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**Final Thesis**

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**PERFORMING ARTS BETWEEN  
HEARING AND DEAF WORLD**

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A CULTURAL RESEARCH ON THE DEAF COMMUNITY  
AND ITS RELATION WITH THE HEARING MAJORITY  
THROUGH PERFORMING ARTS

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# Introduction

This dissertation is the result of a cultural research about Deaf Culture and its derivations into performing arts.

This research work has been nourished by a personal curiosity towards minority cultures such as Deaf Culture, a subject that has attracted my attention as soon as I joined the Italian Sign Language class in 2013. This Italian Sign Language class - held by language assistant Gabriele Caia and professor Chiara Branchini - took place in Venice and has been my first step inside the Deaf World.

Deaf Culture is a relatively young and intriguing study subject. It deserves attention despite the meagre bibliography about it, which comes mainly from American scholars engaged in the Deaf cause. Probably due to its young age, it is hard to find Italian papers and books that explore this study field. The bibliography of this dissertation has been created mainly on American scholars work, which support the theory (1nd and 2nd chapter), while the practical part takes into account Italian play and performance examples (3rd chapter).

In November 18th, 2015, I had the chance to join the audience of a play at Teatro Duse, Bologna, which involved both deaf and hearing actors on stage. The play was *Figli di un Dio Minore* directed by Marco Mattolini, the italian version of *Children of a Lesser God* by Mark Medoff, performed by Rita Mazza and Giorgio Lupano in the role of Sarah and James. The experience was very intense, as it was the very first play in Italian Sign Language I witnessed, and stepping out the theatre I started a discussion with

my university colleagues about the role of performing arts within a minority culture context. Our discussion involved also accessibility at the theatre, the stage directions and the functionality of lights and shadow during the play to follow, the hearing actor Sign Language skills. These comments became a short paper that I handed out in December, 2015, and that was the first draft of this thesis, thanks to the encouragement of professor Carmela Bertone.

The question that I aimed to answer with this thesis is whether the performing arts (theatre first, but dance and music as well) might be a bridge to connect different cultures. The primitive idea comes from consideration made about *Figli di un Dio Minore*, a play that manages to unify two distant worlds, and let them communicate through the expedient of a romantic relationship between two representatives of relatively Deaf and hearing culture. The first rough idea was sharpened with a meeting in Rome, at the ISSR, *Istituto Statale Sordi Roma* in October, 13th. The title of the meeting was *Contaminazioni. Signed Talk su arti performative e nuovi linguaggi visuali*. with *Figli di un Dio minore*'s cast, *Tribe*'s cast and *The Silent Beat* dancers and choreographer, Ambra Bianchini. The focus of the meeting was the contaminative function of performing arts, therefore how performing arts can connect the hearing and the deaf world and how both of these cultural universes can be contaminated one each other: many exponents of acting and dancing companies and deaf performers showed up to contribute to the seminar. Thanks to this meeting I theorized a scheme which is here denominated Cultural Contamination Scheme, a circular scheme that put in connection the hearing and the Deaf worlds through performing arts.

The focus of this thesis is Deaf Culture and in particular performing arts between Deaf and hearing culture. During my research work I tried to reflect about the role of culture and the performing arts in particular, proceeding from a wide perspective until the precise point of my research. In fact, this thesis starts with a Deaf World overview because, before getting to the main point, I believed that a short journey into the Deaf World was necessary.

Therefore, the first chapter is dedicated to the Deaf World, to the Deaf history, to the perspective of the hearing world on the Deaf World, to the concept of normality and to the struggle of the Deaf community in the process of empowerment. I tried to reflect about culture as a force that allow the Deaf community to raise its voice in the outside world, and to reinforce its boundaries at the same time, with a centripetal and centrifugal force towards outside and inside the heart of the community. This principle is the same that rules the cultural scheme that I theorised in the third chapter and that is the cornerstone of this research work.

The second chapter gets closer to the main point of the thesis and reports the importance of the performance in minority cultures such as the Deaf one. The central chapter focus on the difference between the Deaf Theatre and the Sign Language Theatre as the oldest performing art form in which the deaf have taken part, and I investigate the concept of accessibility on stage. Then, as last paragraph, I focus on the Deaf Theatre history in the world. The third chapter reports the Cultural Contamination Scheme and aims to pose questions about the possible contamination functions that performing arts have on the deaf and the hearing world. In this third chapter I aim to analyse some examples of Italian performance which involved the Deaf and the hearing world and that give credibility to my personal theory of performing arts.

