of these communications were humourous. Deaf audience members would break into laughter while the hearing audience sat bewildered. One of the most significant aspects of this particular performance was the relative abandonment of accepted theatre etiquette strictures. In contemporary theatre, audience behaviour has largely been regulated to laughter and applause in appropriate moments (Kershaw 140, 151).

During this performance many deaf audience members, having never attended a theatre performance before, laughed in “inappropriate” places, applauded during the performance, wept out loud and spoke back to the actors on stage or to each other. This was a theatrical event enjoyed as if in the nineteenth century when audience members laughed, cried, stamped, sang and spoke (Blackadder 120) through performances. The actors found this particular performance one of their most heightened experiences in the theatre. This enhanced the theatrical experience for the marginalised audience by introducing them to spontaneous responses not normally encountered in the theatre.

Post-performance discussions also raised hearing audience member’s awareness of those living with disabilities. The discussions were mediated by a facilitator and the actors sat in the audience and joined in the discussion. Audiences were given an opportunity to discuss their stories. The hearing, deaf and blind participants discussed a variety of issues such as the genuine struggles faced in a household with a deaf person, sibling rivalry and communication issues. Comments ranged from “I could relate to Helen’s family. It was like that in my family with me growing up deaf. The frustration is enormous. There were tantrums and fights. Families need to learn signing, after all, it is our first language” (Heim 2) to “I think everyone is still drying their eyes. Very moving. Very, very moving” (Heim 1). In one discussion Penny Harland, a blind and deaf educator was introduced and spoke to the audience. A hearing audience member asked a question that brought the mainstream audience into the world of the normally marginalised: “What did you think of in those moments when you couldn’t understand or communicate anything of the world?” (Heim 4). Harland refused to answer the question and instead described a moment from the play where Helen was discovering a suitcase and explained how inaccurate the actor was in her “discovery.” Heidegger’s concept of the difference in “experiencing” objects was painfully exposed (49, 50).

Comments from post-performance discussions emphasised the need for more accessibility. As one participant commented: “I’m deaf and we should be able to go to anything, and you’ve done that for us” (Heim 1). Others complained that not every word was interpreted. Because of budget restrictions, Crossbow hired actors who could sign and were willing to perform and interpret for a small fee. The actors were not confident enough as interpreters to sign the whole production. Comments such as “We appreciated the signing, but we wanted more” (Heim 1) and “we were disappointed the whole thing wasn’t signed. There were words

going on we didn't understand" (Heim 4) were frequent. There were also tactile tours of the set for blind audience members before each performance; one blind audience member commented:

As a blind person, I got a great deal from it. I found it extremely moving and it has motivated me to read more about miraculous stories. The opportunity to have the tactile tour before the show did help me to visualise better what was going on, so that was a very welcome innovation as well. So I found the night thoroughly moving and worthwhile and I'll certainly agree with the comment that there should be a thousand or so in the audience rather than a hundred so that everyone can experience it. (Heim 3)

These comments and many more from both the discussions and emails to the Powerhouse after the production emphasised not only the gratefulness of people from the deaf community but more importantly the need for more accessibility to dramatic theatre events.

The response to *The Miracle Worker* from deaf people in the community was significant. Over 250 deaf people attended and 70 of these had never been to a theatrical production before. Deaf Services Queensland and Vision Australia were both supportive offering in-kind assistance, promotion and assistance with signing. For its future plays, Crossbow Productions will continue to give tactile tours and, due to cost factors, will sign one performance only using Auslan sign language interpreters. The fee is significant for an independent theatre company: over \$1000 to sign a single performance. It is understandable why theatre companies, struggling to get the finances to stage a play, would be hesitant to go the extra mile to fund an interpreted performance.

The response to the staging by Crossbow Productions of William Gibson's *The Miracle Worker* suggests that there is significant demand for increased access for deaf audiences at theatrical events. Rather than merely reducing marginalisations, deaf people's stories and journeys can be presented and explored in such a way as to enrich the theatrical experience of the mainstream and the marginalised. Exploring objects, emphasising the senses of touch, taste and smell and including signing added to the richness of the theatrical experience. The mainstream, having experienced some marginalisation were made more aware of deaf people's issues. Significantly, the experience of marginalisation of the mainstream in this production also added to the meaning of the theatrical experience. It was hoped that this

fostered the appreciation in audience members of the need for access to be increased for all and that the benefits of increased access can be more than worth the costs involved.

www.crossbowproductions.org

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