

Silence, Gesture, and Deaf Identity in Deaf West Theatre's *Spring Awakening*

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The Journal of American Drama and Theatre

Volume 33, Number 1 (Fall 2020)

ISSN 2376-4236

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For a woman to bear a child, she must . . . in her own personal way, she must . . . love her husband. Love him, as she can love only him. Only him . . . she must love—with her whole . . . heart. There. Now, you know everything.[\[1\]](#)

Frau Bergman, *Spring Awakening*

In the opening scene of *Spring Awakening*, Wendla begs her mother to explain where babies come from, to which her mother bemoans, “Wendla, child, you cannot imagine—.” In Deaf West Theatre’s version of the show, Frau Bergman speaks this line while bringing her pinky finger up to her head, palm outward, but Wendla quickly corrects the gesture, indicating that her mother has actually inverted the American Sign Language (ASL) for “imagine,” a word signed with palm facing inward.[\[2\]](#) As part of a larger dialogue that closes with the epigraph above, Bergman’s struggle to communicate about sexual intercourse in both ASL and English is one of many exchanges in which adults find themselves unable to communicate effectively with teenagers. The theme of (mis)communication is also evoked through characters’ refusal to communicate with each other at all, as in the musical number “Totally Fucked.” When Melchior’s teachers demand he confess to having authored the obscene 10-page document, “The Art of Sleeping With” (which they claim hastened the suicide of his best friend Moritz), they reject his attempts to explain. Whereas the dialogue between Bergman and her daughter demonstrates failed communication due partly to lack of linguistic proficiency, Melchior finds himself “totally fucked,” because the adults refuse to listen to him entirely.

Moments such as these abound in Deaf West’s production of *Spring Awakening* and profoundly inform the musical’s dramatic arc, continually demonstrating the boundaries between Deaf and hearing worlds. These breakdowns of communication—either the inability to communicate with others or the refusal to—make the dramatic consequences of a show about miscommunication all the more compellingly tragic. The production’s choices move beyond an access-oriented approach for d/Deaf audiences,[\[3\]](#) as the integration of ASL adds a dramaturgical emphasis to the musical’s themes. In re-imagining the world of *Spring Awakening* in a d/Deaf context, the “real world” spaces off-stage that often privilege oralist and audist practices are radically inverted onstage, rendering verbal communication unreliable and, instead, prioritizing the literal gestures and physicality of sign language. Exploring the relationship between Deaf West’s *Spring Awakening* and traditional stagings of the show, this paper looks specifically at how the production’s intricate gestures and staging make visible the boundary between Deaf and hearing communities. The production provides not only the literal stage upon which the Deaf and hearing worlds convene, but also a space where Deaf culture and silence are often emphasized, reconsidering traditional renderings of the Deaf/hearing divide within the space and modalities of musical theatre.

Troubling “All That’s Known”: Interrogating the Hearing Line

English and ASL scholar Christopher Krentz offers a productive way to understand the space between Deaf and hearing worlds through what he calls the “hearing line,” or the “invisible boundary separating deaf and hearing people.”^[4] Drawing from W.E.B. DuBois’ “color line,” Krentz’s hearing line calls attention to—and calls into question—the complex, ever-shifting, and uneven binary between deafness and “hearingness,” whereby identities are formed and shaped. If, at the hearing line, one’s ability to hear informs one’s identity (and corresponding privilege), the world generated in Deaf West’s *Spring Awakening* is an analogous manifestation of this line, made visible across private and public spaces.

Additionally, in the same way that reading and writing offer for Krentz a mutual space for Deaf and hearing worlds to convene—“a place where differences may recede and binaries may be transcended”^[5]—so too does the stage attempt to enlighten and alter the complicated relationship between Deaf and hearing identities. In Deaf West’s *Spring Awakening*, the hearing line is continually emphasized and intensified to both convey and bolster the frequent failures of communication between the adults and teenagers, a point made relentlessly in traditional productions of the musical and in the original 1891 play by Frank Wedekind. The hearing line is also troubled, disrupted, and circumvented at times, often through musical numbers, to accentuate Deaf culture, identity, and silence. In the process, the show exposes, challenges, and reconsiders the hierarchical positions of the Deaf/hearing worlds found at the hearing line, both in the show and in the real-world—ultimately attempting to bridge the gap between the two worlds.

