

## Accessibility in Musical Theater: Deaf West Theater

Musical theater has long been celebrated as a multisensory art form, combining music, movement, and storytelling to create an immersive experience. Yet, for individuals who are Deaf or hard of hearing, traditional musical theater often presents significant barriers to access and participation. Over the past few decades, Deaf West Theatre, a Los Angeles–based nonprofit company founded in 1991 has emerged as a pioneering force in redefining accessibility within the performing arts. By integrating American Sign Language (ASL) with spoken and sung dialogue, Deaf West creates productions that bridge Deaf and hearing cultures, transforming not only the performance experience but also the broader understanding of inclusivity in the arts. This thesis explores how Deaf West Theatre challenges conventional notions of musical theater, examining its artistic methods, community impact, and the ways in which it models accessibility as both an aesthetic and ethical practice.

Deaf West's concept of combining ASL with singing and acting was revolutionary for the world of musical theater, showing the world what theater could be. They've performed many shows that have uplifting messages or bring awareness to other issues while using ASL to further and add deeper meaning to it. According to the article, "Los Angeles Theater Review: Flowers for Algernon (Deaf West), "His transformation from intellectually challenged to genius is credible and heartbreaking. And for the deaf audience members, Durant's performance is enhanced because Charlie learns to celebrate his deaf identity and becomes a master of American Sign Language, what is called a "super-signer." This point helps further the theme that using ASL can help deepen the meaning because "Flowers for Algernon" is about a Mentality challenged man who goes through an experimental surgery to increase his intelligence. This

story with the incorporation of ASL can lead to the audience connecting with the character and the story on a deeper level. Another example of this is the 2015 Deaf West Broadway revival of “Spring Awakening”, a show set in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany, which follows the struggles of teenagers as they navigate sexuality, identity and a lack of guidance from adults. In an interview with Kayla Epstein and Alex Needhan in the article “Spring Awakening on Broadway: deaf viewers give their verdict” Maleni Chaitoo says, “The show was so intense and powerful, based on the history and suffering of Deaf people, oppressed by the lack of communication and understanding from the rest of society.” Which highlights another issue alongside the main plot of spring awakening with deaf people in this period were oppressed by a language barrier. There are many more examples, but these two shows stood out for their themes while also having another layer added by including ASL.

Deaf West Theatre’s use of ASL is not merely for accessibility — it is central to their aesthetic, creating a powerful, bilingual theatrical experience that equally serves deaf and hearing audiences. As B. Rafus-Brenning argues in their study, Deaf West intentionally balances the theatrical experience so that both communities are enriched: the performances are crafted “in an equitable division” between signed and spoken language. (Scholar Works). This dual-language design fosters a shared space where deaf spectators can fully engage through sign and hearing patrons can follow the story via spoken lines, thereby dismantling traditional theater’s linguistic barriers. This is shown [here](#), in a performance of “Mama Who Bore Me” from their production of spring awakening. Additionally, the integration of ASL gives Deaf West productions a distinct physical and visual rhythm: actors’ signing becomes part of the choreography, creating a “seamless ballet of signed and spoken dialogue.” (Arts Management and Technology Lab) In doing so, Deaf West challenges the conventional hierarchical relationship between voice and

gesture — elevating sign language to the same dramatic and emotional weight as spoken lines.

This approach underscores the company's commitment to linguistic equity, not just as a practical measure, but as a profound artistic and cultural principle.

Deaf West Theatre has reshaped the expectations of what musical theater can be by placing American Sign Language at the center of its artistic practice. Through productions such as *Flowers for Algernon* and the 2015 revival of *Spring Awakening*, the company demonstrates how ASL can deepen narrative meaning, expand emotional resonance, and create a shared cultural experience for both Deaf and hearing audiences. Their work proves that accessibility is not a limitation but a powerful creative force—one that transforms performance into a bilingual, embodied form of storytelling. By challenging traditional hierarchies between voice, gesture, and movement, Deaf West Theatre models a future for musical theater that is more inclusive, innovative, and reflective of diverse human experiences.

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