

Placement of Interpreters

Where the interpreters will be placed during the performance makes a big difference in the rehearsal process, the stage picture and ultimately in the level of enjoyment by the audience. Usually, the closer the audience is to the actors, the better the level of enjoyment. But this intimate playing is more often the exception rather than the rule. If you are informed about the variety of placement options, and are creative as well, you may be able to participate in making the decision about where the interpreters will perform. Most of the time however, the decision will be made by the director, stage manager, producer or company manager before you even enter into the process.

EDUCATING THE DECISION MAKERS

There are opportunities for your knowledge about theatrical interpreting to be shared. As you continue to work in this specialized field, you will meet a variety of folks who have the authority to make or influence decisions about the placement of interpreters. Some of these people are very open to exploring new ideas, and may be willing to try different locations for interpreter placement. Find these people and make them your friends! Educate them about the wide variety of options and excite them with the creative possibilities offered by interpreted performances.

You also must realize that many people are offended by the idea of interpreted theatre and especially by placing the interpreters anywhere near the action. It is best to remain diplomatic, professional and friendly, rather than getting on a political soapbox. But when you find someone receptive to your ideas, work with that person cooperatively to enhance the placement of the interpreters. The earlier you are involved in the production process

and are able to talk with people, the better chance that your ideas might be implemented. Most important is for you to be ready to educate the decision makers to help them make informed choices.

PLATFORM INTERPRETING

When a theatre decides to offer a sign interpreted performance, more than likely they envision one or two interpreters dressed in black, standing off to the side, either on the stage itself or in front of the apron. This type of placement is known as "platform interpreting." Basically, it requires the signers to stand or sit in one location for the duration of the performance. This is the preferred placement for most theatre companies because it is, from their perspective, the "least intrusive" method. This means several things. First, that the signers are not part of the stage picture, hence retaining the integrity of the director's vision. Second, the signers are not a "distraction" to the majority of the audience. Third, it is the least amount of work in terms of rehearsal time, lighting, and costuming. Fourth, it is less distracting to the actors.

There are obvious problems to this method. For the audience members who depend on the interpretation to enjoy the production, a choice must be made between watching the signers or the play. This creates the "ping-pong" effect for the audience, who must continually turn their heads towards the signers to catch the language (and hence the plot), then turn and watch the actors on the stage to see the action. The audience members needing sign language end up missing dialog and action because they must continually change their focus. Platform interpreting is also a distraction for hearing audience members as well. They will always watch the signers as well as the action, thus experiencing the "ping-pong" effect. It is a myth to think platform interpreting is less distracting.

Interpreters working in this situation need to make the choices which will enhance the enjoyment of the production. This is accomplished through a careful evaluation of the script and concentrated analysis of the action on stage. Striking stage pictures, moments with a great deal of action which clearly convey mean-

ing, magic, special effects, set changes or grand entrances may not need to be signed at all. If it is a moment that is much more fascinating to watch and can be understood purely from the action on the stage, then the signers need to cue the audience to watch the stage. This is a matter of timing. It requires the signers to be finished with their signing before the moment occurs, so the audience has a chance to look at the stage and be prepared for the action. To cue the audience, the signers just return to a neutral body position, hands relaxed at their sides, and look towards the stage. Depending on the type of production, a cue might be more grandiose or even added to the script. For a comedy, the signers could make it into a fun cue, like a signed fanfare. A children's production might require the sign, LOOK, directed toward the stage. No matter how the cue occurs, it should fit with the style of the production. The signers should also look at the action on the stage. This lets the audience members know to watch the stage. When the signers face the audience again, this is a cue that signing will resume.

Another way to make the best of the platform situation is to choose when not to sign. Often, this will be during those moments on stage just discussed, but there may be other times as well. At a performance of *The Illusion*, the director chose to begin the play in complete darkness. The only light came from a match, struck by one of the characters as he enters a cave. The character says "Hello" a few times and asks if anyone is there. From the actions of the character, the lighting of the match and his facial expression, it was obvious he was searching for someone in an unfamiliar place filled with mystery and power. I chose not to sign his few "hellos" and remain in darkness. Bringing the lights up for the interpreters to sign would completely destroy the effect of a single match illuminating the dark. The lines did not require interpretation, and the mood for the show was established during the entrance of the character. By not signing those few lines, the entire audience was able to feel the magic that was integral to the production.

Platform interpreters are usually lit by a single bright white light. The lightboard operator in the technical booth will usually bring this light up or down with the stage lights. That means the light

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will not be on when the stage is dark. Sometimes the light is left on during the entire production, even when the stage is completely black for a scene change or effect. This means the audience can always see you. If you are fidgeting, or picking at your fingernails, or looking around for your friends in the audience, or even just looking bored, you will be observed by everyone in the house. For those reasons, a permanent light should be discouraged. It often happens simply because it is never discussed! During a performance, you are a performer, and should remain in character or in a neutral state whenever appropriate.

