



The Kennedy Center

OPENING STAGES

**A Quarterly Newsletter for People with Disabilities Pursuing Careers in the
Performing Arts**

**Published by the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts
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READERS' ALERT

Opening Stages is always interested in hearing from our readers about pertinent programs, resources and events, as well as ideas for articles. We can pay a modest fee for articles we accept. Contact us at access@kennedy-center.org.

FROM THE EDITOR: CHILD'S PLAY

In this issue of *Opening Stages* we feature "The Island Project" of the PAH! Deaf Youth Theatre, in which the young participants are using their creativity to simultaneously discover, preserve and create their own culture.

A focus on young artists is somewhat of a departure for us, but hopefully not inconsistent with our mission. Young artists become the professionals of tomorrow. And they also become the enthusiastic audiences who support other artists.

In these days of tight state and municipal budgets, it has become necessary to justify support of the arts by pointing to their ancillary benefits. We all know the mantra: the arts enhance learning; the arts contribute to the economy. People never speak of something as frivolous as joy -- that inexplicable rush that beauty gives us, that doesn't contribute to the bottom line, that is simply an end in itself.

Let me defy that taboo and speak of an early experience I had with the performing arts, the joy of which I carry to this day. And, yes, alas, I know how this story dates me.

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Like Jack Hofsiss, whom we interview in this issue, I fell in love with magic of theatre when my parents took me to New York, and we saw two shows, each the pinnacle of achievement in musical theatre and each completely different from the other. The first was "My Fair Lady." Like all American musicals of the day, it was enchantingly optimistic, focusing on the upwardly mobile Eliza. Sure, Professor Higgins might be irascible, and Mr. Doolittle might mock the middle class virtues of sobriety and hard work, but they did so with such charm and gusto that there was no danger in them. I found "My Fair Lady," with its beautiful, witty score by Lerner and Loew, absolutely heavenly. Then I was brought down to earth again, brought down to the grimy pavement, by the other show "The Threepenny Opera." This was a work of real cynicism that dwelt on poverty, corruption, crime and lust with European frankness. The very awkwardness of the Marc Blitzstein translation of the Kurt Weill/Bertolt Brecht collaboration seemed to emphasize its raw power. The show never let you forget that, even if the Victorious Messenger came riding in at the end, that was a mere sop to the audience's weakness for happy endings. I was stunned by "The Threepenny Opera."

When we went home I listened again and again to the original cast recordings of both shows until the songs became part of me -- a joy to be perpetually savored, a standard to measure every other theatre experience against.

And seldom does any come close. That seems to be the nature of theatre -- it breaks your heart with disappointment most of the time. But, I feel enormously fortunate to have learned at an early age what it has the potential of being.

So, if there is an editorial slant to this editorial (not merely an indulgence in nostalgia), here it is -- expose your children to the best in art. Share with them what you love. It will inspire them. It will keep them coming back to the arts. It will even -- forgive us our frivolity -- make them joyous.

Paul Kahn

PEOPLE

JACK HOFSSISS NEW YORK-BASED DIRECTOR

Jack Hofsiss is a distinguished director of theatre, film and television. His direction of "The Elephant Man" earned him a Tony Award, Drama Desk Award, Outer Critics Circle Award, Obie and New York Drama Critics Award. He has a spinal cord injury.

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"I grew up in New York and went to the theatre as a child and fell in love with the magic of it. Ironically, the first play I saw on Broadway was "The Miracle Worker" – the story of probably the most famous disabled person in American history."

You won a Tony for directing "The Elephant Man." What was that experience like?

The experience of directing "The Elephant Man" was wonderful. It was a great story to tell of a remarkable man who overcame incredible disabilities to live a life that we were dramatizing a hundred years later. It was such a match of material to director that I don't know if it will ever happen again in my career, so I am very happy that it did.

How did you get interested in a career in the theatre?

I grew up in New York and went to the theatre as a child and fell in love with the magic of it. Ironically, the first play I saw on Broadway was "The Miracle Worker" – the story of probably the most famous disabled person in American history. It was inspiring even to a non-disabled child. Being raised as a catholic and serving as an alter boy was truly my first experience of theatre.

How did you injure your spinal cord?

I injured my spinal cord in a pool diving accident in 1985.

Has your disability affected your career?

