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UNIQUE U.S. THEATER GROUP DELIGHTS YOUNGSTERS

By Carolyn Battista

From The Christian Science Monitor

SUMMARY: America's National Theatre of the Deaf is helping youngsters to understand the handicapped, delighting audiences with a special blend of sign language, body movement, narration and improvisation. The theater group has performed for students in the United States, Europe and Asia.

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## UNIQUE U.S. THEATER GROUP DELIGHTS YOUNGSTERS

By Carolyn Battista

America's National Theatre of the Deaf (NTD) helps youngsters around the world see past the stereotypes surrounding deafness. And they do so with an unusual theater style.

Twice each year, the award-winning American touring company splits into two "child-sized portions" of five actors, each called a Little Theatre of the Deaf (LTD), to perform for children. All but two members currently suffer from deafness.

They bring to elementary schools the NTD'S special blend of sign language, body movement, and spoken narration. This is a performance style that lets the audience both hear and see each word.

At the Mark Twain School, Hartford, Connecticut, recently, an LTD series of short pieces won steady concentration and vigorous applause from some 300 students.

"Ooh, yuk!" youngsters shrieked as Sandi Inches, playing a spider, happily consumed a fly caught in her web. Soon they guffawed as Billy Seago, playing a moth in James Thurber's "The Moth and the Star," flew around the stage with a little propeller atop his purple beanie.

"Occasionally we worry that we'll be boring to children," said company member Mike Lamitola. "They really pay attention to us, though. Even when their bodies are wiggling, we notice, their eyes

are right on us."

At one Hartford performance, actor Billy Seago recalled, "We had to stop for a minute after we presented the sign alphabet, because we could see that the kids were applauding."

The company includes a fast-moving introduction to sign language in its performances for young people, showing signs for places, things, and abstract ideas. They also explain "finger spelling" -- finger placements that signify each letter of the alphabet to spell out proper nouns and other words that have no special sign.

"Often kids have been learning the language," explained Lizette Smith, a hearing member of the company who narrates onstage events. The finger-spelling alphabet is included in the study guide the LTD sends to teachers whose students will see its performances.

At Mark Twain, the guide spurred classroom discussions on the possibilities of nonspoken language and on both the accomplishments and problems of deaf people.

Several fifth-graders discussed the presence of captions for the hearing-impaired and of sign-language interpreters on television shows they watched. The LTD visits are not to preach, but "to surprise and entertain."

Since its founding in 1967, the Theatre of the Deaf has traveled throughout the United States, Europe, and Asia. Its productions have not only shown deaf people as skilled and handsome performers, but have also won critical acclaim -- including New York's prestigious Tony award.

The theater receives income from gate receipts and both U.S. federal and private grants. The company is based at two 19th century buildings in Chester, Connecticut. These buildings were purchased and renovated with a \$250,000 gift from a Connecticut businessman.

Youngsters seem surprised and entertained when the actors' bodies, hands, and faces put words into motion onstage.

"The kids really enjoy the transformation of the written language into something visual," Mr. Lamitola noted.

The actors close each show with improvisations, acting out whatever challenges the audience tosses to them. At the Hartford performances, the youngsters' requests turned the troupe into monkeys, a thundering brontosaurus, a tractor, and a washing machine.

After the Mark Twain performance, the eight- to 11-year-old audience flocked to the performers to smile, shake hands, and receive autographed pictures. No one had much to say about deafness. What everyone wanted to talk about was the fun of the performance -- which was just what the actors intended.

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Carolyn Battista writes for The Christian Science Monitor, a daily U.S. newspaper.

CAPTION:

AMERICA'S NATIONAL THEATRE OF THE DEAF performs "The Lion in Love" in an outdoor setting as part of the group's summer story-telling program. The touring company is helping youngsters to understand the handicapped, delighting audiences with a blend of sign language, body movement, narration and improvisation. Photo from The Little Theatre of the Deaf/The National Theatre of the Deaf. (No. 86-377)

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