by Pat Keysell

British Theatre of the Deaf

1960 - 1977

Mika Brojer in 'Solo Mime', 1972

When I look back over my seventeen years with the British Theatre of the Deaf from 1960 until 1977, I am amazed by two striking memories; the great natural talent that emerged from the deaf actors who came forward, and the sheer dedication that made them travel considerable distances, over many years, just to take part.

But let me begin at the beginning. There have been several versions written about the origins of the BTD, and many studies and dissertations made. None that I have seen has been completely accurate, so I welcome this opportunity to put a few facts down on paper.

In 1960, I was working for a woman called Ursula Eason, who was Assistant Head of the Children's Programme at the BBC. Ursula was also directing a monthly programme called 'For Deaf Children'. This intrigued me, because it was almost entirely visual, and like a lot of people, I felt that television was missing out by featuring far too many talking heads! Although 'For Deaf Children' was only a monthly programme, it was quite difficult to fill, and we had quite frequent discussions about where we could find new material. Having been an actress and a drama teacher I said "why don't we include some mime?". Ursula Eason said that she couldn't find the sort of story-mime she wanted, and to cut a long story short, we decided to start a mime group, with deaf actors, specifically to develop material which would be suitable for the programme. I was appointed to train the group and develop some short mime plays which would be suitable for the programme.

So, we advertised for part-time actors in Hearing magazine (or The Silent World as it was called then), and from a group of about 30 applicants, we selected ten who would form the first mime company. Even on this first audition, we were struck by the strength of personality, and great power of physical expression that was apparent in most of the people who applied.

I have never worked with deaf people before, or indeed, had any contact, so in the early days, I used to write everything down; copious notes were given out, but I soon realised that this wasn't necessary. With a medium like mime, and with some brilliant lipreaders, there was no problem with communication, and I soon began to pick up some of the signs. I'm sure I made many mistakes, like the time I inadvertently said: "Listen everybody!" and they all put one hand up to an ear in a very pointed way!

But joking apart, we made rapid progress and within six months, we were recording our first mime play for the programme. It was called 'Mario the Magician', and featured some wonderful players like Sidney Druiffe, Cyril Robbins, Jacqueline Grant, Arthur Momber, Gwen Watford and Roy Sheldrick. I can't remember if the group was actually paid anything, I suppose we must have been, but the important thing was, a door had been opened for deaf people to enter a new profession, and although the fully professional company was not formed until 1974, the foundations were laid in 1961 and to be professional remained a constant goal.

Over the next few years there were several plays created, by myself and the group, specially for children's television. It was very hard work for us all, because we had daytime jobs as well, and it meant rehearsing in the evenings and at weekends. But productions like 'Peter and the Magic Pears', 'Fortune and Misfortune' and 'The Waxworks Mystery' were great fun to do, and provided some wonderful opportunities and experience for the mime group.

In 1964 several significant things happened; the programme 'For Deaf Children' changed its format and became

The RNID Mime Group, 1968

Members of the Theatre of the Deaf perform 'The Voyage', 1971

Not many people know that Deaf Theatre has been around for many years. Pat Keysell looks back to the heyday of the 1960s and 1970s

'Vision On' and Ursula Easton asked me to present it. In order to do this I had to resign from the staff of the BBC. This was very timely, because the work of running the mime group, and making all the arrangements, was increasing; in the same year, the then Inspector of Special Education, Michael Reed, asked me to do some work with teachers of the special schools for deaf children within the London area. This move was most significant, because over the years I worked with talented children through primary school, on into Oak Lodge Secondary School, through various youth groups and finally into the Theatre of the Deaf. One such pupil was Michael Hanrahan, from the Old Kent Road School, who now, I am told, leads the Theatre of the Deaf in Canada.

We were also invited to make a pilot programme for the newly formed BBC2 in 1964, but unfortunately this did not lead to anything as the powers that be did not think it would appeal to a mass audience.

