

On Deaf Ears: Disabled in Hollywood  
Mark Medoff  
School of Theatre  
The Florida State University

Abstract: A playwright/screenwriter reflects on two decades of pitching American Sign Language inflected stories at deaf Hollywood ears.

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In *The Hands of Its Enemy*, the second bilingual (English and American Sign Language) play I wrote, there was a line I've used almost as a mantra: "The thing I love about the theater is the collaboration of separate spirits who share the responsibility of a play's fate."

Making theater bears the same power in my experience as playing sports and living within a family. As a model for the notion of the sum being greater than its constituent parts, making theater has been as illuminating to me about how to live in the world as playing on dozens of sports teams from the sixth grade into my fifties; as complex and ultimately satisfying as being part of families I was born to, married into, procreated and adopted.

In 1979, I met Phyllis Frelich, an actor who happens to be deaf and doesn't speak out loud. Since that year, she and her husband Bob Steinberg have been part of a team on which I play, a family in which I live.

I've written five plays now for Phyllis that incorporate English and American Sign Language. The first, *Children of a Lesser God*, changed our lives.

I know I could get the bright idea to adapt the nearest phone book into a stage piece for deaf and hearing actors and some theater somewhere would welcome me and my deaf and hearing buddies and we would have the joy and challenge of trying make that phone book live for an audience.

Film, though, is a different kettle of ears where my work with Phyllis, with the deaf, with American Sign Language is concerned.

In March 1988, for one week, there was an event at predominantly deaf Gallaudet University in Washington, DC, that came to be known as the Deaf Revolution, driven by a cry, signed, written, and spoken of "Deaf President Now!" In the year following that "revolution," Tony Award winner, Emmy nominee Phyllis, her designer-actor husband Bob, and I tried to sell an idea for a fiction set against the events at Gallaudet. A single sentence at one of our pitch meetings was indicative of a familiar way of thinking about "diversity" in America: We pitched our story concerning a deaf mother and daughter at cultural and generational odds; at the end of our carefully orchestrated narration, one of those ubiquitous children in Armani who have no discernable job in Hollywood studios but to over-populate meetings in studio chambers, said in his youthful wisdom, "But there's already been a deaf movie."

That sentence struck me, sadly, as both epigrammatic and epitaphic.

This was not the first time I had "pitched" a movie idea in Hollywood that involved Phyllis at the center. Our favorite encounter involved a pitch at Warner Bros. back in the early 80s. We were running on the notoriety of the success of *Children of a Lesser God* in New York, a Tony for Phyllis, a Tony for me.

The idea we presented went like this: Phyllis's character has been in a mental institution since she was very young. She has no history and no language other than the combination of

incomprehensible speech and gesture that she's invented for herself. A lawyer is in trouble with some of the nasty people he's been keeping out of jail and has himself committed to the same facility to hide out. Phyllis immediately attaches herself to the most interesting new person in her world. She plays cards with him. She has an amazing visual memory and always wins. The mob finds the lawyer and he is able to escape but only with Phyllis's help (she knows where the Thorazine is kept and disables his pursuers) and they end up on the run together, the definitive innocent with a reluctant teacher who in turn is taught. We sketched a lot of fun doing all her "firsts": first restaurant, first motel, first airplane, first love, first kiss... We find out that Phyllis' father is a major mobster who had her put away because of something she witnessed. Phyllis and her lawyer companion wind up in Vegas; using her visual memory and card playing skills, she and her lawyer partner/love interest break the bank at her father's casino.

The standard "pitch meeting" in Hollywood has the writer narrating and/or acting out the story in a very compressed 10-15 minute stand-up (or leaning-forward) routine. Our plan was that I would pitch the basic three act structure of the movie with Bob interpreting for Phyllis; then Phyllis would take over with Bob interpreting for the listeners while she signed. At a pre-planned point, Bob would stop interpreting and Phyllis would go it alone, in silence, using ASL, so that the studio folks would get an idea of what a brilliant mimic and comedienne she is, with or without the standard compensation for her deafness in a hearing world.

When the moment came for Phyllis to go solo, she rose, she moved, she signed, she used conceptual gesture and the sort of inarticulate but comprehensible (we thought) noises indigenous to her character.

Phyllis, Bob, nor I will ever forget the looks of abject confusion on the faces of the president of Warner Bros. and his Armani Army as Phyllis played out some of the scenes for them. They shriveled in discomfort and were mightily relieved when we finished. And left.

