

DANCETHEATER APPLICATIONS USING SIGN LANGUAGE MOVEMENT PATHWAYS AND FACIAL POSTURE DYNAMICS

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Deaf-communities are supporting their own deaf art civilization, distinguishing their techniques and aesthetics even if socializing in everyday life with hearing citizens. They have developed their own art-styles in Conjectural and Theatrical Arts. As far as it concerns the art of Dance, there it does not exist any relative research paper or school-education reference concerning art-making innovation by dance-art. *Purpose:* Examination of a new dance-style based upon sign language. *Method:* In the current study participated 12 deaf amateur actors and 20 hearing professional dancers, by rehearsing three times per week for two months in performance seasons (2005-2013). The choreographer had sign language sufficiency. *Performer Groups:* (A) Professional-hearing-Dancers, (B) Semi-Professional Deaf-Actors, (C) Semi-Professional Actors and Professional Dancers. *Content:* traditional dance techniques, sign language movement pathways and pure Sign-Language. *Results:* According to results, during rehearsal and stage performance enthusiasm and satisfaction has been observed from both hearing and deaf dancing group. The hearing group had long term and strong intrinsic motivation with high duty commitment to the scope in contrast with deaf group. The group of deaf artists was working better and more systematically when integrated with hearing artists. Both groups had a difficulty to copy the new -sign language extension-movement patterns. The groups A & C were the most interesting and innovative. The group with hearing dancers was the best in quality. *Conclusions:* The proposed dance theater approach is suggested as an art-making application with educational, therapeutic and artistic interest.

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INTRODUCTION

In contemporary societies deaf communities are socially supported for a better quality of life through public law facilitations, concessions in transportation, health and welfare services, mass media accessibility, special education quality, more job opportunities and finally, social inclusion enhancement (Padden & Humphrics, 2006; Kilpatrick, 2007; Freire, 2009; Gerich & Fellingner, 2012). Art life of deaf communities is not substantially supported, except for some world deaf centers, as in Europe and in the USA (Lang & Meath-Lang, 1995; Kilpatrick, 2007; Freire, 2009; Holcomb, 2012). The art of deaf is not widely established and it is not much appreciated concerning its indifference (Bergman, 1981; Mirzoeff, 1995; Kochhar-Lindgren, 2006; Kavazidou, 2012).

In Greece, after the establishment of schools for deaf, many theatrical groups have been occasionally created with junior, teenage and adult deaf individuals. In 1983 the "Theater of the Deaf of Greece" (Athens) has been established, in 2005 the Silent Theater of the Cultural Center of Thessaloniki (as a domestic part of the Regional Authority of Central Macedonia – North Greece) and three years later, the theatrical group "Crazy Colours" (Athens). Since 2013 and after, several new theatrical groups have been established mostly in the large urban centers of the country. Their establishment and activation have been reinforced through the annual National Deaf and Hearing Individuals in Action Festival (Antzakas, 2010; Kavazidou, 2012, DHIA Festival, 2014).

Deaf History is strongly connected with the deaf arts. The types and forms of deaf-arts have been developed in a parallel with the spectrum of abilities of deaf individuals; Their content is usually connected to their subculture and their social needs, wonders and problems (Mirzoeff, 1995; Kilpatrick, 2007; Holcomb, 2012). There are two types of fine arts that are widely known in deaf communities: the conjectural and the performing arts (Lang & Meath-Lang, 1995; Mirzoeff, 1995; Kipatrick, 2007; Kavazidou, 2012).

Concerning performing arts, the art-practice is focusing in the visual interest, while deaf performers & spectators experience the performance as a visual –rather than audiovisual- event. In deaf communities, the most favorite and common performing art has been the theatrical art rather than dance-art (Mirzoeff, 1995; Kochhar-Lindgren, 2006; Kilpatrick, 2007; Lang, 2007; Holcomb, 2012). Even if the dance-art is the primitive form of theater, it has not been developed in a peculiar way, so to claim a dance-deaf art. Dance projects that are performed by deaf youngsters or adults, are constructed according to traditional teaching forms and dance styles that have been basically developed from and for hearing population (Looseleaf, 2008; Park, 2008). As such, there shall follow a short review of the theater of the deaf, to link to dance-theater approach suggested for deaf culture.