Although ASL/English productions such as this have attempted to increase access for d/Deaf audiences, Deaf West’s musical productions (which to date include *Oliver!*, *Sleeping Beauty Wakes*, *Big River*, *Pippin*, *Spring Awakening*, and an adaptation of *Medusa*) are nonetheless criticized for not being fully accessible. d/Deaf audience members have continually noted the difficulty in understanding ASL used on-stage because of SimCom^[6] (which weakens and obscures linguistic meaning, made via the hands and face, known as non-manual markers), the ineffective lighting design in some scenes (at times either too dark or too bright), and the inconsistent use of captions and clear sightlines (or clear access to d/Deaf actors’ communicative gestures and expressions).^[7] Jehanne C. McCullough denounces *Spring Awakening* in particular for being for hearing people rather than for Deaf people because the overall design and casting of the show continually works in favor of hearing audiences.^[8] As a hearing audience member, I acknowledge my own limited perspective and hearing privilege in my viewings and readings of the show. Because of the space always-already created by musical theatre (i.e. sound-centric), and given Deaf West’s uses of SimCom and captions, I was afforded more opportunities to understand what was going on. Nonetheless, by highlighting the casting, staging, and choreographic choices of Deaf West’s revival, I hope to point out how frequently the production emphasizes Deaf perspectives over hearing ones, generating an overall shift towards Deaf modalities of experiencing musical theatre. More explicitly than in their previous musicals, this production challenges the hearing line by including various moments that attempt to prioritize and even simulate Deaf experience.

Several scenes in the show not only emphasize the hearing line but also purposely call into question the hierarchy that holds audism and oralism superior to deafness. During the first classroom scene, for instance, Herr Sonnenstich calls on various students to recite from Virgil’s *Aeneid*, enforcing what is known as oralism, the nineteenth-century practice of teaching d/Deaf students through lip reading and vocalizing, which rejects the use of ASL altogether. When Ernst uses ASL to facilitate his own

vocalization of the poem, Sonnenstich berates him and angrily strikes a pointing stick against the desk. Later, when Moritz vocally recites a word incorrectly (“multim olim” instead of “multim ille”), Sonnenstich chastises him, mocking the way Moritz sounds when vocalizing and even making up random hand gestures to accompany his voice. In traditional productions, Moritz’s failure is often performed and read as a result of his laziness, his lack of scholarly aptitude, and the fact that he is caught sleeping (an action noted in the libretto); however, Moritz’s vocalized error here, wholly unaccompanied by ASL, adds a layer of complexity to the situation: his mistake might also be a mispronunciation if he does not vocalize regularly. As a result of Sonnenstich’s offensive conduct, Melchior stands up for Moritz and tries to minimize the humiliation by attempting to rationalize the mistake. Suggesting that “multim olim” be recognized as a new critical commentary on *Aeneas*, Melchior uses SimCom so that his classmates can all understand him. This being Melchior’s first scene also critically positions him as an ally and advocate of Deaf culture, Deaf identity, and language—an important position he maintains throughout the show. By setting the production clearly in the historical context of the late 1800s, Deaf West’s version presents oralism as the framework through which to understand the show. Many of the adults’ actions also uphold audist and oralist ideologies, a dramaturgical choice that affixes specific nuance to the constant miscommunication that pervades the show thematically. At the same time, the dramatized suppression of a rich and vibrant language like ASL and Melchior’s presence as a hearing character who undertakes the plight of his Deaf classmates bring to light the ethics of such an oppressive system.

The overall story arc between Wendla and Frau Bergman also presents the devastating consequences that miscommunication, or rather the desire not to communicate at all, can have. Demonstrating the hearing line within the privacy of the home, Wendla asks her mother to explain where babies come from, as discussed in this paper’s opening example. Frau Bergman, rather than explaining the truth—birth as a natural, physiological phenomenon that may result from intercourse—evades the question and explains the process of conception as vaguely as possible, in part because she does not know how to expound on the topic through ASL. The full damage of Bergman’s failure to explain how babies are conceived is revealed in Act Two, when the Bergmans find out Wendla is pregnant. Wendla’s response is to cry out, “My God, why didn’t you tell me everything?”^[9]—the only line in the show vocalized by Deaf actor Sandra Mae Frank, rather than voiced by the Voice of Wendla, Katie Boeck. Interestingly, the emphasis on communicative failure also falsely suggests the opposite of what happens: if only Wendla could “hear,” her mother could have fully communicated the truth in English.

This mother-daughter relationship, as well as the relationship between hearing and deafness, is further exaggerated and complicated when two doctors become involved in Wendla’s pregnancy. The first, Doctor von Brausepulver, communicates with Wendla using SimCom during their run at The Wallis and using English only on Broadway; when Frau Bergman asks about Wendla’s nausea, Brausepulver ends by speaking but *not* signing, “Not uncommon. *Trust me, child. You’ll be fine*” (emphasis added), performing the emphasized phrases in an over-enunciated and exaggerated manner at Wendla, indicated both vocally and physically.^[10] Immediately after, Brausepulver speaks with Frau Bergman off to the side, a whispered conversation that is never spoken aloud to the audience. This secret, “silent” conversation is contrasted soon after by the second physician, Schmidt, who is recommended by Bergman’s “doctor friend” to perform Wendla’s abortion, unbeknownst to Wendla. In this second scene, Schmidt (played by a deaf performer) signs to Bergman in ASL only, “Now, listen to my instructions carefully,” and explains where to bring Wendla. These scenes function together ironically: Brausepulver whispers to Bergman to avoid Wendla’s overhearing him, even though she is deaf, while Schmidt communicates with Bergman in ASL, a language Bergman herself struggles with. The tragedy of

Wendla's eventual death is partly caused and greatly augmented by the adults' inability and unwillingness to communicate with her and with each other.