Yes. Plays I do need to have a more substantial thematic content. It takes extra preparation for me to go to work whether they are personal time issues or issues of accessibility, so the material I choose doesn't necessarily have to deal with issues of disability, but a wide variety of things that are important to me. The greatest challenge is people's ignorance as to what a disabled person can and can't do. We must work to get the information out that we can deal with accessibility.

Has having a disability changed your directing style?

No, it hasn't changed my directing style. No one can feel more disabled than when it is time to work and you don't have a creative idea. It is a great leveler.

Has your disability imposed impediments to the advancement of your career?

This problem is really the province of others. You must continue to do good work, and that should be the only requirement of the job. Sadly, that isn't always the case. The only real barrier is people's ignorance. For my part, you must be proactive and anticipate your needs in advance of beginning work. I've had ramps built to allow access to the stage and have had steps ramped. I improvise to take care of my bathroom needs. (I've used the facilities of the building next door to where I'm working for better access, etc.)

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Do you need any accommodations to practice directing? If so, who provides and pays for them?

This is the type of thing that needs to be negotiated each time a job is undertaken. Depending on budget and how important the job is to you, either you or the producer (always start with the latter) should take care of the accommodations. Be flexible and try to help as much as possible, but no one should be asked to undertake such costs that they are not earning a decent living.

You've been involved with VSA arts. Can you describe your involvement and any other work you've done to nurture other artists with disabilities?

I am a member of the board of directors at VSA arts, and I chair the Artist Selection Committee for the Young Playwrights Festival held every year. I try with every production I do, to audition artists with as well as without disability. And I lobby the theatres I work at to audition likewise on every show they do. The more people see and know disabled artists of all kinds, the sooner the barriers will fall.

If a young person with a disability like yours wanted to pursue a career as a director, what advice would you give him or her?

I would give the same advise to a director with a disability that I would to a director without. Read and see as much theatre as you can. (Often there are discounted seats for you and a companion to see a show.) If you attend a theatre program, while the theory classes are great, you must direct as often as possible. Each production you undertake is very different, so the more experience the better. You best break into the theatre by doing good work. Try to make as many contacts as possible, doing whatever job you do on your way to directing as well as possible. Keep reminding people your goal is to direct, and with a little bit of luck or really serendipity you will hopefully find yourself directing.

**NALAGA'AT
ISRAELI DEAF-BLIND THEATER GROUP**

Established in 2002, Nalaga'at is an Israeli theatrical group made up of 12 actors, most of whom are deaf-blind. In Hebrew Nalaga'at means "Do touch." And their play "Light is heard in Zig Zag," that dramatizes their stories, dreams and hopes, has been touching audiences throughout Israel. Enthusiastic reviews have proclaimed it an "impossible mix of humor and melodrama," "simply amazing," and "the most surprising hit of the Israeli theater."

There are more than 1000 deaf-blind people living in Israel. Most of them have Ushers Syndrome, which begins with congenital deafness and progressively restricts the visual field, eventually leading to total blindness. Besides giving performances, another goal of Nalaga'at it to establish a center for deaf-blind people that will offer innovative programs in independent living, rehabilitation,

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housing and artistic expression.

The co-directors of Nalaga'at are Adina Tal and Eran Gur. Tal was born in Switzerland and came to Israel at the age of 20. For many years she has been active in theater as a director and actress. Gur is an Israeli-born businessman with 20 years of experience in the securities field. After having been invited by Tal to one of the first performances of Nalaga'at, he sold his business and joined the group.

Tal believes that she "was lucky not to have any background as a social worker." Moving past her preconceptions of what deaf-blind people would be like, she relied on her experience as a director and adapted traditional theater techniques to the group. "I started to ask them about their dreams and 'translated' their dreams into theatrical pictures."

Since starting to work with them, Tal has seen profound changes in the participants. "When I first started to work with the group they were even talking about suicide," she remembers. "Today a lot of them think that they have the duty and the possibility to give to society."

And, she has been equally changed. "I always believed that there is no limit to the human spirit, but there is such a difference between believing and knowing. And, yes, today I know it, and this one of the biggest gifts I got in life."

