

Spring Awakening from a Hard of Hearing Point of View

Lee Kitchen

599

1/05/2015

A few weeks ago, I returned from New York with a buzz because I had scored a left center stage ticket for people with special needs for Spring Awakening. I can't pretend to add anything of value to the NYT stellar reviews except from the point of view of someone who can't hear very well.

The production of Spring Awakening, by the Deaf West Company from LA., is a beautiful musical with a dark subject matter.

Before the performance began, the actors, clad in white night gowns or in white shorts and athletic t-shirts, casually strolled on stage and met in twos or in small clusters and socialized using American Sign Language. It was a soundless version of a sixties-love in. The stage was covered with smiles and orchestrated friendships. It was virtually impossible to differentiate the Hearing actors from the Deaf actors and a smooth way to establish the concept of purity before the messages of abuse and incest.

My early professional career included taking clients to Broadway plays. Before the curtain rose, the kettle drum roared, the shivers began and I had to control the urge to stand on my seat and

shout, Oh, Yeah! The emotional high from a Broadway musical is imbedded in one's memory forever.

Seventeen years ago I became one of the 50 million labeled Hearing Impaired. The trauma happened just as one of my plays was accepted for a professional reading at the Last Frontier Play Festival in Alaska where Edward Albee and Obie Award recipients, the late Joseph Chaikin, Jack Gelber and Ellen Stewart, founder of the La Mama Experimental Theatre Company, were honored. Struggling to listen to the plays from some of America's most famous playwrights and actors was incredibly frustrating and sad for me. At that time, I was in a loop of doctors trying to understand why I had lost my hearing in my right ear. After many years of testing and diagnosis by renowned specialists, it was concluded that I would never be able to hear from the right ear and the left ear was nothing to call home about. The Deaf West production was a sensory revelation. The seamless mixture of music, with dialogue and lyrics projected on stage combined with ASL throughout the play created magic for someone who can't hear very well.

As the first act begins, Wendla sings Mama Who Bore Me in front of a glassless mirror while a deaf Wendla is on the other side of the mirror using American Sign Language in synch with her mirrored self. The Deaf Actor's ASL was choreographed with the hearing actors so that the ASL and facial expressions flowed like, well, a lovely melody. I was able to interpret the ASL while experiencing most of the music in my somewhat better ear while my eyes scanned projected lyrics and dialogue. It was a surround-sound-visual sensation for the Hard of Hearing.

Perhaps the play will evolve into a touring company with plenty of grant support for the fifty million Hard of Hearing including sixty percent of all the returning vets. One thing is for sure, the Deaf Community has plenty of acting talent and hopefully there will be more Deaf West productions integrating acting and music from both Hearing and Deaf Actors. Maybe we will see plays that have more humor than anguish, more joy than sadness yet still leave the audience with that tingling sensation.

*Lee Kitchen is a professor at Tallahassee Community College, a writer and doesn't hear well.*