While the scenes above perpetuate the normative hierarchy of the hearing line (wherein the hearing world is often dominant), other scenes intensify the divide and prioritize silence and ASL. Specifically, Moritz's confession to his father about failing his final exams is one of the production's two brief scenes that are communicated entirely through ASL, though subtitled in English. Herr Stiefel continually probes Moritz for an explanation of how they can show their faces publicly: "What are your mother and I supposed to do?" "What do I tell them at the bank?" "How do we go to Church?" Stiefel's interrogation insinuates that the family will be negatively perceived by the community because of Moritz's failure, and the shame of Moritz's failure can also be read as a further marginalization of the family as d/Deaf. In any staging of the scene, silence always permeates the interaction between Moritz and his father; that is, all questions go unanswered, as Moritz is unable to respond at all out of fear and/or shame. But in Deaf West's staging, the placing of two d/Deaf actors onstage alone further heightens the power of "silence," not as a passive space or absence of sound, but as a space that includes energy, emotion, and movement, particularly that of ASL. For hearing audiences, the minute-and-a-half scene is ostensibly done in complete silence, except for Herr Stiefel's brief vocalized yells. While hearing audiences might experience the aural "silence" of this scene, it is the magnitude and force of Stiefel's rage when he interrogates Moritz that is emphasized, redefining the notion of silence itself. Anyone with experience being reprimanded by a parent can immediately sense Herr Stiefel's nonstop "shouting," conveyed through his agitated signing and aggressive movements, like grabbing Moritz by the collar, as well as the word "failed" continuously projected/subtitled on the back wall. Silence here shows what "the deaf family experience [is] like, and how signing can be loving, but can also be angry and scream-like, thus proving to the audience how diverse of a language ASL is."^[11] Moreover, although this scene is punctuated by captions projected onto the back wall—still privileging hearing audiences in providing them a means by which to understand the scene—the prioritizing of and focus on ASL rather than on vocalized speech compels hearing audiences to reconsider the ways in which meaning is communicated, changing how audiences *hear* and *listen*, particularly in the space of musical theatre.

As a further punctuation of the hearing line, the production's casting of Deaf/"Voice of" pairs (utilized for the characters of Wendla, Moritz, Martha, Otto, Thea, and Ernst) purposely positions the younger characters in the Deaf world, thereby creating a clear alliance among the students rather than among any of the adults, none of whom were cast in Deaf/Voice of pairs, as noted in the Playbill. In addition, Melchior is positioned as the hearing line in human form, performed by a hearing actor who is fluent in ASL. That Melchior uses SimCom is problematic from a linguistic and logistical point of view, since he is the main character and has a great deal of dialogue. Dramaturgically, however, Melchior is the hearing line made manifest—a human bridge between d/Deaf and hearing worlds, such that SimCom becomes a metaphor for Melchior's existence in and ability to move in-between both worlds. Notably, of the parents portrayed in the production, Melchior's are the only Deaf/hearing couple—his mother being Deaf and his father being hearing, using SimCom. Melchior's actions can thus be read as an attempt to mediate the relationships across both worlds, particularly between teachers and students, and adults and teenagers. On the one hand, because the show employs SimCom with specific characters (rather than double-casting all of the characters) in order to demonstrate the failures in communication, an ironic result is to impair another essential line of communication, diluting the messages from stage to audience. On the other hand, the use of SimCom for adult characters like Brausepulver and Frau Bergman heightens the collapse of communication and highlights the Deaf/hearing dichotomy. By using Deaf/Voice Of pairs, delineations

between Deaf/hearing in the adults, and SimCom in the case of Melchior, the characters influence and embody the ever-shifting state of the hearing line in the world of the play.

Musically, the production also presents, pushes against, and interrogates the hearing line through the use of non-spoken and gestural languages. These languages accentuate the teenagers' emotional, psychological, and physical states. For example, "And Then There Were None" is both an intensification of the Deaf/hearing dichotomy and an attempt to circumvent the hierarchy produced by and at the hearing line. In the epistolary song, Moritz and Frau Gabor, Melchior's mother, write a series of letters to each other, detailed within the song's lyrics. Although Gabor is certainly the most sympathetic and idealistic of the adults, the song itself portrays her unwillingness to believe Moritz's "veiled threat that, should escape not be possible, [he] would take [his] own life," creating a more nuanced iteration of her own failure in communication: she "hears" him but refuses to actually listen to what he says. Since the actors playing Moritz and Frau Gabor are d/Deaf, the number compels audiences to focus on the signing rather than on the singing. Hanschen and Georg are the only hearing characters that briefly perform lyrics through SimCom; however, the staging of the song concentrates on Gabor and Moritz, who are later joined by Otto and Ernst—all characters who are played by d/Deaf actors. Therefore, rather than marginalizing the physicality of ASL, it is put front and center, while the Voices Of are off to the sides. This is also a visceral reversal of the limited use of ASL in theatrical settings: typically, d/Deaf access to a show is performed solely by platform interpreters, who are placed off to the sides of the stage. By putting deafness and Deaf identity at the forefront, Deaf West inverts the hearing line dramaturgically through its characters and linguistically for its audiences.