A great difficulty now arose. Some of the new directors who worked on 'Vision On' were not happy about working with so-called 'amateurs' and even less happy about rehearsing at weekends and the extra hassle of communicating with deaf actors: "They are not members of Equity" became the excuse. This excuse was also used by theatre directors when they cast hearing people in the role of deaf characters. It was frustrating when we knew that our deaf actors could do so much better, but it strengthened the resolve to win Equity membership and full professional status for members of the company.

We now concentrated on stage work, and there were many performances for clubs and educational establishments like the Curtain Theatre, formerly Toynbee Hall, in the East End. But it was in 1968-69 that the big step forward happened. I was awarded the Churchill Fellowship to study and travel with the newly formed National Theatre of the Deaf in America. This experience was a great inspiration - I was there for about five months, but when I came back, I set about transforming the RNID Mime Group into a fully fledged theatre company.

We held our first national summer school in 1969, and great new talent began to come forward: Ian Stewart, Lydia Handscombe, Mika Brojer, Issy Schisselman, to name a few. By including sign-mime and hearing speakers, as well as the mime and movement, we created a new form of total theatre. We had professional choreographers like Henry Metcalfe who incorporated some great dance sequences into the shows, and professional musicians who composed music specially to follow it. Many people in the audience used to say: "How do they keep to the music when they can't hear it?".

For the next five years we travelled the length and breadth of the country, performing in colleges, arts centres, and theatres in places as far afield as Reading, Nottingham, Leeds, Malvern, Brighton; we went to Belfast and Dublin; to the World Congress in Paris and a big Educational Congress in Stockholm. We performed in practically every available theatre in London: in the West End and The Place, home of the London Contemporary Dance Theatre.

Something special happened at The Place. When I came back from America, I went to see my former mime teacher, Claude Chagrin, who was then the movement specialist for the National Theatre Company at the Old Vic. When I told her about our plans, she said: "You must have a Patron" and promptly went to ask Sir Lawrence Olivier if he would fulfil the role. Miraculously he agreed, but reportedly said: "They can have my name but nothing else" - meaning we were not to bother him, which was fair enough. He came to see our show "The Voyage" at The Place, in which Ian Stewart gave, in my opinion, the best performance of his career, as the Greek Hero Odysseus.

The show appealed to Sir Lawrence very much (he still liked to be called Sir Lawrence, even when he became Lord

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Above: Elsie Whitby and Ian Stewart perform a scene in 'Sganarelle' by Moliere at the Toynbee Hall, 1969

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Olivier) and he was full of admiration for the timing. Even though he was not well at the time, he agreed to come backstage to meet the company. They did not find him easy to lipread - the greatest actor of his generation, and he mumbled! However, as we all know, Olivier on stage was something else - he had the most magnificent voice.

Later, when I was making a great effort to fundraise for the professional company, I wrote to Sir Lawrence, and he gave me a letter of introduction to Lord Drogheda at the Financial Times. Lord Drogheda said he had no money (!) but he asked a friend of his, the retiring chairman of Bovis, to do some fundraising for us. The result was the princely sum of £4,000.

At the same time, I was battling with Equity and the Arts Council. The secretary of Equity said they could not convert an amateur company into a professional one; the Arts Council said they could not give a grant to a company which did not have Equity membership. And so it went on, back and forth. Eventually, the then Drama Officer at the Arts Council - I think it was John Linklater - came to see a performance of "Masquerade" which we were doing under the Arches in Paddington. He was so impressed, because the local people gathered around to watch and could not drag themselves away. John Linklater said later that it was some of the best maskwork he had ever seen.

Another Arts Council officer, Peter James, who led the Young People's Committee, also did some lobbying for us, and eventually, we were awarded, not a grant, but a guarantee against loss of £3,000. That gave us £7,000 in total - not a great sum, even in those days, but it was enough for us to make the giant leap. In 1974 we went to the Edinburgh Festival with "Images" (one of my favourite shows) and from September to November of 1974 we toured with the first professional show, which was "Hassan" directed by Clifford Williams, of the Royal Shakespeare Company. At last Equity caved in, and granted provisional membership to all those who took part. I stayed for three more years with the British Theatre of the Deaf organising the professional tours, the summer schools, the Theatre in Education company, and the A.D. B. courses (Associate of the Drama Board, which led to a qualification for deaf tutors).