The idea of this thesis is that culture can connect diverse and distant universes, can build bridges that unify individuals belonging to different culture and can be the wall that work as community boundaries and contains its social rules and values. Culture can be studied also through arts, and in this thesis the final target are the performing arts, illustrating examples in order to support my theory of cultural connecting function.



# Chapter 1

## Inside the Deaf World

### 1.1 In search of history

The Deaf history tells about a past characterized by subjugation and epistemic violence<sup>1</sup> perpetrated by the hearings towards the deaf. For a long time the deaf have been subdued by the hearing culture, which will be identified with the mainstream culture in this dissertation. The story of the Deaf culture has been marked by the will of hearing education and events promoted by Sign language opponents, but it has been characterized by an identity acknowledgement process as well. This fundamental acknowledgement process let the Deaf recognize their identity and stick up for their rights.(Zinna 2010)

When the professor and researcher Paddy Ladd was asked to explain the content of his research on Deaf culture, he used the metaphor of a museum.(Ladd 2003) He asks to imagine yourself wandering in an exposition room named *deafness*, where you can see various totems like ear trumpets, hearing aids, models of the ear and diagrams of its tiniest parts; drawings of deaf children being operated by so-called doctors in 18th century, photographs of children with their mouths forced open with silver tools in order

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<sup>1</sup>Kind of violence, process by which a language considered inferior is being destructed and brought to brink of extinction by the imposition of alien education systems and the enforced enrolment of the children belonging to that language (Ladd 2003).

to bring forth sounds and other futuristic tools related to deafness. The aim of his research is to locate another room close to this, which door has the sign *Deaf Culture* displayed. Beyond this door, there is an exposition room where some of the paintings have been turned to face the wall. These paintings display themes that have not been displayed before in the museum, themes about Deaf Culture.

The paintings are related to the joy of millions of deaf communities around the world, which experience the fulfilment of expressing their thoughts and emotions through their hands, and the deep pleasure of feeling part of a growing community. They refer not of people being sad for not hearing sounds or music, but of people which are able to create art out of the rhythm and pulse of what they see around them. They portray the «oppression of these communities by those supposedly charged with responsibility for their welfare, but they also portrayed a clear sense of the ingenuity, determination and humour by which they struggled to resist that oppression»(Ladd 2003:2). There are historic paintings, which illustrate the relationship between deaf and hearing through the centuries of some episode of prestige for the Sign Language. There is a painting where cooperation is shown between hearing and deaf during French revolution, and one set showed Queen Victoria signing with a Deaf servant.

By this metaphor, Ladd wants to introduce the reader to a deep acknowledgement of the Deaf community, a minority group formed by Deaf, whose ancestors have been often labelled as disabled, with no chance to use their natural means of communication – their hands - or to improve their life quality with a proper education. Ladd pinpoints the concept of deafness in the hearing aids and in the silver tools used by speech therapists to teach the deaf to talk. In a deaf perspective these tools represent the image of the oppressing mainstream culture ruled by speech therapists, professionals determined to make the Deaf talk. For long time the Deaf have been forced to talk against their will and capabilities, and many of them experienced the humiliation of being the pearl of their speech therapists, who used to show their speech progress to the colleagues on the stage of scientific congresses. Some of them suffered cruel treatment such as the perforation of

the cranium, break of the eardrum with boiling oil and use of the famous Itard probe.(Lane 1984)

The stories of Sign languages<sup>2</sup> are shaped on the position taken by institutions and mainstream culture towards deafness. It is about a long process that includes medics, scholars and philosopher's observations and interventions by many members of the clergy, unconcerned educators who have found an unexpected gain in Deaf education.(Cardona and Volterra 2007)

The first traces about the Deaf community are found in Plato's work (427-347 a.C) precisely in Cratilio, who refers about how the *mute* use their hands to speak. In ancient times, they could not know that deafness and mutism are naturally connected and the Deaf were considered just as minors or people with mental disease. The visual communication of the Deaf seemed to be a natural way to communicate, but Plato did not left any observation about the deaf condition. Aristo(Aristotele 2008) (384-322 a.C.) believed that all the Deaf were mute too, and this led the people to the prejudice that who is deaf suffers of mental illness as well. The Holy Writs consider the Deaf as incomplete and weak creatures, someone in need of the glory of God.