A second song that places emphasis on physicality, gesture, and ASL is "Totally Fucked," which highlights the younger characters' resistance to their adult counterparts. In traditional stagings of the show, "Totally Fucked" is the ultimate anthem of teenage angst and rebellion, underscored by the music itself. Deaf West stages this number as a rock concert, putting even more emphasis than the original Broadway production on the physical, aggressive, and sometimes sexually and linguistically explicit movements of the choreography. What becomes most important in this song—and indeed, throughout the show's many musical numbers—is not so much the lyrics but, rather, the gestural and non-verbal languages that accompany the lyrics and music, including choreography, lighting design, and the principal focus on ASL, as in "And Then There Were None." Sarah Wilbur suggests that Deaf West's version of the show triumphs because of these layered gestural economies, that is, "the demands that the company's multifaceted use of gesture places on audiences, performers, and producers."^[12] As a "visual-gestural language,"^[13] ASL becomes the most powerful tool on Deaf West's stage. "Totally Fucked" is, in all productions, a mutinous response to the "yes" or "no" that adults demand of Melchior and his peers. But in Deaf West's version, the song also becomes an outright reversal of the hearing line in which hearing and oralism are traditionally favored. Deaf West's "Totally Fucked" takes physicality and gestures to new heights and meanings, imbuing a song known for its loud and extreme chaos with ASL, a language just as intense, powerful, and "loud" (or, in this case, boisterous) in its own unique way. In this way, both multiplying and subverting the traditional modalities of musical theatre beyond merely vocalized speech and music, *Spring Awakening* highlights a Deaf perspective, a rewriting of the hearing line, through its transformative inclusion of Deaf culture, identity, and language.

"I'm Gonna Be Your Bruise": Sharing Signs On and Across Bodies

Additional restructurings of the hearing line occur within Deaf West's practice of "sharing signs,"^[14]

when two (or more) actors sign words/phrases together. The use of shared signs reveals how important meaning-making can occur via ASL on and across the literal bodies of performers and characters, which English alone cannot achieve. This practice arises frequently throughout *Spring Awakening* to emphasize the intimate and physical (often sensual and sexualized) connections between characters. In a show explicitly about sex, shared signs also add complexity to the relationships between characters and bolster the already-sexualized content of the libretto and music.

Shared signs first appear in the production during “My Junk,” when Hanschen channels Desdemona and masturbates to Correggio’s *Jupiter and Io*. With Herr Rilow (Hanschen’s father) constantly rapping on the bathroom door, Hanschen’s urgency to “finish” is augmented by two, three, and eventually five girls who help him sign and masturbate simultaneously: Wendla holds up the picture, while Thea’s right arm signs with Hanschen’s left; when Fraulein Grossebustenthaler asks Georg to “bring out the left hand,” Hanschen switches arms, this time signing with Martha’s left arm while masturbating with his own left; finally, when Rilow demands that Hanschen go back to bed, Martha and Thea sign together, while Anna takes on the task of stroking Hanschen, and Heidi rubs Hanschen’s arms, put above his head to signal his letting go of all control. The abundance and entanglement of hands becomes visually striking, and sharing signs is conceived as an overt sexual act, used to create and complete Hanschen’s stimulation, arousal, and climax—a sexual awakening that is already written into the character. Moreover, this early sequence of shared signs, with its explicit sexual content, adds a related charge to subsequent uses of this device, which acquire similar connotations of intimacy, physicality, and sexuality.

The use of shared signs in the songs following “My Junk” reinforce the teenagers’ desires to *feel*, close to each other and/or anything at all, since the adults in their lives refuse to do so. “The Word of Your Body,” performed by Melchior and Wendla and later reprised by Hanschen and Ernst, first occurs when Melchior and Wendla touch hands for the first time and a brief pause transpires between them. Focusing on the chorus (“O, I’m gonna be wounded. / O, I’m gonna be your wound. / O, I’m gonna bruise you. / O, you’re gonna be my bruise”[\[15\]](#)), the signs and shared signs for “wound” and “bruise” speak directly to the song’s meaning, especially because the performers sign *on* the other person’s body. Their signs for “wounded” are made individually, but the repeated sign for “wound”—made with index fingers pointing in and slightly twisting in opposite directions—becomes an entangled idea, as they literally crisscross over and under each other’s arms while signing. Additionally, using an ASL variation to indicate “bruise,” performers sign the color “black”—made by swiping a finger across one’s forehead—on the other person’s body: in the first line, they each point to Melchior for “I’m gonna” and then sign “black” on each other’s foreheads, but in the second line, they point to Wendla for “I’m gonna” and then sign “black” across each other’s chests. As in ASL, the position of the signs adds further meaning to the song: the forehead could signify a mental “bruise,” while the chest signifies the heart or the soul/spirit, suggesting the ways in which Melchior and Wendla’s impending relationship will affect the characters. Since ASL is not normally signed on another person’s body (but, instead, on the affected spot of one’s own body), the repeated act of signing *on* and *across* another’s body makes the black and blue metaphor all the more violent and serves as a foreshadowing for the ambiguous brutality and possible rape between Wendla and Melchior that occurs later in the show.