It was a very exciting and very hectic time, but although the big breakthrough had been made, for me the truly inspiring, creative ways were over. The reasons for this should perhaps be explained in a second instalment.

Part Two of Pat Keysell's story of the British Theatre of the Deaf will be in the next issue of Deaf Arts UK

Pat Keysell

by Pat Keysell

British Theatre of the Deaf

Part Two of Pat Keysell's story of the British Theatre of the Deaf from 1974 until 1977

In the summer of 1974 expectations were running high. We had just returned from a successful run in The Edinburgh Festival Fringe - two weeks in a central location just off Princes Street - which we had shared with a deaf theatre group from Sweden. Our show, 'Images' was an anthology of poetry, mime and dance, while the Swedish group performed some modern comedy sketches about what it was like to be deaf. In retrospect, this was way ahead of its time.

Our members did not wish to draw attention to their deafness; they wanted to be actors and part of theatre just like any other company. And yet I knew that to utilize their special talents, and overcome their comparative lack of training and experience, the material we used had to be very carefully chosen. I had always felt, personally, that theatre should be a total experience, incorporating all the arts - mime, movement, dance, music, as well as a heightened form of speech, as it had been in the beginning, when drama first emerged in ancient Greece. (It is only in the present century, perhaps since Ibsen and Shaw, that theatre has become so verbal and concerned with domestic and social issues). Perhaps we were also ahead of our time, since physical/visual theatre has once again become very popular.

So there we were, on the brink of our first fully professional tour. Up till then, we had rehearsed in the house adjoining 105 Gower Street, which belonged to the RNID and was leased to The Magic Circle. There was a small hall, an even smaller stage, ideal for shows we had produced so far, but we decided we needed more space in which to fulfill our new potential, so we rented a studio theatre in Soho for the new production. Rehearsals for 'Hassan' began in September 1974, with a cast of twelve (ten deaf actors and two hearing), plus two musicians and two stage managers.

photograph: courtesy of Elsie Whitby

'Under the Sun', 1973

It was felt by most people in the company that we needed a 'real' play, and a famous director, to launch this new initiative, so I approached Clifford Williams, who was well known for his work with The Royal Shakespeare Company. He had taken some persuading, as he was very much in demand at the time, but in the end, the excitement of a new company, on the brink of a new adventure, prevailed. All these circumstances meant a totally new approach to the way we worked. Hitherto, all our shows had been developed through improvisation; I would teach technique or stagecraft, then throw out a theme, or skeleton of an idea, and then the company would go into smaller groups and develop it. Eventually all these pieces would be honed and adapted and polished, and fitted into a larger, comprehensive piece of work.

This was the way I had been trained on the hugely influential courses I had undergone with Claude Chagrin and Jacques Lecoq, mime teachers par excellence, and it had always worked with the BTD. The group dynamic produced some wonderful results, and it meant that the material always belonged to the actors and they to it. Nothing was imposed. But this method takes time to develop, months rather than weeks, with plenty of time to think in between rehearsals. A professional company, with a limited budget, cannot afford such luxuries.

So the decision to use a text had been made some time before. Clifford had left the choice to me, because he was very busy, did not know the company and was unfamiliar with sign-mime (though I must say he was an excellent mime himself and had run his own mime company before joining the RSC.) After much rummaging through libraries and play lists I chose 'Hassan' because it was described as a 'minor masterpiece' and had not been produced for a long time; it was also poetic, full of drama and action, with colourful characters which we could cast perfectly with the people we had available.