Starting in June, Nalaga'at will begin a tour of North America. The schedule is:

Toronto

Thursday, June 17 7:30 PM at Bathurst Street Theater
736 Bathurst Street, Toronto, ON

For information and reservations call Sonia Rosenblatt: 416-640-8521

Montreal

Sunday, June 20, 8 PM. Outremont Theater

For information and reservations call Ariela Cotler: 514-485-0679

Boston

Wednesday, June 23, 7:30 PM. at the Leventhal-Sidman Jewish Community Center, 333 Nahanton Street, Newton MA 02459

For reservations call: 617-965-5226

For information call : Ayelet Boasson: 617-577-5867

Port Washington, NY

Monday, June 28 7:30 PM Landmark on Main Street Jeanne Rimsky Theater,
232 Main Street.

For information and reservations call 516-944-8900 Ext.254

New York City

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Tuesday June 29 at 8 PM Peter Norton Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th Street.

Box Office: 212-864-5400

For information call: Yoav Barashi 917-446-0684

For more information contact:

Nalaga'at

P.O. Box 9657 Jerusalem 91090, Israel

Tel: + 972-54-5608502

Fax: + 972-2-6428842

Website: www.nalagaat.org.il

E-mail: adina@bezeqint.net

PROGRAMS

THE ISLAND PROJECT

PAH! Deaf Youth Theatre at the Wheelock Family Theatre in Boston is helping to preserve Deaf stories and Deaf history with The Island Project, a multi-disciplinary program involving students, teachers, artists and theater professionals. The culmination of the Project is "A Nice Place to Live" a new play by Catherine Rush and Adrian Blue. It has toured the Cape and Islands and will be performed at the Theatre on June 6 and 7.

To encourage the use of drama as a vehicle for teaching history, Wheelock Family Theatre selected a team of artists and teachers to develop a ten-week curriculum based on a unique period in the history of Martha's Vineyard. Seventy students from the Horace Mann School for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing in Brighton, Massachusetts and the Learning Center for Deaf Children in Framingham, Massachusetts have been combining social studies and history with American Sign Language storytelling and poetry. During the April school vacation, nine of those students, who were cast in the play, traveled to Cape Cod and Martha's Vineyard for staged readings at the Harwich Junior Theatre and the Vineyard Playhouse.

"A Nice Place to Live" recounts a late 19th-century time in the town of Chilmark on Martha's Vineyard, when for almost 300 years nearly one in four people had been born deaf, and everybody used a manual language that was unique to the island. Martha's Vineyard Sign Language was used at church and at town meetings. Neighbors signed across fences; fisherman signed from boat to boat; farmers signed at market, and everyone visiting the town store signed the local gossip.

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"To the people who lived there, deafness was never considered a disability," said Jody Steiner, director of PAH!, "because everyone on the island knew sign language, from the postmaster to the deacon of the church."*

Damon Timm, a sign language interpreter from New Hampshire who has been working with the deaf students participating in The Island Project noted that "The idea of a whole town that knows sign language was hard for them to imagine, so we would do role-playing activities to make it a bit easier to understand."

Norma Tourangeau, a deaf teacher and actress, who co-taught with Timm, said that she learned about the deaf settlers of Martha's Vineyard along with her students. "I knew a bit of the story, as did some of the students," she explained, "but not the wealth and the depth of it. We all learned so much -- who these families were, what was the mainland's perspective of a deaf society. The students, in particular, got to learn about a deaf community where nobody felt they had to be fixed. That's something that, in 2004, we're still trying to let people know."

"A Nice Place to Live" tells the story of a young hearing boy who moves to the island with his family in 1890, falls in love with a young deaf woman, and must learn to understand a world where deafness is seen in an entirely different light than on the mainland.

"I really hope that young deaf people can feel power in their lives from this story," said Steiner. "And, having worked with deaf teens at PAH! for nine years, I've seen many of the students involved in theater go on to college. That's what I feel involvement in the arts can do -- give kids a chance to dream outside of their regular experiences."

The Island Project is funded in part by the Peabody Foundation, Massachusetts Cultural Council, and VSA Arts of Massachusetts.

Wheelock Family Theatre is located at 200 The Riverway, Boston. For additional information about "A Nice Place to Live" contact:

Charles Baldwin at cbaldwin@wheelock.edu or (617) 879-2147

Jody Steiner at jsteiner@wheelock.edu or (617) 879-2148

**All quotes are from an article in the April 16, 2004 Allston-Brighton TAB by Josh B. Wardrop.*

RESOURCES

PERFORMING ARTS SCHOOL & PROGRAM DIRECTORY

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The Performing Arts School & Program Directory www.performingartsschools.com contains listings of over 1300 schools, colleges, departments, workshops and programs throughout the United States and the world. You can search is the Directory by location, type of program and artistic specialty. In addition, the site contains descriptions of different majors and programs, sources of financial aid, job postings, a store for books and supplies and a forum. You can also link to columns by various experts who offer education and career guidance.