If the story we pitched seems reminiscent of a movie called *Rain Man*, we have, for years, thought so too. Plagiarism, though, can only exist if its opposite exists, and in Hollywood there is no such thing as plagiarism because there is no such thing as originality; everything is in the air for anyone to breath and exhale back into the atmosphere, naming carbon monoxide fresh air.

In the most basic way, those "normal" executives, those arbiters of cultural taste, were discomfited by the alien, "disabled" person in the room. And though it may be only me, that discomfort seemed but a step away from contempt.

In the mid-90s sometime, Disney wanted to talk to me about doing the story of the Gallaudet revolution, a more or less historical two-hour movie. I didn't want to do that. I had learned the hard way that dealing with living subjects was a nightmare. Though I knew I was supposed to create an "artistic distance" between me and them, that I would need to embellish, abridge, even alter their stories for dramatic purposes, I inevitably felt responsible for the basic verity of their lives, the sanctity of their secrets, and grew to hate the inevitable disparate needs between the producing organization and the subject. An example: I was signed to write about a famous football coach once. When I turned in the first draft, a TV executive noted that the subject seemed awfully pristine, even noble. I was asked, "Didn't he ever cheat on his wife?" I said I certainly had no evidence of that. The TV executive suggested I *invent* an affair for the coach. I noted that we were dealing with a *real person*, still alive, not a creation of my imagination, and that to make up a hurtful event like the executive was suggesting was perfidious and egregious.

At that point in my TV/movie life, I was stunned by the suggestion. Though I think I wrote a good script about that football coach, the script is moldering on a network shelf somewhere. I had a similar experience with a script about a famous Russian dissident whose wife spent over a decade trying to get him released from a Soviet prison. The wife really didn't want a movie made about her and her husband's experiences. She wanted to live her life with her husband and her children quietly, even anonymously. Whereas he was very forthcoming, she was not. The head of a major Hollywood studio asked me if I thought she'd had any affairs during that decade-plus. I replied that I had only heard rumors I could not substantiate. In truth, it wasn't that I couldn't substantiate the rumors, but that I wasn't going to try. Another moldering script.

As a screenwriter, I became pretty unshockable by the shifting moral ground in Hollywood. I knew that in the inner sanctum of film and TV "creative development," there was not only a modicum of creativity but there was a profound dearth of moral conviction – *unless a particular moral stance was pragmatic*, pragmatic being synonymous with: 1) Does it work for the story? 2) Will it sell tickets? I was ever reminded of the old saw that goes: "It's not called Show Art, it's called Show Business."

I should not have been surprised, really, to learn that Hollywood has some highly refined and peculiar views of the disabled, as well as foreign languages.

My memory of films made in Hollywood during my childhood is that all Germans had one clichéd Germanic accent, regardless of class or region; same with the Russians; and everyone else from Europe had a British accent. Asians were modeled on the now infamous Charlie Chan accent. No one, to my memory, was ever from a Scandinavian country. All Native Americans sounded like Tonto. Everyone from Latin America, Central America, Cuba, and Mexico sounded like Eli Wallach who, I think, played every person of Spanish descent with some hybridized Spanish-New York accent from around 1950 to the recent present when, amazingly enough, many Latin roles began to be played by people of Latin heritage (though we haven't reached the point where any distinction is made among those of Brazilian extraction, who speak Portuguese, Castilians, Basques, or Argentines who emigrated from Nazi Germany. The etymology of the name holds force, however; if it sounds Latin, it's good.

Phyllis, Bob, and I had another story we wanted to tell, one about a group from a deaf school in New Mexico trying to *get to* the revolution of 1988 at Gallaudet in a stolen school van. Lo and behold, Disney bought the pitch and moved ahead with us until somebody realized The Mouse was developing a movie intended to have *real deaf people in it* and that sub-titles were integral to what I was planning to write and shoot. Two common errors hearing people make about the deaf are 1) all deaf people are fabulous lip readers (when in fact the best lip readers only get a modest percentage of what people say) and 2) most deaf people can learn to speak so that hearing people can understand them (a large percentage of deaf people do not speak, period, and many *choose* not to speak).

We were informed that Disney didn't want sub-titles. We explained there was no way, given the proximity of the camera to the actors that we could do a viable story with a cast that was at least half deaf without asking the audience to read sub-titles at least some of the time. Disney was adamant; they could – or would – not do a Sunday night movie that required children to read or that their parents would have to read to them.

It didn't take Phyllis, Bob, and me long to conclude that what Disney wanted was a deaf story *without deaf people in it*.