The ancient Greeks are popular for their obsession with body perfection and for their cruel treatment to those born with physical imperfections. In Sparta the families used to leave imperfect newborns in desert places and let them die: the famous mountain Inedia was one of these places. The Romans have been influenced by this cruel practice so also the Roman imperfect children were doomed to die before growing up. As far as it concerns the deaf, many deaf children found shelter in the invisibility of deafness, as a disguised deficit that could get away unnoticed until two or three years old.

After 735 b.C. Romulus decides that also grown-up children after three

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<sup>2</sup>why this dissertation refers about different Sign Languages? Does an international Sign language exist? The International Sign Language has been created and works as Lingua Franca among the deaf from different countries. However there are as many Sign languages, as the Deaf communities around the world. Moreover, two diverse Sign languages can show similarities, even if the spoken languages in use in the Deaf communities are geographically distant: as an example, the Langue des Signes Française (LSF) has many resemblances to the American Sign Language (ASL) because of historical reasons (Laurent Clerc, a deaf French teacher, traveled to America in 19<sup>th</sup> century to teach American LSF)

years old could be taken away from the families and killed, so also the deaf children could be identified and cruelly murdered. Nevertheless, this practice is real only to the lower class of population, because the society used to protect and let the upper class Deaf live and cultivate their passions, such as art. The first certified example is told by Plinius the Old, who writes about Quintus Pedius, a patrician Deaf who received the grace of mercy and could live his life and shows his artistic talent.<sup>3</sup> The Romans consider thoughts as the results of language, a natural rather than acquired instinct, so the Deaf were considered unable to understand and take action.

The first improvement to the condition of the Deaf comes from the distinction between deafness and muteness, with the emperor of Justinianus (572-565 a.C) that attributes legal rights to the deaf who were able to write. Perhaps they are Deaf, who lost their hearing once adults, and that learnt to read and write before they lost their hearing. On the contrary, those deaf, who received no education, had no chance to communicate and to get legal rights: an educator used to rule their whole life and tutor their actions (Cardona and Volterra 2007). During the Middle Age the life of the deaf meets no improvement under any circumstances, but many try to understand the origin of deafness, and the connection between deafness and muteness.

Humanism flips the page of Deaf history: with its new conception of the ingenious man, as a human being able to investigate itself thanks to the culture, and its concept of self-made man (*homo faber*) the deaf improved their conditions of life inside the society. From the 16th century on, new figures of educators made their entrance in deaf life: the very first one is Pedro Ponce from Leon, France. His education plan is addressed mainly to children of upper class family, who had to learn how to rule in the future. But later in years he decides to admit also deaf children coming from poorer classes, that were mostly given in custody to religious institutes.

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<sup>3</sup>see: FABRIANI S. (1826) Sul beneficio dalla religione cristiana recato agli uomini nell'istruzione, Storia dei Sordi: Quinto Pedio, ossia il primo Sordomuto di Roma antica, [http://www.storiadeisordi.it/articolo.asp?ENTRY\\_ID=812](http://www.storiadeisordi.it/articolo.asp?ENTRY_ID=812)

From this point of history on, the Deaf community is strongly connected with religious schools, where the deaf could communicate thanks to a language that had not been theorized yet, and that was considered a mere pantomime. In the 18th century many scholars show their interest in the Deaf situation, following the interest that Francis Bacon (1516- 1626) showed for the issue: «And in the practice of some who had been deaf and dumb from their birth and were otherwise clever, I have seen wonderful dialogues carried on between them and their friends who had learned to understand their gestures.»(Bacon 2011:439)

The age of Enlightenment takes another important step in Deaf history, thanks to its openness, its craving for knowledge and sense of renovation. A foregoer of Deaf education is Charles-Michel de l'Épée, who theorises an educational method, which was free and accessible for all the Deaf. He develops a method based on a language made of signs: this intuition is accepted by the deaf, because the number of his pupils considerably grows in few years. In 1775 L'Épée founds the popular *Institut national des sourds-muets of Paris*(National Institut of the Deaf and Dumb) thanks to public funds: this school plays a fundamental role in the spread of manual method between the end of 18th and beginning of 19th century in Europe.