NEWS AND NOTES

EVENT INTRODUCES ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY TO HOLLYWOOD

Dr. Kent Cullers, the physicist behind the famous SETI Project, and Robert David Hall, one of the stars of *CSI*, were the keynote speakers at a special event held on March 18 in Los Angeles that brought together Hollywood artists, the assistive technology/high-tech industry and the disability community. Titled "ET Meets AT," the purpose of the event was to showcase how assistive technology (AT) can offer the film and television industry new opportunities to collaborate and work inclusively with disabled individuals.

Dr. Cullers, who is blind, and Hall, who is a double amputee, both spoke about the importance of AT in their work and lives and advocated for employing people with disabilities. "Without AT, I could not perform this revolutionary work," Cullers said, referring to his search for evidence of extraterrestrial intelligence in distant solar systems.

"ET meets AT" underscored how assistive technology can tear down the barriers that historically have prevented people with disabilities from developing their full intellectual and creative capabilities. Through hardware and software applications AT can enhance vision, hearing, touch, speech, cognition and movement.

The writers, producers, actors, directors, craftspeople and technicians present at the event were given demonstrations of some of the newest technologies. These included:

Eye Tracking Technology that allows users to operate a computer and interact with their environment using only their eyes,

Brain Actuated Technology that allows users, regardless of physical condition, to operate computers completely hands-free by harnessing minute electrical signals generated from muscles, eye movement and brainwave activity.

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A variety of proprietary software was shown, including products that improve reading and writing and assist with communication in American Sign Language.

Also, plans were launched build an information and referral online service with the entertainment industry on AT technologies and products.

"Our goals for this evening are to create an awareness of these technologies among Hollywood's writers, producers, actors, directors, and special effects professionals. Once this awareness occurs, hopefully more people with disabilities will be employed in all facets of the entertainment field," said John M. Williams, a TV columnist and author of the recent book *Assistive Technology: Expanding a Universe of Opportunities for People with Disabilities*.

"ET Meets AT" was held during the California State University at Northridge (CSUN) Center on Disabilities 19th Annual International Conference on Technology and Persons with Disabilities. It was produced and sponsored by CSUN, Assistive Technology News (ATN), Concurrent Technologies Corporation Foundation (CTCF), Public Media Group/Public Interest TV Films, TextHelp, Brain Actuated Technologies and LC Technologies.

For more information contact John M. Williams at tel: 703-404-9557 or e-mail: jmmaw@aol.com.

VISUAL PLAYWRIGHTS RETREAT ANNOUNCED

The U.S. Department of Education has provided funding for a partnership between Gallaudet University Theatre Arts Department in Washington, D.C., and the Maryland-based arts organization *Quest: Arts for Everyone* to conduct two consecutive summer play development retreats for aspiring and experienced deaf and hard-of-hearing writers. Playwriting applicants will have the benefit of receiving guidance and support from visual theatre experts sensitive to the communication and educational needs of deaf and hard-of-hearing writers. Willy Conley, a Gallaudet Theatre Arts professor and playwright, will serve as retreat director.

The retreat will be tailored to the needs of each playwright. To help further develop their scripts from a visual base or with visual support, applicants will have access to a pool of professional actors adept at creative movement, improvisation, and American Sign Language. A variety of other tools and resources will also be made available to assist in play building, such as video cameras, digital cameras, computers, art supplies, props, masks and costumes. One of the primary goals of the retreat is to introduce alternative means of building or enhancing play scripts other than the traditional way of being alone in a room hammering out a script in English.

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An application form and more information about the Visual Playwrights Retreat are available online at: <http://www.quest4arts.org/company/retreat.htm>. The application deadline is May 28.

DANCING WHEELS SUMMER PROGRAMS

This summer Dancing Wheels will be offering three programs: Dance Workshops, Theatre Arts Camp and a Teacher Training Workshop.

Summer Dance Workshops

The Workshops include Dance Technique, Composition/Improvisation and Dance Repertory. They provide an opportunity to audition potential trainees and apprentices for our company.