It was, however, a wordy play and had to be cut back and adapted before it could work in a combination of mime, movement and sign-language. There were those who felt that 'Hassan' was an old-fashioned play, but one could say that about any classic. The central figure of Hassan (beautifully played by Issy Schlisselman) is a naive and simple man who becomes corrupted by success and people in high places. The sub-plot concerns a young couple who become embroiled in the clutches of power. How can such themes ever become old-fashioned? Anyway, 'Hassan' was a beautiful production, even though produced on a shoe-string. After the preview in the LAMDA theatre, the show went on the road for a very ambitious eight weeks. I did not travel with the company all the time, there was too much to do in the office, so I was only able to make spot visits.

The thought of booking a tour like that now makes my hair stand on end! It was a struggle, because of course the dates have to be continuous and progressive - it's no good doubling back on yourself from one end of the country to another. But get the bookings we did. It would be difficult for young deaf people today to realize how different things were before 1981 - The Year of the Disabled - when public opinion, and public and private support for special needs issues changed dramatically. Before then, it was an enormous struggle to capture anybody's interest.

However, the BTD had built a solid reputation between 1969 and 1974, with the semi-professional tours, and miraculously, the first fully professional tour came together, with something like 40 to 50 performances, in small and middle scale venues, from Exeter up to Aberdeen. It was difficult to get administrative help in the office. Most people who expressed interest in the company wanted to write for it, or direct, or design, or do something upfront and creative - the day-to-day slog of administrative work was not popular. But it had to be done; the accounts office at the RNID drew up the wage packets, which was an enormous help, but there were theatre contracts to be done; publicity material and programmes to be sent out; the actors' Equity contracts to be drawn up; accommodation to be booked; travel arrangements to be made, and accounting and reporting to the funding bodies to be done. It was an enormous amount of work.

There were other difficulties. As in all companies, people fell in and out of love; the bus broke down and the scenery fell over! I did not know the full extent of it until 1997, when Ian Stewart arranged the first re-union at his house in Saltdean. There, the assembled company, older and wiser now, spent the afternoon rollicking about with laughter at some of these remembered misadventures - but I'm sure they didn't seem so funny at the time!

To return to 1974; at the end of this first tour we realized that media coverage had not lived up to expectations. The opportunity to appear on News Review (The Sunday News

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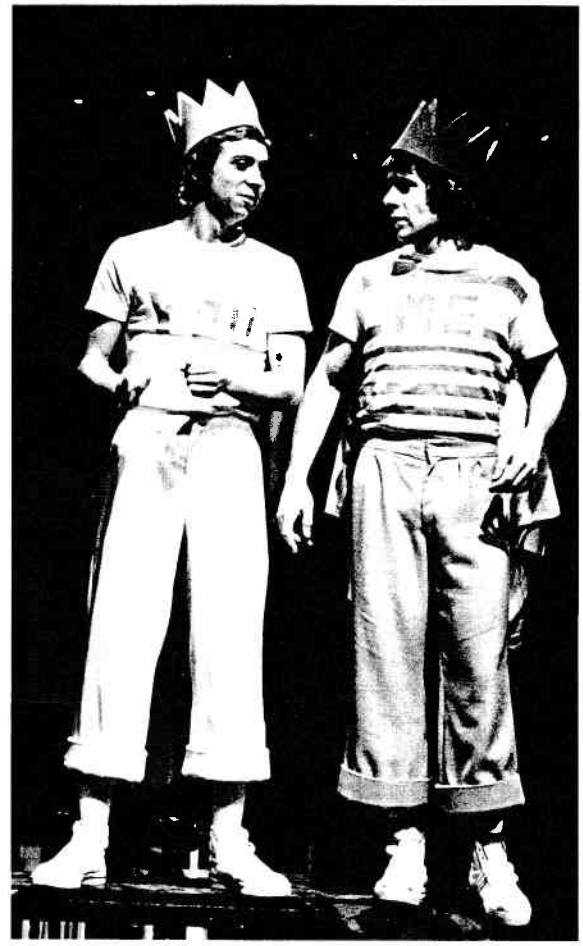

