

Entertainment

Ethel Simmons editor/644-1100



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Theater accents the deaf

By Cathie Breidenbach
special writer

SIGN LANGUAGE with its dramatic animation and visual symbols fascinates children.

When they are introduced to it early and learn that sign is a language with its own people and culture — like any other language — children become more accepting of the deaf community, says Mary Wells of Plymouth. She is the artistic director and founder of Sign Players, Unlimited, metropolitan Detroit's first and only deaf theater.

The new theater company aims not only to offer good, live theater to the deaf community, but to promote deaf awareness in the hearing community. On Saturday morning, Oct. 13, the company will debut its first children's production, "The Ice Wolf," at the Farmington Hills Library. "We really would like hearing children and their parents to come," says Wells. "The more exposed children are when young, the more accepting they become as adults."

Laurie Smalls, publicity chairwoman for the theater, says the show is also booked for Saturday, Nov. 10, at the Novi Civic Center; Saturday, Nov. 17, at Madonna College; and Friday, Nov. 30, at the Farmington Community Center, as well as at Eastern Michigan University and at the Detroit Day School for the Deaf.

"THE ICE WOLF," based on an Eskimo folk tale, will be performed in sign language by six hearing and five deaf adult players. Voice interpreting will allow hearing people to follow the action. Wells anticipates a diversified, young audience, including members of the deaf community and their parents and relatives, as well as hearing people interested in

sign language and those interested in theater.

The play about an Eskimo girl who is different from others in her village "deals with hard stuff like discrimination and isolation. It's not a cutesy little story," Wells says, but she knows the deaf community will relate to the frustration and prejudice in the folk tale.

Both of Mary Wells' parents are deaf, so she is intimately acquainted with the misunderstandings and discrimination deaf people face. Two percent of the American population is deaf, and the medical causes for their deafness vary. If a pregnant woman contracts a disease such as German measles during early gestation, her child may be born deaf. One of the actors in "The Ice Wolf" became deaf after a prolonged high fever.

Wells describes growing up as the hearing child of deaf parents. "I knew who they were, what they did and what they were capable of," but she often saw others misunderstand and underestimate her parents' abilities. The hearing are often unaware of the talents of people who can't hear. In the job market, some employers refuse to hire the deaf and cite hazards and safety factors as justification. Wells believes this reluctance stems more from misunderstanding or prejudice than from logical reasons.

Many hearing people assume all the deaf ought to be able to lip read. Wells explains the difficulties. "Most speech happens behind the lips and teeth, and research indicates the best lip readers get only 25 percent of what's spoken." For people deaf from birth, "The language they're trying to lip read isn't even their own language."

THE HIT BROADWAY show



Director Mary Wells works with Scott Willitt, stage manager (center), Beth Buccellato as Anatol and Greg Frohrip as the

Wood God in the Sign Players, Unlimited, children's production of "The Ice Wolf."

"Children of a Lesser God" won a Tony award for its deaf star, Phyllis Frelick, and stimulated interest and understanding of the deaf. The play dramatically put in the spotlight the controversy of whether the deaf fare better if they learn to sign or if they learn to speak.

Then came the movie version starring John Hurt and Marlee Matlin, and respect for the deaf and awareness of the sign/speak controversy spread nationwide. Sign Players, Unlimited, aims to use the medium of drama to continue to educate Americans, especially young Americans, about the deaf community and about sign language.

Sign was Mary Wells' first language. "My mother insists that I was signing before I was a year old — asking for my milk," she says. "Deafness was inherited on my mother's side. My father lost his hearing when he was 10 or 11 years old." In the sign/speak controversy,

Wells takes a firm stand in favor of sign, so clear a stand that she has pioneered the Detroit area's first sign theater.

"I'm biased and I accept my own bias," she says. Wells works as a professor of Sign Language Studies and interpreting at Saint Claire College in Windsor, and for several years she was part of the sign and language interpreting faculty at Madonna College in Livonia.

She says, "The prevailing research shows that the deaf who sign as a primary language understand English better." She makes clear that sign language is not English. "It doesn't represent English at all. It develops out of the community," she says, adding that sign, like any language, evolves and changes over time and has idioms that challenge translators.

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Buccellato rehearses a scene from "The Ice Wolf," to be presented at Saturday at the Farmington Hills Library.

Meadow Brook defines strong images in 'Cabaret'

Performances of the Meadow Brook Theatre production of "Cabaret" continue through Sunday, Oct. 28, on the Oakland University campus in Rochester Hills. For ticket information call 3770-3300.

Flamboyant naughtiness tinged with sadness marks Meadow Brook Theatre's polished production of "Cabaret," the musical that exposes the decadence of Berlin in the late 1920s.

Leggy dancers at Berlin's liveliest night spot, the Kit Kat Klub, wear black garter belts and scanty costumes that reveal plenty of posterior

cheek. With kinky costuming, free-wheeling heterosexuality and just a bit of same-sex fanny patting, director Carl Schurr captures the naughtiness of Berlin in those out-of-bounds years when reparations and rampaging inflation sent Germany into the moral tailspin that gave birth to the Nazi party.

British cabaret singer Sally Bowles says Berlin is "lucky and terrible, but everyone's having such a great time." To his credit, Schurr balances her evaluation by showing the nastier side of naughtiness — the rise of the Nazi pestilence.



Barbara Michals

Sally, played by talented singer and dancer Donna Kane, claims to thrive on the glamorous decadence of the times. Not everybody does, however. A Jewish fruit merchant suffers when vandals throw rocks through the windows of his fruit store and when rising Nazism

ends his hopes for late-in-life love and companionship.

WIL LOVE plays winningly the gentle, elderly man smitten by the charms of his landlady, Fraulein Schneider (Dorothy Stinnette). The coy courtship between the musta-

chioed Herr Schultz and the spinster Fraulein Schneider radiates tenderness and corny, loveable naivete.

Not so the sophisticated affair between the show's leads, flashy songstress Sally Bowles and struggling young novelist Cliff Bradshaw. After one evening of flirtation, Sally moves in on Cliff and shares his room and single bed. Paul DeBoy is likable as the bemused, nice-guy American, even if his singing voice is merely adequate.

Sally and Cliff may look a likely pair of lovers. She is vivacious and pretty. He is tall and handsome. But the low voltage electricity between

them makes their affair seem just another of Sally's sleep-around flings, a love lacking in I've-never-felt-like-this-before electricity.

Kane brings little of the mapae craziness that Liza Minelli did to the role of Sally Bowles. Instead she brings a subtle sadness to Sally's party-girl personality, especially when she sings her bitter-sweet rendition of the hedonistic title song, "Cabaret." The flashes of self-awareness Kane offers as Sally make her a complex heroine — interesting but not particularly like-

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