Session I

Youth: 7 – 15 years old

June 14 – 19

9:00 AM – 1:00 PM

Childcare available after program: 1:00 – 4:00 PM, Monday – Friday

Performance on Saturday, June 19

Child Care: \$4.00 per hour

Tuition: \$175

Session II

Teens & Adults: 16 years old & up

June 21 – 26

10:00 AM – 3:30 PM

Performance on Saturday, June 26

Tuition: \$225

Theatre Arts Camp

Held in collaboration with the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Camp provides an interactive arts experience for children of all abilities. Campers will explore the art and culture of Japan and other Asian countries through dance, Kabuki theatre, music and visual arts.

August 2 – 14

9:00 AM – 1:00 PM

Performance on Saturday, August 14

Tuition: \$200

Teacher Training Workshop

The purpose of the Teacher Training Workshop is to educate dance instructors, health professionals and educators about methods and techniques used in teaching dance to mixed ability students in an integrated setting.

August 2 – 6

Tuition: \$150

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To register for any of these programs call (216) 432-0306 or visit www.dancingwheels.org.

IRISH TENOR WILL OPEN VSA ARTS INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL

VSA arts has announced that Ronan Tynan, one of the world-famous Irish Tenors, will perform at the opening ceremonies of its 2004 International Festival. The ceremonies will take place at the Concert Hall of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington D.C. on June 9.

Tynan was born with a lower limb disability. He will be among the hundreds of visual and performing artists, including 79 international groups, who will be presenting their work throughout the city during the four-day Festival, taking place from June 9-12.

Held every five years, the VSA arts International Festivals celebrate the creativity of artists with disabilities and offer educational seminars about integrating the arts. "All of us at VSA arts were overwhelmed by the amount of entries we received for the Festival and greatly impressed by the time and effort each and every artist put into creating their wonderful works of art," said Soula Antoniou, Executive Director of VSA arts. "We're extremely proud to bring this array of talent to Washington D.C."

For more information about the Festival, go to www.vsartsfestival.org.

KICKSTART2 FESTIVAL TO BE HELD IN SEPTEMBER

The kickstART2 Festival of Disability Arts and Culture will take place from September 16 to 19 in Vancouver, British Columbia. The Festival is sponsored by the Society for Disability Arts and Culture (S4DAC).

The theme for kickstART2 is Extraordinary Lives, Extraordinary Art. Emerging and professional artists with and without disabilities, art and music therapists, arts presenters, families and friends are invited to attend.

Participants will be able to explore new territory in visual and literary arts, dance, theatre, music, and humor at the Roundhouse Community Arts and Recreation Centre, which is close to downtown Vancouver and a variety of accessible hotels. Workshops and master classes will bring together Canadian artists to meet and learn from each other and from invited international guests. Presenting artists will include:

Dave Roche, USA
Pat Rix, Australia

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Five Foot Feat, USA
Nasty Girls, Britain
Max-i-mime, Canada

Starting May 1, Early Bird Whole Festival and Daily Passes will be available. Prices for passes will increase on June 1, and tickets for individual performances and workshops will go on sale August 15. Go to www.s4dac.org for ticket details.

S4DAC is a registered, charitable not-for-profit organization whose mission is to present and produce works by artists with disabilities and to promote their artistic excellence. S4DAC was the first to develop and promote the disability arts movement in Canada. The first kickstART Festival was held in August 2001. It was attended by Adrienne Clarkson, Governor General of Canada, and attracted hundreds of artists from as far away as Australia, New Zealand, the United States, France and Great Britain.

The Artistic Director of S4DAC is Geoff McMurchy. After attending the Vancouver School of Art for a year, he was accepted to the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in 1977. But, while traveling there, he damaged his spinal cord in a diving accident and became a quadriplegic. After seven months of intensive rehabilitation, Geoff returned to work and spent many years in the disability advocacy movement, mainly with the British Columbia Coalition of People with Disabilities. Since 1998, Geoff has been involved with the kickstART Festival, which marries his two passions in life: equality for people with disabilities and the arts.

Contact information

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- fax your request to: (202) 416-8802.

If you do not want to receive your newsletter via e-mail, please request a hard copy and let us know if you need it in large-print or Braille.

For more information contact: The Accessibility Program at (202) 416-8727 (voice) or (202) 416-8728 (TTY), or via e-mail at access@kennedy-center.org.

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