The project died at Disney but became a play called ROAD TO A REVOLUTION, commissioned by Deaf West Theater. As with the phone book reference earlier, we had the joy and challenge of working on the idea and putting it in front of an audience.

I did a movie called *Clara's Heart* back in the late 80s, starring Whoopi Goldberg, an extremely nice lady and a terrific comedienne though not a trained dramatic actor. The producer, director and I very much wanted Alfre Woodard for the role. The studio involved made it clear though that the movie would only get made if Whoopi would do it. The inference was that, in studio-think, there was only one African American actress in the world and, in order to do movies with African Americans at the center, she would have to do all of them. Sidney Poitier had earlier born the mantle of *The African American Actor*. Eddie Murphy got it for a while. Denzel Washington and Halle Berry share it now.

For several years, Marlee Matlin, currently *The Deaf Actor* for Hollywood, and I tried to sell a remake of *Johnny Belinda*, a story about a deaf woman which has been twice made with hearing actors. Those were funny movies, largely because the hearing actors playing the deaf character had *no clue* how to convincingly pretend to be someone and something they weren't.

For all of Marlee's popularity, we weren't able to set that project up. On the face of the rejection was reasoning that had to do with lack of interest in redoing something that had already been done, however ineptly.

I did win one notable battle in Hollywood with one of my plays that involved a deaf character. When I sold the film rights to *Children of a Lesser God*, I asked for assurances that the central deaf character, Sarah Norman, would be played by a deaf actor. I was assured the actor would be deaf. Within a matter of days after signing away the rights, I was asked whether I preferred Goldie Hawn or Meryl Streep for the role.

The only real power a writer has in film is that which he can exert through the people who have the power – studios heads, producers, directors. Over the course of several years, I was finally able to exact a promise from the people with the power that using a hearing actor in a role made notable by a deaf actor would not only be unfair, but would cause a backlash of considerable size from the millions of deaf and hard of hearing people around the world the powers that be would like to come see their movie.

There have been several movies that have dealt powerfully with motor disabilities: *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Coming Home*, *The Waterdance*.

Mostly, though, Hollywood salves its conscience where the disabled are concerned by periodically making TV or feature films about what can be called "The Hollywood Retarded Person," whether the person -- usually male -- is technically retarded or not. Nice mentally defective people, entertaining, and ultimately, grandly sentimentalized. And in some amazing synchronicity, along with their looks of Edenic innocence, each Hollywood Retarded Person always wear pants that are just *slightly too short*. This is a signal that none of them has bought a pair of pants since he was 12, right before the final growth spurt, and that more importantly, no one has thought to update his wardrobe since. In recent years, Dustin Hoffman, Tom Hanks, Kevin Bacon, William H. Macy, Billy Bob Thornton, and most recently, Cuba Gooding, Jr., fine actors all, have stooped to a variation of the short pant retarded guy, reaping accolades as each salvaged our guilt with the balm of righteousness in this time of under-representation of any real variety of stories of persons with disabilities.

Giving Oscars to people who play Hollywood Retarded Persons – Hoffman, Hanks – makes me wonder at the legitimacy of Marlee Matlin's Oscar for *Children of a Lesser God*. Was it compulsory that she win to ease consciences in a flick that would soon be described to me as

“But there’s already been a deaf movie”? Did the mass of Academy voters pretend Marlee was a real and valid actor because most of the voters knew in their cool business hearts there would only be another analogous opportunity for a deaf actor over their dead bodies?

I can’t say I ever forget that my friend Phyllis is deaf. Neither do I ever forget that she’s the best actor I’ve ever been privileged to work with.

After the success of *Children of a Lesser God*, it seems I was *always* called to gauge my interest in writing the plethora of so-called “Disease of the Week Movies” in the 80s. I worked on one feature about a blind woman (who would no doubt have been played by a sighted actor) and another about a young man with cerebral palsy who, with his father, started and finished the Ironman in Hawaii (same as above). I turn those offers down now, as much because the view of those with the money to make the movies is hackneyed as because I no longer hope that any great effort will be made to populate the movies with disabled actors.

It’s good to see Marlee on *West Wing* with some regularity; it’s terrific that Deanne Bray has her own show on *Sue Thomas, Private Eye*.

It would be great to see a new version of *Ironside* with a disabled actor in that wheelchair. But show business is largely not disability-accessible. Unless you’re wearing an iron lung, don’t hold your breath.

**MARK MEDOFF** won a Tony Award for *Children of a Lesser God*. He is currently Reynolds Eminent Scholar at Florida State University and recently directed the feature film *Children On Their Birthdays*.

