

Don Nguyen Reaches Out to Deaf Community in ‘Sound’

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Promotional photo for ‘Sound’ at ACT Theatre. Left to right: Ryan Schlecht, Cheyenna Clearbrook, and Lindsay W. Evans. • Photo by Richard Nguyen Sloniker

Collaboration is the watchword in the upcoming co-production between [Azeotrope](#) and [ACT Theatre](#) of Don Nguyen’s play *Sound*.

The show presents the challenges of navigating both deaf and hearing cultures within a single family near Martha’s Vineyard, and is bilingual in American Sign Language and spoken English, augmented by super titles and listening devices.

Nguyen originally developed his play while immersed in that local context. “I was on a writers’ retreat on Martha’s Vineyard, off the coast of Massachusetts in 2010,” Nguyen said. “It was there that I discovered, in the early 18th century, the island had the highest concentration of Deaf people in the entire country.”

The island's unique legacy was compelling to Nguyen. "The unusually high concentration of Deaf islanders attracted Alexander Graham Bell to the island, where he conducted many interviews with the Deaf islanders," he said. "He believed Martha's Vineyard held the key to the cause of deafness, and finding that cause would eventually lead to finding a 'cure' for it. I found the history of this island fascinating and started sketching out a story for it."

This story was the first of many versions of *Sound*. "I initially wrote it for the Civilians, an investigative theatre company in New York," Nguyen said. "Their aesthetic is documentary style theatre, so the play initially consisted of lots of research and recreating scenes from Alexander Graham Bell's notes about the islanders as well as his actual letters to his wife Mabel, who was deaf."

But as Nguyen was to discover, this initial draft was only the beginning of a long project of development over time and in many places. "I sometimes joke that you could probably write a play about how this play changed over time," Nguyen said. "It was through the development of *Sound* over these many years that I have made the personal connections to the Deaf community that, in turn, have helped shape the play into what it is today."

Later drafts moved Bell from serving as the protagonist in the play to a supporting character. "As I did more research on Bell, I discovered what an immensely antagonistic relationship he had with the Deaf community," Nguyen said.

Although Nguyen himself is not deaf and, prior to working on *Sound*, had no connection to the Deaf community, he decided to explore the community's views more deeply. "Bell viewed deafness as a disability, and what I learned through my research is that the Deaf do not view themselves that way," Nguyen said. "They are proud of their deafness."

Nguyen found that the Deaf community has been subject to experiences common to other American minorities. "I started learning about hearing privilege and how we (the hearing) take sound for granted and how we impose a certain attitude on deafness based on our hearing privilege, which gives the hearing an inaccurate perspective on the Deaf community," he said.

The play now places the Deaf experience centerstage, with subsequent productions relying on the expertise of those with experience with ASL and the Deaf community. At the Bay Area Playwrights Festival, Nguyen worked with two key individuals. "Karen Atree Piemme, who knows ASL and has worked with the Deaf community, served as our dramaturg," Nguyen said. "JAC Cook, a renowned Deaf community activist and artist, served as our ASL director."

Both roles were key to the success of Nguyen's revised play. "Karen's role was more of a traditional dramaturg, tracking the storytelling beats of the play, but through the lens of her personal experience with Deaf culture," he said. "JAC worked on making sure the script translated properly, given the difference in syntax between ASL and spoken English."

Beyond strict translation, Nguyen emphasized that Cook provided input for the play itself. "JAC was also a great resource in making sure we told the story of the Deaf experience accurately," he said. "She was our barometer for keeping an equitable perspective of the Deaf community. Together, their contributions to *Sound* were invaluable."

Even with these contributions, audience reactions led to still more learning opportunities. "Last year at the Bay Area Playwrights Festival, we had two talkbacks with a nice mix of Deaf and hearing audiences," Nguyen said. "The discussions about the play were energetic, passionate, and fairly blunt."

Reception of the play was different among the hearing and Deaf communities. "Many in the hearing audience found the play fascinating and illuminating of Deaf culture," he said. "On the other hand, many Deaf audience members took issue with the play in terms of how it portrayed Alexander Graham Bell as a sympathetic character, which surprised me because I thought I had shown the offensive nature of Bell's perspective on Deaf culture."