The art of acting has been present in prior deaf communities as a kind of primitive form of physical theater and pantomime. The first official reference on deaf actor has been reported in Motion Pictures of Charlie Chaplin (Kilpatrick, 2007). The *deaf theater* is a 20th century art-term that is used to define a very specific form of theater, structured upon special abilities rather disabilities of the deaf performer. The main communication is attempted with alternative communication vehicles, such as physical body or face expressions, symbolic movements and signing, rather than oral language (Kochhar-Lindgren, 2006; Kilpatrick, 2007). The most common types of adult deaf theater are pantomime, physical theater and Storytelling Theater, being formulated according to the peculiar characteristics of the performers. In junior or teenage deaf-theater, the most appropriate theatrical techniques are a variety of voice-muted shows (widely known in prior communities as dumb shows), integrating

symbolic, ballet or physical movements, or circus pantomime. In deaf theatre, integration of hearing and deaf individuals in acting or in attending a performance is feasible (Kochhar-Lindgren, 2006; Padden & Humphrics, 2006; Kilpatrick, 2007; Freire, 2009).

The first deaf theaters have been established by experienced deaf actors in the art of pantomime. The most common pantomime techniques used in deaf theater are based upon the schools of pantomime of Marcel Marceau and Jacques Lecoq. As such, if in “Marcel Marceau” like-pantomime, the actor is using body only realistic every day movements in combination with improvisation techniques for mime performances; in “Jacques Lecog” like-pantomime, the actor is manipulating or replicating natural movements, familiar to physical theater, where pantomime is the added value of the act for getting dramatically creative. This pantomime technique is usually combined with dance and object related performance forms, as plastic arts, juggling, acrobatics, ballet, etc. Other techniques of deaf theater are the storytelling and the Art-Sign technique. Storytelling concerns the use of sign language in an accurate and fluent manner for recounting a story or performing an event. Art-Sign is based on a poetic and less abstract way of story-telling, by using the whole body and extending the signing letters and words. Art-sign permits the artist to express an idea with a creative manner (Kilpatrick, 2007). Finally, even though there are sporadically reported experimental “deaf theater” styles, that they have not been analyzed in depth (Mirzoeff, 1995; Kochhar-Lindgren, 2006).

Deaf theater is the most favorite and common art – expression of deaf communities from youngsters to the very old ages. Theatrical art is experienced as a beautiful artistic praxis and is mainly obtained through using sign language in art-practice. The art of theater is used to express their feelings about hearing culture and indirectly, to psychologically release them from the feeling of “cultural oppression”. In current societies, deaf theater is often used in special education (in deaf) as a tool for being easily connected to the deaf culture. It can be used to strengthen the willing and the belief of the population. Theatrical act is a common educational tool for transmitting culture (Kilpatrick, 2007).

Professional deaf theater can be an interesting performance for hearing individuals, if enough work and imagination are put into the production. Contemporary deaf theater projects are interesting for both deaf and hearing audience (Kochhar-Lindgren, 2006; Padden & Humphrics, 2006; Kilpatrick, 2007; Freire, 2009). The connection with audience can be fulfilled through a) theatrical open captioning English text, b) amplification systems, c) performances in SL with voice interpreters, d) theatre interpreters who use SL, e) theatre interpreters for deaf-blind persons and f) shadow interp Reference for a special dance style, approached upon the artistry of sign language or deaf subculture ranges has not been found in contemporary bibliography. Only some experimental trials from several groups concerning SL integration with contemporary dance techniques, have been found but without any official report through research papers or other script-like documentation¹.