Deaf West’s staging of “Touch Me” also utilizes shared signs to visually represent the characters’ sharing of knowledge and of themselves with each other, diminishing the original staging’s emphasis on individual experience and suppressed, inner turmoil, while also accentuating relationships that are both erotic and indeterminate in nature. Melchior and Moritz’s shared signs during “Touch Me” produce

ambiguous, bisexual dimensions in both characters and also positions Melchior as “top” regarding both Moritz and Wendla. The very act of sharing signs parallels Melchior’s desire to share his (sexual) knowledge with Moritz, and Moritz’s mutual desire to learn about sex from Melchior, prompted by Melchior’s self-assured insight about how it must feel for a woman to give herself to another, “defending yourself until, finally, you surrender and feel Heaven break over you.” In Raymond Knapp’s reading of Huck and Jim’s relationship in Deaf West’s *Big River*, Knapp notes that the sharing of signs reinforces their already-intimate friendship and “comes across as a rueful acknowledgment of their impossible love.”^[16] Just as *Big River*’s Huck and Jim establish a hierarchical rapport through their sharing of signs (especially in “Muddy Water”), Melchior’s position of intellectual authority over Moritz is reinforced through their interconnecting signs as well. Melchior and Moritz’s homosocial relationship—like Huck and Jim’s—is expressed gesturally, evoking homosexuality through physical, shared signs.

The shared signs of “Touch Me” also move beyond Melchior and Moritz. In the original Broadway staging of the song, Melchior briefly grabs and controls Moritz’s arms during the song’s chorus (“Touch me—just like that. / And that—O, yeah—now, that’s heaven”^[17]), gesturing toward sight or enlightenment (guiding Moritz’s hands toward Moritz’s eyes) and the discovery of sexuality. The rest of the song is performed by the whole ensemble individually, choreographed within the limited spaces around and on their own bodies. In Deaf West’s version of the number, however, Georg’s solo and final chorus of the song results in a burst of choreography and shared signs amongst the younger characters. Melchior and Moritz sign together and constantly link hands and arms, and several other cast members also pair up to sign together for the chorus (Wendla and Ernst, Thea and Heidi, and Martha and Anna). This choreography underscores the sexuality of the song’s lyrics and altogether multiplies the sexual connotations of shared signs. That the performers appear here in same-sex and mixed-sex pairs adds further homosocial and bi/homosexual undercurrents to a song literally about sex and sexuality. Although the multiplicity of shared signs here could perhaps suggest something like a sexual orgy, the pairing up of the girls and of characters like Wendla and Ernst also highlights the consequences of repressing the truth about sex and of isolating girls and boys: children will educate each other about sex if their parents refuse to. By accentuating the act of sharing through the physical act of sharing signs, and by drawing sharp attention to how sign language can function in tandem with and across multiple bodies, Deaf West shifts the hearing line towards a d/Deaf production of knowledge and community- and relationship-building.

“And Now Our Bodies Are The Guilty Ones”: Deaf Experience & Expression

Deaf West’s production further revises the hearing line by prioritizing moments of d/Deaf experience and expression. This includes an emphasis on the body and on touch in particular, calling attention to the importance of physical expression and contact found at the hearing line from a d/Deaf perspective: effective ASL depends on the physicality of the speaker, and physical touch holds particular importance within the formation of Deaf community and interactions. Moreover, the production highlights Deaf modalities of meaning-making, including through language and music. That the production generates instances of d/Deaf sensory experience and expression also contests versions of deafness that, in the past, have been romanticized or demonized—that is, the writing of deaf characters who are either pitied or detested. Similar to nineteenth-century deaf writers who “subvert power arrangements, not to mention concepts of reality and order,”^[18] Deaf West thereby rewrites the power dynamics of the hearing line and produces a d/Deaf sensibility and awareness of the world and of music in particular.

Further building upon the play’s themes of communication and connection, the production stresses

physical touch and sense over sight and language to simulate characters' need to be close to others and their (blind) desire to feel anything at all. Two "games" take place in which characters are blindfolded, accentuating physicality, sensory deprivation, intensification, and *feeling*. In the first instance, the students play a version of blind man's buff with Moritz: depriving him of sight, the students continually circle around him, slapping and smacking various parts of his body, then quickly pulling away before he can catch them. The second game occurs at the top of Act Two, when Melchior and Wendla are blindfolded and play a game of trust, walking on chairs that are continually being set down by the cast, literally trusting the other cast members with their "safety" and feeling their way across the stage to the piano. These blindfold games, in which characters willingly deprive themselves of sight—seemingly the most important element to ASL—address the unspeakable-ness of their lives and underscore the fact that not everything can be verbally or even gesturally communicated between them. Metaphorically, these scenes also depict the teenagers "feeling their way" through life, an irony since they actually do not know what they are doing, despite the adults always being portrayed and thought of as the most ignorant and naïve.^[19] These acts of blindfolding, though ironic in a d/Deaf context, maintains focus on the sense of *touch* found at the heart of Deaf culture. Moreover, the actions limit the usual emphasis on English-centered or hearing-centered modalities and communication.

