

Book Review

Title: Deaf Side Story: Deaf Sharks, Hearing Jets, and a Classic American Musical

Author: Mark Rigney

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Reviewer: Alex Lubet

Deaf Side Story chronicles a 2000 production of West Side Story at MacMurray College in Jacksonville, Illinois. The rival youth gangs were portrayed by hearing students from “Mac” and deaf high schoolers from Jacksonville’s Illinois School for the Deaf.

Rigney is a playwright and it shows. He knows much about theatre and is a compelling storyteller. Unfortunately, as a case study in Theatre and Deaf Education, the book comes up short.

Rigney never reveals how he was able to provide a seemingly eyewitness account of a production whose book-worthiness would have been apparent only in its late stages. Rigney was likely not present at all, relying on the account of director Diane Brewer who now lives, like Rigney, in Evansville, Indiana. Lack of balanced perspective is worsened by non-disclosure of method.

Rigney knows no sign language, but claims to have represented Deaf culture as well as any hearing person could. I disagree. He vividly portrays many “Hearies,” but almost no Deaf personnel. He renders Jacksonville drably Midwestern, a perspective native “Flat-landers” and “Hearies” like myself will recognize. But with its large Deaf school and Deaf community, and Mac’s prestigious Deaf Education program, Jacksonville might appear to Deaf readers like Mecca on the prairie.

Rigney seems to laud pro-Deaf director Brewer’s rejection of the suggestion that a bass drum be used to assist Deaf dancers as a “crutch” that would reflect badly upon them. In reality, this device is used by the Gallaudet University Dance Company (Hottendorf & Gill-Doleac, 2003). The suggestion Brewer nixed almost certainly came from a Deaf member of the production team, although s/he is never identified.

Much of the drama of Rigney’s tale revolves around the many cast members, who dropped out throughout the production. These are young people, largely minors, some apparently quite vulnerable. Rigney impugns these and others mercilessly, using their real names when permissions could be obtained. Comparable ethnographies of schools (Nettl, 1995; Kingsbury, 1988) protect even the names and locations of their institutions.

Rigney’s descriptions of music range from muddled to incorrect. His transcriptions of e-mails of a Deaf production team member whose English is imperfect are inadequately contextualized and unempathic.

Deaf Side Story is intended for students of theatre and Disability Studies. It is mostly an easy “read,” although issues of theatrical production and Deaf Culture present challenges. Scholars of Deaf Culture will find it disappointing in ways others may not notice.

Deaf Side Story needs to be read with a background in Deaf Studies and a dose of skepticism. There is a revival of Roger Miller’s musical, Big River, in an ASL/English production currently running on Broadway and on tour. Perhaps from that a truly distinguished chronicle of an ASL/English musical production will finally be written.

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written on numerous aspects of disability studies in music and is currently completing a monograph entitled *Crip Notes: Towards a Disability Studies of Music*. Contact him at lubet001@umn.edu or School of Music, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN 55455.

References

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Nettl, Bruno (1995). *Heartland Excursions: Ethnomusicological Reflections on Schools of Music*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.