photograph: Donald Cooper, courtesy of T. Ruane

Paul Rowland and Chris Harrowell in 'The Most Dangerous Animal of All', 1977

photograph courtesy of Elsie Whitby

Lydia Handscombe in 'Under the Sun', 1973

british theatre of the deaf

photograph: Donald Cooper, courtesy of T. Ruane

Issy Schlisselman in the title role of 'Hassan', 1974

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Bulletin signed for deaf viewers) had been lost because Equity insisted that their members should be paid full Equity rates for appearing in news items. The producer said his budget did not run to Equity rates, and that was that! So Clifford Williams helped me to launch a big press reception, coupled with an exhibition and demonstration, held in the Magic Circle Theatre. It was very well attended, and one of the people who came was Melvyn Bragg. He was suitably impressed, and the result was an hour long programme for The South Bank Show, introduced by Melvyn himself. It was transmitted in 1975 and remains the best record of the work of The British Theatre of the Deaf at this time.

In 1975-76, there were two A.D.B. courses running (Associate of the Drama Board) a first year and second year (it took two years to qualify) which took place at weekends. The Summer Schools began in 1969, and it was held in colleges all over the country, to help spread the word and discover new talent; and the semi-professional shows were still mounted in London in order to give other people the opportunity to take part and gain experience.

The second professional tour in early 1976 was a double bill. John Wright (who later became well known as the founder and director of Trestle Theatre Company) created a lively clown piece based on improvisations, and I directed 'The Boy in Darkness' based on a story by Mervyn Peake. This was a fairly heavy, symbolic piece, but it began with a wonderful mimetic ritual when the boy comes of age, followed by his escape from the castle, which Chris Harrowell mimed superbly. Later, it became rather static, when the boy met some strange animal characters and dialogue took over, but it remained a very unusual and interesting piece. This tour was even more extensive than the first, and covered a wide range of venues from large theatres to small arts centres, community centres, studio theatres, and colleges all over the country.

The autumn of 1976 saw the launch of the pioneer Theatre in Education Project called 'Periscope' which had been brewing in my mind for a long time. T.I.E. teams, visiting hearing schools, were very prolific at this time, and it seemed to me that schools for the deaf, and indeed, other special schools, were missing out. The first programme was based on the story of The Pied Piper of Hamlyn, which we called 'A Promise is a Promise' and following a very visual interpretation of the original story, illustrated by slides. We then gave a modern version which showed what should happen to local taxes, thus giving the children a useful lesson in Civics. The Project was extremely successful, warmly welcomed by the Education Authority and schools alike. A great deal of positive feedback was gathered for submission to sponsors, in the hope that this smaller company could become a permanent branch of the British Theatre of the Deaf.

The third national professional tour took place in the spring of 1977. It was a new play, specially commissioned from a writer called John Abulafia. The Arts Council was promoting new writers at this time, and made it clear that our grant depended on it. John did a series of

photograph: courtesy of Elsie Whitby

Ian Stewart and Issy Schlisselman fronting 'Masquerade', 1972

workshops with the company, to get to know the individual actors and develop his ideas, and so wrote the play specially for them. It was called 'The Most Dangerous Animal of All' - an unconventional piece to say the least, and not generally understood, but it contained some wonderful ideas and images. For this tour we had our own minibus, donated by The Gulbenkian Foundation.

By the end of this third tour, things had reached a crisis point for me, for many reasons; artistic, financial, and personal. Although we had many supporters, we also had many critics who compared us unfavourably with the National Theatre of the Deaf in America. Vainly I pointed out that the NTD had begun life with a grant of $350,000 - the equivalent of £150,000 whereas we had started with £7,000, and although our Arts Council Grant had risen to £12,000 in 1977, it was still not enough to sustain the company adequately. Furthermore, the NTD recruited its members from Gallaudet College in Washington D.C. where the drama department trained deaf students for 3 - 4 years full-time. We had only part-time training at weekends. But critics are not interested in the circumstances.

There were those who said that the professional company should never have been launched with inadequate funding, but my view was that you can wait forever for an ideal situation.