Much like the ASL-centric "silent" scene in which Moritz admits his failure at school to his father, several scenes also show central characters briefly privileging Deaf modalities of meaning-making over English- and hearing-centered ones, or the consequences of the opposite. The scenes also primarily revolve around characters' desires to "feel something" beyond merely the physical or emotional—that is, to feel something inexpressible through language alone. For instance, during Wendla and Melchior's beating scene, Wendla continually presses Melchior to beat her with a wooden switch, expressing a longing to *feel something* ("My entire life. I've never . . . felt . . . *Anything*"). The actor playing Melchior momentarily foregoes SimCom to sign, "I'll teach you to say: 'Please.'" The words are projected for hearing audiences, making this one of Melchior's two ASL-only lines and adding a disquieting moment to what is already the most harrowing line in the scene. Melchior's second and only other ASL-only line occurs a few scenes later, right before they have sex, when he signs "forgive me" onto Wendla's hand; that this too is done in aural silence, with words projected, functions conversely to his line during the beating scene and demonstrates his deep regret for what transpired. Throughout these scenes, Melchior's use of ASL-only is in the first instance chillingly harsh, but in the second an attempt at compassion, such that his brief but powerful uses of ASL over English perpetuate a complicated sexual politics at the hearing line: Melchior, who exists simultaneously in the hearing and Deaf worlds, exercises his knowledge of sex and ASL both to influence the situation but also to communicate intimately with Wendla, who is primarily read as Deaf although she has a Voice Of partner on stage. Although the act may falsely suggest that language alone can successfully express his raw, complicated emotions, Melchior's abandoning of English functions as an attempt to communicate fully and intimately with Wendla in ways that no other relationship on stage does.

In contrast to Melchior and Wendla's relationship, a later scene between Ilse and Moritz demonstrates the damaging consequences of unequal communication between d/Deaf and hearing individuals, wherein English and hearing are privileged. While Wendla believes being beaten will allow her to *feel something*, Moritz believes ending his own life will allow him to *feel something different* than the despair caused by school and his parents, again a desire inaccessible via language. Ilse unknowingly runs into Moritz as he is searching for his gun and becomes an embodiment of the failures that can be found at the Deaf/hearing divide, specifically in her audist actions. Moritz, too distracted and overwhelmed by his own personal

crisis, rejects Ilse's continued requests (in SimCom) to walk her home, causing Ilse to purposely abandon her use of ASL. She indignantly proclaims in English-only, "You know, by the time you finally wake up, I'll be lying on some trash heap." She then removes her wig to reveal her baldness, having recently undergone chemotherapy, before walking offstage.^[20] The performative function of removing her wig could, in part, be read as Ilse's way of trying to stay in control of the situation even beyond her linguistic prerogative, and unlike Melchior's purposeful abandonment of English with Wendla, Ilse's actions reimpose the communication gap. The fact that Ilse gives up her position as an ally by discarding the use of ASL not only perpetuates the normative hierarchies of the Deaf/hearing divide and hearing line, but also demonstrates the disheartening consequences of what happens when people cease their attempts to truly communicate and empathize with each other.

Momentarily generating a Deaf experience of musical meaning-making,^[21] a single ASL-only musical line occurs at the very end of the show, during "The Song of Purple Summer." These moments highlight for (predominantly hearing) audiences an even wider spectrum of Deaf (multi-)sensory experiences and meaning-making modalities that move beyond sight and speech alone. When Melchior is confronted by the ghosts of Moritz and Wendla, he decides not to kill himself and realizes that they will always be with him; this is musically signified in the repetition of the phrase "Not gone." However, coupled with ASL, and repeated several times by the ensemble, one phrase omits the singing *in favor of* the signing; that is, the phrase is signed in ASL but not sung in English. As in Deaf West's productions of *Big River* and *Pippin*, this crucial musical moment is placed towards the show's finale, displacing hearing audiences from the audist realm but also repositioning them within the Deaf side of musical experience. No longer is music (or meaning) simply about tones and sounds, but it is now instilled with physicality and feeling for both Deaf and hearing audiences.