¹ In Greece, since 2004 there has been an attempt for integration of deaf and hearing artists in dance theater performances of Esai en Roi Company. In 2005 and 2006, European (Folklore meets Progressive, 2005) and Euromediterranean (Tasty Art Pollution, 2006) Art Festivals have been placed with half deaf and half hearing youngsters, aged between 18-25 years old with coordinators Esai en Roi (EER) Company and Cultural Center of Thessaloniki (CCT), which were sponsored by regional funds and the European Program “YOUTH”, coordinated by the Greek National Institution of Youth. Through several workshops and life performances of the Festivals, much experimentation in all kinds of arts with deaf and hearing youth integration has been made. Every year after, there have been hosted deaf-art events, art exhibitions in regional festivals and artistic events of annual events of EER Company and CCT of Thessaloniki’s Prefecture. Since 2013, EER & CCT and the Club of Sign Language Propagation started co-organizing the DHIA Festival, which refers to the collaboration of Deaf and Hearing people in arts-, sports-, and other social- events.

The current research paper examined a 10 year experimental trial of using sign language in dance theater productions by integrating deaf and hearing artists, in behalf of utilizing the art of signing in new dance-theater and improvisation styles.

PURPOSE

The purpose of the current study was to examine possible applications of dance styles integrated with sign language, through choreographic and improvisation stereotypes. It has also examined differences between hearing and deaf performers during those experimental procedures.

METHODS

Participants

In the current study deaf amateur actors and hearing professional dancers participated, aged between 18 - 30 years-old. Some of the performers have been replaced across the ten years study. During this long period of the pilot project 12 deaf and 20 hearing individuals had participated in total. Participants have been passed from various performer combinations: (A) Professional-hearing-Dancers, (B) Semi-Professional Deaf-Actors, (C) Semi-Professional Actors and Professional Dancers. The participants were guided by a choreographer who had sign language sufficiency, a SL interpreter and when necessary, a Deaf director for supervising deaf actors.

Content

A multiple repertoire of Contemporary dance, physical theater, oriented improvisation and sign language have been used. The techniques of pantomime, shadow interpreting and art-sign have been borrowed from deaf-theater to be extended and adapted to dance theater applications. Sign language was in use all the time during the dance-theater rehearsals and performance.

The styles applied were:

- a) Deaf actors performing by storytelling and oriented improvisation,
- b) Dancers dancing contemporary by integrating sign language in the dancing movement where SL is the core of the movement formation and dynamics across all the body. The combination of SL and contemporary dance is built gradually. For instance, as far as it concerns body levels: floor exercises and SL alphabet, middle Level and SL words, Standing Postures and SL Phrases.
- c) Deaf actors narrating (by SL and Pantomime combined) a story that is performed in parallel by contemporary ballet. In this style the work is applied in a two level stage, where there is no connection between dancers and actors.
- d) Deaf actors related to hearing dancers with several techniques, being interrelated in space, time and movement dynamics, across the same performance (Deaf actors are the narrators and dancers extend each signing (1st level) or extend one sign per minute and come back taking another sign to extend it and play with it by oriented improvisation (2nd level).
- e) All signing or using choreographic stereotypes of the "space" element.
- f) All moving harmonically on a specific movement pattern axon consisted from gross motor skills; deaf moving and signing, dancers moving and dancing.

Research Tools

For the evaluation of the rehearsal and performance aesthetics quantitative research tools have been used, such as photographs, videos and interviews by the producers, the performers and the beholders.

Measurement

For evaluating the aesthetics of the performances, the photos and videos have been shown to 3rd parties for evaluation in a likert scale (from “very good” to “very bad”) and some spectators have been interviewed, randomly. Similarly,, each performance was rated in a likert scale (from “very good” to “very bad”). For evaluating the satisfaction and the motivations of performers’ voluntary involvement, interviews and group discussions have been used. The choreographer, the SL translator and the Director of deaf actors were noting comments of unordinary or ordinary events during or after each rehearsal or performance.

Procedure

Every year, the group was rehearsing three times per week for two months in performance seasons (2005-2013). Before and after the pilot study, participants were practicing to acting or dancing as members of regional dance schools or theater groups. Before and after the performance performers, performance contributors, and some deaf and hearing beholders, were interviewed randomly.