Although Deaf history is marked by an event that left a deep scar on its surface. This event is the famous Congress of Milan in 1880, a congress that gathers the main opponents to the Sign language and has as motto “*The gesture kills the word*”<sup>4</sup>. The aim is to forbid the use of minority languages on the Italian national territory in order to build a united country and impose Italian as the only language. This aim is supported by the clergy, which wants the deaf to speak in order to be real worshippers, and the Reign of Italy, whose target is the linguistic unification of the country. The concern of the Congress was a possible isolation of the Deaf due to the spread of use of the Sign language. The scholars, who support the oral method are afraid

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<sup>4</sup>Second resolution of the Congress of Milan: 2. *Il Congresso, considerando che l'uso simultaneo della parola e dei gesti mimici ha lo svantaggio di nuocere alla parola, alla lettura sopra le labbra ed alla precisione delle idee, dichiara che il metodo orale deve essere preferito.* (ISTC)

that the Sign language could isolate the Deaf from the community norms and to alienate it from the religious doctrine, both great concerns in Italy in those days. Douglas Baynton gives a hypothesis about the decisions taken at the Congress of Milan in 1880. He states that the detachment from the manual method in favour of the arousing Oralism approach is due to complex cultural changes that used to project what was considered primitive and uncouth (such as Sign Language) on the first step of the evolution scale. This point of view contributed to the approval of inferiority of the gestural-signed communication in respect with the word/writing communication (Baynton 2000).

The Congress of Milan caused the elimination of Sign Language inside and outside the institutes, where the teachers preferred the use of the manual method rather than the oral one. This change of direction deeply influenced Italy and Europe, and this flame crossed the ocean as well, reaching the United States in a few years. One of the most popular opponents to manual method was Alexander Graham Bell (1847-1917), who accused the *manu- alists* to support the development of a *deaf race of mankind*. The famous scientist, famous for his inventions, was connected with the eugenic movement<sup>5</sup> in the United States and supported the oral method. Moreover, in his lecture *Memoir upon the formation of a deaf variety of the human race* presented to the National Academy of Sciences on November 13, 1883, he noted that congenitally deaf parents were more likely to produce deaf children and tentatively suggested that couples where both parties were deaf should not marry. He proposed the compulsory sterilization of people to be, as Bell called them, a *defective variety of the human race*<sup>6</sup> In this respect

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<sup>5</sup> As stated in *Eugenics: Its Definition, Scope, and Aims*. The American Journal of Sociology. X (1): 82, 1st paragraph by Galton, Francis (July 1904): eugenic is a set of beliefs and practices that wants to improve the genetic quality of the human population. The aim of this social philosophy is to create a perfect human race by supporting the reproduction of individuals with desired traits and the sterilization of individuals with undesired traits.

<sup>6</sup>Lusane, Clarence in her *Hitler's Black Victims: The Historical Experiences of Afro-Germans, European Blacks, Africans, and African Americans in the Nazi Era*(2003) analyses the effects that the Californian Eugenics laws had on the Nazi Germany in late 1930s. The California's compulsory sterilization law was adopted by the Third Reich as a model for the domination on the expendable minorities.

Cardona and Volterra remark that

«La lettura in chiave ‘razziale’ della contrapposizione tra oralismo e manualismo non è che la più evidente manifestazione della confusione profonda a proposito del ruolo della comunità sorda, del suo statuto intermedio tra condizione biologica e dimensione socioculturale e svela, ancora una volta, i timori che da sempre questa condizione di ‘diversità’ suscita nei sostenitori dell’ordine costituito.»(Cardona and Volterra 2007) <sup>7</sup>

The end of the Second World War brought a significant class change that allowed the development of a new deaf middle class. One reason is the general economic improvement that the end of the war brought to the United States. Class change brought a desire for a different self image that reflected a new status. Along with the desire of a different image of themselves, the deaf middle class craved for a renovation fo the old language and discourse about them, which suddenly seemed to be inaccurate, inappropriate, and undignified (Humphries 2008).