As one final gesture toward the Deaf/hearing divide, the production splits the pairs of characters—deaf and "Voices Of"—from one another, adding dramaturgical intricacy to the deaths of characters. Before Moritz commits suicide, he pushes the Voice of Moritz's mic down, indicating that he no longer needs an aural voice anymore; the actor playing the Voice of Moritz subsequently walks offstage, and Moritz proceeds to sign his lines without vocal accompaniment, with words projected on the wall. This matches the aural silence of the only other ASL-only scene in the show, the earlier scene between him and his father. The second death occurs when Wendla is taken to get an abortion: in a burst of chaos onstage, one doctor grabs Wendla while another grabs the Voice of Wendla, ushering them offstage in different directions; the shrieking that follows (indicating her pain and subsequent death) comes from Wendla's side of the wings rather than the Voice of's. As with Ilse's earlier abandonment of ASL, Moritz's voiceless suicide demonstrates an end to his interaction and communication with the (hearing) world, embodied through his voluntary separation from his Voice Of. This is contrasted with the unwanted death of Wendla—brought about by the actions of her mother—which includes the involuntary separation from her Voice Of and subsequent vocalized cries. The varying degrees of d/Deaf expression and experiences performed in the show—of emotions, music, life, and death—symbolize the limitations of spoken language and hearing in partiality of d/Deaf perceptions of the world on stage. In ways that traditional stagings cannot, the production's d/Deaf lens enhances the meanings and complexities of these themes, characters, and relationships.

"And All Shall Know the Wonder": Reconsidering the Hearing Line

Certainly, the integration of ASL in Deaf West's production opens up the predominantly hearing space of

musical theatre, generating a communal space geared towards accessibility and inclusion. Critics and scholars have continually praised Deaf West's production of *Spring Awakening* for its groundbreaking ways of addressing issues of inclusion, accessibility, and diversity in theatrical productions, particularly with regard to the intersection of disability activism and the national theatre scene. It brought the first actor in a wheelchair, Ali Stroker, onto the Broadway musical stage, and it was also the first to provide access and innovative interpretation services to deaf-blind theatregoers. Disability Studies scholar Rachel Kolb asserts that the production's power lies in its ability to reconsider "a question that is increasingly relevant in culture: how to tell stories in more inclusive ways."^[22] But more significantly, the dramaturgical effects of Deaf West's staging, their artistic use of sign language via shared signs, and the retelling of *Spring Awakening* through a d/Deaf perspective deliberately rewrites the hearing line. While Krentz's notion of the hearing line specifically attends to Deaf stories within literature, his ideas certainly extend to the stage, where distinctive worlds can be represented, tested, and played out. The theatrical choices in *Spring Awakening* thus present, interrogate, and invert the Deaf/hearing dichotomy on-stage, dramatically and dramaturgically, and give audiences a view at the damaging effects of oralism and audism found in the real-world.

Rather than suggest that the hearing line itself is a negative factor, Krentz merely notes its existence, arguing that it illuminates the differences that exist between the two worlds. Yet the hearing line does create a hierarchy of difference in reality: the two sides are not equal. Such a difference plays out as a real-world divide in American culture that exists between the Deaf and hearing communities, ideologically affirmed through oralist, audist, and ableist practices and institutions—especially in the case of musical theatre. This emphasized difference and separation has also stigmatized the Deaf community as less than normate bodies, historically "viewed as a physical impairment associated with such disabilities as blindness, cognitive, and motor impairments," and something to be diagnosed and corrected.^[23] Deaf West has made it their mission to trouble the imbalances of the hearing line, not only calling attention to the hearing line itself but also calling it into question and, hopefully, subverting it in the process. In reconsidering the hearing line, ASL/Deaf musical theatre thereby becomes a 21st century platform on which to bridge the gap between the Deaf and hearing worlds.

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^[1] Steven Sater, *Spring Awakening* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2007), act 1 scene 1, Adobe Digital Editions PDF.

^[2] This interaction also suggests that ASL is not Bergman's native language, further signaling the divide

between mother and daughter, and adult and teenage characters.

[3]. Following Deaf Studies and cultural practice, the use of the lower-case represents the audiological state. The upper-case represents the Deaf community and culture.

[4]. Christopher Krentz, *Writing Deafness: The Hearing Line in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 2.

[5]. Krentz, *Writing Deafness*, 16. Krentz attributes this space to what Disability/Deaf Studies scholar Lennard J. Davis's calls literature's "deafened moment," wherein "reading and writing are basically silent and visual acts" that produce "a meeting ground of sorts between deaf and hearing people" (Krentz, 16). In the context of *Spring Awakening*, the stage is "deafened" in a completely different manner: an extremely loud, un-silent space, sanctioning the sharp physicality of rock music and, in so doing, tilting the passive nature of literature toward the active, dynamic nature of musical theatre.

[6]. "SimCom," or Simultaneous Communication, refers to the simultaneous use of sign language and verbal speech by a speaker. Although it seems practical and useful for speakers in a Deaf/hearing space to use SimCom for the benefit of all present, research has shown that the messages *produced* and *received* by SimCom are not equivalent—and thus obstructive to communication—because the grammatical structures of both languages are vastly different. Such actions are akin to speaking in one language while writing in another. As such, ASL most often suffers when this practice is used. For more on SimCom, see Stephanie Tevenal and Miako Villanueva, "Are You Getting the Message?: The Effects of SimCom on the Message Received by Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and Hearing Students," *Sign Language Studies* 9, no. 39 (2009): 266–286. Also see Ronnie B. Wilbur and Lesa Petersen, "Modality Interactions of Speech and Signing in Simultaneous Communication," *Journal of Speech, Language & Hearing Research* 41, no. 1 (1998): 200–12.