Funding for the arts has always been inadequate in this country and still is, compared with others in Europe and the U.S.A. I still think it was worth doing, even though it brought me to the verge of a nervous breakdown. Theatre will always be a hazardous profession, for hearing as well as for deaf people, but whereas the hearing can often pick up casual work in between contracts, it is not so easy for deaf people. Some of our members were able to get unpaid leave of absence from their permanent jobs; others took the risk like me. But there was never any shortage of people who wanted to do it.

I had done my best to train, not only actors, but tutors, directors, even business managers and publicists. By 1977, the deaf power movement was very strong, and I knew that in some quarters, my leadership role, as a hearing person, was resented. Although I still received a small stipend from the RNID and an occasional bonus from the company when funds permitted, this did not amount to a full time salary, which is what the job had become, and the television programme, 'Vision On', which had subsidised my other work for many years, had finished the year before. Above all, the managerial role, and the huge amount of administrative work had begun to oppress me, and I longed to get back to my creative roots; teaching, researching, and developing my own projects.

It had been 17 years since the founding of the RNID Mime Group, and I knew it was time to move on - hoping against hope that the deaf leaders who took over had gleaned enough experience to keep it going. A lot had been achieved, but sadly, the dream of establishing a full-time, year-round company, occupying its own premises, with everybody being paid a good salary and not just the minimum, had not been realised. I'm sure that many others have had the same dream, but they must tell their own story.

I'm sorry there has not been space to mention by name all the people who contributed to the work of the BTD. However, a book is being prepared for the British Deaf History Society, when hopefully these omissions can be rectified.

photograph: Donald Cooper, courtesy of T Ruane

Chris Harrowell leading the dance in 'Insight', 1976

List of Productions:

RNID MIME GROUP	
Mario the Magican	**1962**
Peter and the Magic Pears	**1962**
Come to the Fair	**1963**
Manley Ploughs a Field	**1964**
Merriman Goes to Town	**1964**
The Nativity & Bethlehem Blues	**1964**
The Waxworks Mystery	**1965**
See What I Mean	**1965-7**
NATIONAL THEATRE OF THE DEAF*	
Sganarelle and The Pearl	**1969**
The Magic of the Theatre	**1969**
The Insect Play	**1970**
Spoon River Anthology	**1970**
The Voyage	**1971**
Masqerade	**1972**
Once Upon a Future Time	**1972**
Under the Sun	**1973**
BRITISH THEATRE OF THE DEAF*	
Images	**1974**
Hassan	**1974**
Insight	**1976**
The Boy in Darkness	**1976**
The Most Dangerous Animal of All	**1977**
PERISCOPE (Theatre In Education)	
A Promise is a Promise	**1976**
The Emperor's New Clothes	**1977**

*Between 1969 and 1973 the group was called National Theatre of the Deaf but changed to 'British' after the American National Theatre of the Deaf objected to the duplication.

Recognition due for Pat Keysell

I read with great interest Pat Keysell's article about the British Theatre of the Deaf in the Spring 1999 issue of Deaf Arts UK.

The article led me to reminisce about my involvement with the company after attending its first summer school in September 1969.

I would like to praise Pat Keysell for her pioneering work for the first Theatre of the Deaf - a company that was and is easily on a par with a professional theatre company.

It was eye-opening for me to watch Pat at work. She has an eye for a play and skill in directing it. She is a truly remarkable person with her sheer determination to establish potential in Deaf people to develop their skills in acting.

During my short time in the company this was something I readily appreciated. Pat, of all people, put Deaf Theatre on the national scene. She created my love of drama.

What disappointed me was that there has been so little recognition for Pat Keysell. Recognition is due to her because she gave opportunties for deaf people to have a career in theatre.

Pat, I want to thank you for your wonderful and magnificent contribution to the British Theatre of the Deaf.

Alan Murray, London

Deaf actors at the the first RNID Summer School in 1969. Alan Murray is on the right.

right: Pat Keysell

coming to our senses

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BSL Interpreted

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Central Student Services
65 Davies Street, London W1Y 2DA

tel 0171 514 6156 fax 0171 514 6165
email j.thompson@linst.ac.uk