

# Deaf hear OU play via interpreters' hands

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Photos: MINDY SAUNDERS

There was never a performance of "The Rivals" in the Detroit area like the one presented at Oakland University's Studio Theatre on Valentine's Day. When the curtain went up at 8:30 p.m., there were, as with most plays, actors and actresses and sets on stage and carefully constructed lighting.

There was also, as usual, an audience for the performers.

The appearance was that of a normal

performance of a comedy.

But things weren't as normal as they seemed. In addition to two extra women on the steps in front of the stage interpreting in sign language every phrase the actors and actresses said, the audience was composed of deaf people from Oakland, Wayne and Macomb counties.

"This is a first here at the university," said student and interpreter Mary Wells. "In the last few years there have maybe been two interpreted performances for the deaf in Detroit. Enter-

tainment is hard for them. It has to be visual entertainment. The deaf are limited if they go to a movie, unless they are lucky enough to have an interpreter."

Mrs. Wells, who lives in Avon Township, knows from experience what problems the deaf have. Though her hearing is normal, she grew up in a family of deaf parents. She's seen the needs of the deaf.

MRS. WELLS has known sign language since she was a child. She's taught sign language at Detroit Hearing and Speech Center and at Utica High School. For two years she was director of the now-defunct Detroit Sign Company.

Detroit Sign Company was a group of deaf or hard-of-hearing persons who performed songs in sign language.

For the last few weeks prior to Feb. 14, Mrs. Wells, Betty Miller of Lake Orion, Monale Ferrero of Troy and

Maureen Wagner of Detroit spent time studying the script of Richard Sheridan's romantic comedy "The Rivals" and attending every rehearsal two weeks prior to opening night.

They all worked as interpreters for the one performance, signing two at a time.

They worked closely with the director of the play Adeline Hirschfeld-Medalia, presented by OU's Theatre Arts program, and with the cast members, becoming familiar with how each actor and actress was going to interpret his or her character.

"When we interpret a play, we have to take on the character of the person saying the lines. Our bodies have to relate to the character of the role. That's why we attended rehearsals, to watch the actors and see how they look," said Mrs. Wells.

LOVE OF THEATRE is what directed Mrs. Wells to tackle

interpreting a play for area deaf.

"I approached Adeline, the play director, and asked her if we could do this."

At the time, Mrs. Wells said she didn't realize how difficult signing this particular comedy would be.

"We interpreters read the scenes over and over, trying to get an understanding of what's happening in each scene. First we had to interpret the play into American colloquialism, then into sign language."

"This is an 18th century British play with many outdated terms that we had to look up to find out what they mean before we could interpret them. For instance, the word 'caprice' is used in the play. That means 'change your mind.' The word 'impudent' is used frequently and there's not a sign for that."

"We had to try to interpret many of the concepts while still trying to keep the Rocco language," said Mrs. Wells, 34.

One of the most difficult characters for the four interpreters to sign was Mrs. Malaprop.

It's for her that the English language contains the word "malapropism," which means, according to the Random House College Dictionary, "the act or habit of misusing words ridiculously, especially by the confusion of words that are similar in sound."

Other performances are scheduled for Feb. 22-25 at 8:30 p.m. with a Sunday matinee at 2:30 p.m. For reservations and tickets at \$3 general admission, \$2 for OU students and seniors, contact OU at 377-2000.



"The singers will be three or four words behind while the actors are saying their lines," said Mary Wells, sign language interpreter for the deaf.

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