[7]. Kayla Epstein and Alex Needham, "Spring Awakening on Broadway: Deaf Viewers Give Their Verdict," *The Guardian*, 29 October 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/oct/29/spring-awakening-broadway-deaf-viewers-give-verdict>. For more on creating an equitable space for d/Deaf audiences, see Brandice Rafus-Brenning, "The Aesthetics of Deaf West Theatre: Balancing the Theatre-Going Experience for Deaf and Hearing Audiences" (Master's thesis, California State University, Northridge, 2018), 1–29.

[8]. Jehanne C. McCullough, "10 Things the Raving Reviews Don't Tell You About Spring Awakening," 6 December 2015, <https://jehanne.wordpress.com/2015/12/06/10-things-the-raving-reviews-dont-tell-you-about-spring-awakening-2/>. Soon after McCullough's post was published, *The Daily Moth* posted a dialogue with McCullough, Deaf West's Artistic Director DJ Kurs and ASL Master Linda Bove, in which Kurs and Bove explained the intent of the show, including their artistic reasoning behind using SimCom. See The Daily Moth (@TheDailyMoth), "Spring Awakening: Accessibility for Deaf," Facebook video, 9 December 2015, https://www.facebook.com/TheDailyMoth/posts/464086633793242?_tn=-R.

[9] Sater, *Spring Awakening*, act 2 scene 6, Adobe Digital Editions PDF.

[10]. This action performs the myth that deaf individuals can read lips or can hear better at higher

volumes. This misconception is also often generated by the person speaking (or shouting) in a slow, almost childlike way, again calling attention to the hearing line. On Broadway, Brausepulver also verbally emphasized the lines and used the ASL for “fine,” although he did not use ASL for the rest of the scene.

[11]. Christian Lewis, “Spring Awakening Is Currently Broadway’s Most Important Show,” *Huffington Post*, 4 December 2015, <https://www.huffingtonpost.com/christian-lewis/spring-awakening-is-currently-broadways-most-important-show>.

[12]. Sarah Wilbur, “Gestural Economies and Production Pedagogies in Deaf West’s *Spring Awakening*,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 60, no. 2 (2016): 146.

[13]. Wilbur, “Gestural Economies and Production Pedagogies,” 148.

[14]. Raymond Knapp. “Disabling Privilege, Further Reflections on Deaf West’s *Big River*,” *Studies in Musical Theatre* 9, no. 1 (2015): 105–9.

[15] Sater, *Spring Awakening*, act 1 scene 5, Adobe Digital Editions PDF.

[16]. Raymond Knapp, “‘Waitin’ for the Light to Shine’: Musicals and Disability,” *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability Studies*, ed. Blake Howe et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 828.

[17] Sater, *Spring Awakening*, act 1 scene 4, Adobe Digital Editions PDF.

[18]. Krentz, 17.

[19]. This is most pronounced by Frank Wedekind’s own description of the original play as “a tragedy of childhood” and his dedication of the work “to parents and teachers.” See Emma Goldman, “Frank Wedekind—The Awakening of Spring,” in *The Social Significance of the Modern Drama* (The Anarchist Library, 1914), 27 February 2009, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/emma-goldman-the-social-significance-of-the-modern-drama#toc21>.

[20]. Notably, this action occurred only during performances at The Wallis. During the production’s Inner City Arts and Broadway runs, Rodriguez completed her lines in *SimCom* and exited the stage without removing her wig. In an article for *Cosmopolitan*, Rodriguez shares her experiences during chemotherapy of both wearing wigs and being bald in public, eventually learning to be comfortable with her appearance and regaining her self-confidence. For more on her experience, see Krysta Rodriguez, “What I Learned About Myself From Going Out Bald in Public,” *Cosmopolitan*, 30 March 2015, available at <http://www.cosmopolitan.com/health-fitness/a38428/krysta-rodriguez-cancer-bald-wigs/>.

[21]. Numerous scholars working across the fields of music, performance, and Deaf studies have pointed out the multimodal, multi-sensory ways in which d/Deaf people “listen” to music—that is, through a combination of visual, physical, and kinetic sensory encounters and experiences. See Joseph Straus, *Extraordinary Measures: Disability in Music* (Oxford University Press, 2011); Jessica A. Holmes, “Expert Listening beyond the Limits of Hearing: Music and Deafness,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 70, no. 1 (2017): 171–220; Carol A. Padden and Tom L. Humphries, *Deaf in*

America: Voices from a Culture (Harvard University Press, 1990); and Anabel Maler, "Songs for Hands: Analyzing Interactions of Sign Language and Music," *Music Theory Online* 19 (2013).

[22]. Rachel Kolb, "'Spring Awakening' and the Power of Inclusive Art," *The Atlantic*, 18 October 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/10/spring-awakening-and-the-power-of-inclusive-art/411061/>.

[23]. Megan A. Jones, "Deafness as Culture: A Psychosocial Perspective," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 22, no. 2 (2000), available at <http://www.dsqsds.org/article/view/344/435>.

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