This led to further steps in Nguyen's creative process. "I realized that even though I understood the Deaf experience on an intellectual level, I could never understand it on a personal level, and therefore made some well intentioned yet naive assumptions about the Deaf community in the play," Nguyen said. "It was a hard but necessary experience for me."

That experience has continued for Nguyen in preparation for the Seattle presentation of *Sound*, which is co-directed by Azeotrope founding director Desdemona Chiang alongside Howie Seago, a Deaf theatre artist who is in charge of the ASL translation as well as collaborating on overall directing choices.

Azeotrope first collaborated with ACT Theatre in 2012, and was excited to propose *Sound* for possible co-presentation. "I first came across this play when I was on a selection committee for a new play festival in San Francisco, and was just floored by it," Chiang said. "I've always been interested in stories about underrepresented people in society, and after I met Howie (which was in 2010 when we worked together at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival), I became aware of just how invisible Deaf culture was."

Seago was also enthusiastic about coming on board for the project. “There is a great need for more plays about or related to Deafness,” he said. “I am thrilled to work with Don Nguyen for the first time and hope it won’t be the last.”

In his work as co-director, Seago has also advised Nguyen on key aspects of the script. “He is aware that his writing or concepts may not always be appropriate from the Deaf perspective and sometimes may be awkward or impossible to translate into ASL,” Seago said of Nguyen. “He is the most approachable playwright I have ever worked with.”

Chiang also lauds Nguyen’s cooperation during the rehearsal process. “Don has spent the last few months rewriting the play, which has changed drastically since the first version I read a year ago,” she said. “He has been tremendously flexible in this process, and even now with him back in New York, we still send notes back and forth and are skyping him into run-throughs so he can stay connected with us.”

Seago and Chiang have also developed a rapport as co-directors. “We divide scenes based on the content and cast involved,” Seago said. “Des is responsible for the overall design and does the basic blocking while I work on the translations from English to ASL.”

But Seago and Chiang report that their work also overlaps a great deal. “After Des has worked a scene, I review it for refining the translations and suggested blocking adjustments,” he said. “For example, re-locating signer(s) to different stage positions so we can see them better and directing them to use the downstage hand for clarity of signs.”

Chiang agreed. “Co-directing is always tricky, because at some point, there is bound to be disagreement on something,” she said. “I haven’t co-directed since college, and I vowed never to do it again, because I didn’t want to be at the mercy of someone else’s ideas. But this is completely different. As a hearing person, I *have* to take a backseat on this one. It’s not my story, it’s not my culture.”

She described the creative process in the rehearsal room as one that requires recognizing the privilege of majority culture. “I’m an ally and a supporter on this project,” she said. “So when I block a scene and Howie has a note that something isn’t working, I can’t get defensive and say, ‘well, it’s because... etc. etc.,’ because that’s what privilege is. It’s the self-declared right to tell someone else’s story because you have agency. And just because I can doesn’t mean I should.”

Chiang and Seago also insisted that everyone involved in the production learn at

least some of both communication methods. “Every hearing person who is working on this show has some degree of ASL exposure and can at least fingerspell,” Chiang said. “The barrier in a bilingual process is communication, and if you want to make that easier in rehearsal, you find time and energy early on to learn the other language.”

Both co-directors hope that their efforts will allow this show to communicate across barriers. “There are very few theatre artists and technicians who can sign, but we’ve managed to find them and put them in this room,” Chiang said.

Seago added, “We want every performance to be accessible for both Deaf and hearing audiences.”

The entire artistic team will again soon be present together at ACT. While no talkbacks are currently scheduled on the ACT webpage, Nguyen enjoyed his first visit ever to Seattle to attend the first two weeks of rehearsals, and he looks forward to attending *Sound*’s first weekend of performances.

Sound runs from September 9 to October 4, at ACT Theatre, 700 Union Street, Seattle. For tickets and more information, visit www.acttheatre.org.