Entrances and exits should also be carefully considered when platform interpreting. Often the house lights will dim to half their original power, then fade to black. The signers will usually move to their position during the blackout. In a total blackout it is safest to have someone backstage guide you by shining a flashlight on the path you will use to enter and exit, especially if there are stairs or obstacles in your path. If the platform area will be reached from within the house, rather than an entrance from the wings, the signers should get to a position near the platform when the house lights go to half. The location should be close enough to the platform to permit an easy, clear path to the signing area without being in front of the audience before the lights go to black. Most stage managers will make sure glow tape has been placed at strategic spots to guide the signers to the platform area. This should be discussed with the stage manager in advance as you will probably not have a chance to rehearse the show from the platform area. Since each theater has its own unique layout, the signers will need to work with the stage manager to figure out the best way to enter and exit.

At the end of the performance, the interpreters are usually acknowledged by the cast or asked to bow at the same time as the actors. The stage manager will make the decision about the bows, but may need to be reminded before the show. Stage managers experienced with sign interpreted performances often have everything organized and well under control. Still, reviewing your needs will make sure nothing is missed.

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Because platform interpreters are further away from the action, it may be more difficult for the audience to distinguish which signer is portraying which character. Facial expression and characterization need to be more obvious. Sign choices should lean more towards two handed signs which can be held for a longer amount of time. This makes the signs larger and easier to read when looking back and forth between signers and the stage.

Platform interpreting is the most commonly used placement for theatrical interpreters, although it is not the most preferred.

SIGHTLINE INTERPRETING

Sightline interpreting is basically platform interpreting where the signers are placed a bit more strategically on or near the stage to allow the audience a better view of both the signers and the stage picture. For example, the signers might be placed standing or sitting in front of and below the stage. This should allow the audience members to look at the stage in nearly a straight line, with the interpreters in that line of vision. Deaf and hard of hearing patrons have the best view of the signers and the stage when seated at least four or five rows behind the front row. (Again, the seating plan for each theater space needs to be taken into consideration when designating seating for view of the signers.) Placement for a raised stage would most likely be on a platform directly below the stage and usually off to one side. This location would once again be illuminated by a single spot light. Some theaters have seats that look down on the stage, so that the first row is level with the stage. In this staging, interpreters might be placed on the stage or on a platform towards the back of the stage. In this case, the best viewing is from seats where the audience can see beyond the speaking actors heads to the signers behind.

Sitting on the edge of the stage is another option in theaters where the stage is at least several feet above the level of the front row. This is especially effective for children's shows where an intimate, storytelling atmosphere is appropriate.

ZONE INTERPRETING

Another placement option is known as "zone interpreting" (sometimes affectionately referred to as "zone defense"). This method places the interpreters in designated areas on the stage during the performance. The signers might be in stationary placements or on platforms, or the signers might be able to move about the stage within their individual zones. The concept behind this strategy is to place the interpreters as close as possible to the action on stage without a great deal of complicated blocking for the signers. When signers are allowed to move around the stage area, they are often directed to stay stage right or stage left of the action, consciously avoiding any placement that might block the rest of the actors on the stage.

Zone interpreting allows the signers to be closer to the characters, but usually keeps the signers at opposite sides of the stage. While there might be moments throughout the performance when the signers are near each other, often they are in separate areas. This means that the division of characters (who signs which lines) is based completely on movement of the actors. The signer closest to a character signs the lines. Even if there are four or five characters in the same zone, the interpreter closest to the action would sign all the lines. Suppose all the characters are blocked stage left, the stage right interpreter could move in closer to the group and pick up lines for the nearby characters. This could create a ping-pong effect for the viewers, if the signers are on each side of the speaking actors. If the signers are placed next to each other, or at least in a closer proximity, it will be easier for the audience to watch the show.

It is more difficult to rehearse for zone interpreting, as the blocking for the characters is subject to change as late as the final dress rehearsals. Every time the blocking is changed, the signers need to determine how this effects their blocking and choice of who will sign specific lines. Zone interpreting requires signers who are comfortable on the stage and can adapt easily to the movements of all the actors. The stage picture changes from the director's vision once additional people are added to the production.

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That's why it is especially important that you look as comfortable on stage as the rest of the performers.

SHADOW INTERPRETING

Of the different methods for presenting a sign interpreted performance, shadow interpreting is the most challenging for everyone involved in the process. The payoff, however, is a production that is much more enjoyable for all audiences. Rather than several signers obviously “tacked on” to a performance, shadow interpreters are smoothly integrated into the complete production through costuming, placement, movement and signing style. The signers are placed as close as possible to the speaking actors, following the characters' blocking, and sometimes even their actions throughout the performance. This means, if the speaking actor kneels, the signer kneels. When the speaking actor crosses the stage, the signer also makes the same cross. The extent to which the movements and blocking of the speaking actor are “shadowed” by the signer varies depending on several factors which include: the type of show, the director's concept, the limitations of the stage and/or set, and the number of signers. When there are only two shadow interpreters for three or more characters during a scene, choices have to be made about the best placement of the signers. If numerous characters are scattered about the stage in separate locations, the signers locations could be next to the main characters. They might also be placed in the midst of several characters. The challenge will be to place the interpreters in locations that allow the audience to know which character is speaking, especially in scenes with a large number of characters.

Suppose the set is built with areas that are only large enough for one person, such as a window or balcony. A decision must be made about the placement of the signer that best allows the audience to see the actor and signer. In the case of a balcony, is there a nearby window that a signer could use? Perhaps the signer can stand under the balcony. Or could the actor in the balcony learn to sign their lines for that scene? Be creative when confronted with challenging set designs.