RESULTS

Techniques

As solo performers, deaf actors had a difficulty in copying accurately the dancing movements and moving rhythmically. They preferred to move separately by using SL, rather than moving by dancing. They were not memorizing dance/movement patterns easily.

As far as it concerns team works, they were more rhythmic and more positive in oriented improvisation dance techniques. Furthrmore they had great difficulties in static and dynamic balance, drops, floor exercises, orientation and kinetic memory of dancing movements. They were not just copying, but they had the tendency to extend and embrace any dancing movement with an individual creative style.

When cooperating with dancers, they had a difficulty to move on time in parallel with the dance-word matching’s. Thus, automatically the dancer was controlling the “SL word-Posture” or SL phrase-Movement Pattern” matching procedure. Even if implicated in team work, they had a tendency to split from hearing individuals and foregather with other deaf.

Emotional Distress or Balance

When deaf actors, werenot related in implementation with the dancers and they were also starring in the front stage, they had strongcommitment on the rehearsal and the result of the performance was more interesting and aesthetically sufficient. During rehearsal and stage performance enthusiasm and satisfaction from both hearing and deaf dancing group has been observed. The hearing group had long term and strong intrinsic motivation with high duty commitment to the scope in contrast with deaf group.

Aesthetics

According to the work behind the performance, deaf actors tended to socialize and entertain themselves rather than to create art. The group of deaf artists was more stressed but also, productive and fine when hearing individuals were implicated in performance. The groups of a) Hearing Dance Performers using SL and b) integrated group with deaf actors and hearing dancers were the most interesting and innovative. The group with hearing dancers was the best in quality.

DISCUSSION

In the current research there has not been observed a special ability in copying, rather than in transforming the figures and postures into interesting movement patterns, or even better, in strong & creative *hand to face* expressions. Deaf performers preferred to dance through signing, rather through harmonically moving. According to research reports, cognitive processing of observing, focusing, reacting and copying human movement is different between deaf and hearing individuals, especially, if deaf have SL as mother language (Smith et al., 2014; Olulade et al., 2014). Deaf can mime by ease but they have difficulties in dancing/movement. They use visual cues and memorization of the phrasing and beat of the choreographed music for being facilitated (Kilpatrick, 2007; Park, 2008). Thus, there is supported that the musical (dancing) movement is alien rather than physical for the deaf, as such to support, that only a rhythmical, multidynamic signing movement or pantomime could lead easily to the feeling of musical (dancing) movement in deaf performers.

Another interesting result was the productivity of deaf individuals when cooperating with hearing artists. Even if they were expressing feelings of insecure and hesitation every time they were cooperating with hearing individuals, they were boosted in high quality performance and had an ease to cooperate and be socialized. According to relevant reference, deaf individuals have better creativity, social correspondence and quality of life if integrated with hearing individuals (Padden & Humphrics, 2006; Freire, 2009). Their amenity on being socialized could facilitate their socialization with hearing individuals (Kavazidou, 2012).

Concerning poor performance when only deaf individuals were implecated, the reasoning could be probably found on cultural construction, self-dissatisfaction and mental distress factors of deaf when exposed in hearing individuals (Branson & Miller, 2002; Kvam & Loeb, 2006).

Finally, many deaf participants expressed interest in learning dance and physical theater, on behalf of corresponding to the needs of the performance, even if dancing has been reported as a difficult task.

CONCLUSIONS

The proposed dance-theater approach was very familiar to deaf, probably because SL was used continually, giving a feeling of uniqueness to deaf participants. The motive of art-contribution probably kept the interest of deaf participants to the art-project. The interest of deaf participants in continuing and repeating suchart projects and the need of performance continuity enhance the need for introducing the performing arts from elementary education. Moreover, the aesthetic with or without deaf participants was from satisfying to exciting or impressing for both deaf and hearing spectators. Thus, dance-theater applications could be suggested as a broadening model of deaf theater, where more experimental and difficult tasks are provided for deaf who are talented on dance and other fine or gross motor skills. Finally dance-theater could be suggested as an art-making application with educational, therapeutic and artistic interest.

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