Therefore, eighty years later the Congress of Milan, William Stokoe (1919-2000) publishes his revolutionary research about Sign language and strikes a blow for the sign method. Stokoe painstakingly analysed and catalogued thousand of signs according to their *phonological* category. This analysis was shocking to both Deaf and hearing people, not because signs were catalogued, but because Stokoe employed linguistic analysis and terminology to explain a finding-that sign language is indeed a language- which seemed to contradict all earlier scientific explanations (Eastman 1980). After his work, it is undeniably clear that Sign language is the result of a dense union of nature, culture, biology and history, and that the biologic dimension binds the heart of the language with the sociological and linguistic dimension. With its "Sign Language Structure: An Outline of the Visual

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<sup>7</sup>«The ‘racial’ point of view of the confrontation between manualism and oralism it is nothing but the most evident demonstration of the deep confusion about the role of the deaf community, of his half-biological condition and half-sociological dimension. It reveals once more the timeless fear that this condition of “diversity” creates in the supporters of established order.»

Communication Systems of the American Deaf" (1960), Stokoe, trained as a structural linguist, makes the all important breakthrough at Gallaudet University and his assertion that Sign languages are *bona fide* languages was confirmed by subsequent research. In the first page of his research he states that:

«The primary purpose of this paper is to bring within the purview of linguistics a virtually unknown language, the Sign language of the American deaf. Rigorous linguistic methodology applied to this language system of visual symbols has led to conclusions about its structure which add to the sum of linguistic knowledge. Moreover, the analysis of the isolates of this language has led the writer to devise a method of transcription that will expedite the study of any gestural communication system with the depth and complexity characteristic of language.» (Stokoe 1960:7)

Thanks to the demonstration that analyses spoken language and Sign Language, the latter can be finally considered a real language under every aspects. However, many deaf following the dominance of ideas of hearing about them, were content to say that sign language was not a real language. This research was of inestimable value to Deaf communities, once their languages were confirmed to be the equal of spoken languages, other important discourses could begin(Ladd 2003). What Stokoe did not know, that these lines were about to start of a revolution: the revolution of the Deaf community.

## **1.2 In search of *deaf*initions**

In this section I aim to analyse the fundamental role that a language plays for a ethnic community such as the Deaf community

### **1.2.1 Of language recognition**

The development conducted by Stokoe, almost at a stroke, placed many of the philosophical issues of preceding centuries back on the agenda, albeit



in modern form: linguistic autonomy is one logical explanation for why the Deaf moved on to a discourse of language and culture in 1960s (Humphries 2008). Sign language linguistics posed central challenges to many aspects of mainstream linguistic theory and via neurolinguistics and psycholinguistics (Bellugi and E. 1979; Sacks 1989), ironically opened up channels by which the medical model itself might be subverted. Once the Deaf were recognized as linguistic group, it was but a short step to perceive them as cultural communities, thus empowering pioneering works within the traditional disciplines. However, with the exception of linguistics, these texts have at present had only minimal impact on the disciplines in which they operate, although of course they have been influential in changing the discourse tides. Perhaps a primary marker of their value is in their contribution to the development of the discipline of Deaf Studies itself (Ladd 2003). The *empowerment* of the Deaf community is thus a chain of which the first ring is the research about language: Sign Language has been the first step for the first acknowledgement of the linguistic and then cultural community. This proves the centrality of a language for a community in search of identity, and the relation that unifies language and culture:

«The mother tongue is an aspect of the soul of a people. It is their achievement par excellence. Language is the surest way for individuals to safeguard or recover the authenticity they inherited from their ancestors as well as to hand it on to generations yet unborn.»(Fishman 1977:276)

The first waves of these linguistic research arrived in Italy in the 70's, where Montanini Manfredi, Facchini and Fruggeri in 1979(Facchini, Manfredi Montanini, and Fruggeri 1979) published a volume that gathers all of the American articles and highlights the problem of languages and underlines the importance of language ability as one of the peculiar characteristics of humankind. However the first scholar who published a volume about the Italian Sign language<sup>8</sup>, is Virginia Volterra, that presented in 1981 "*I segni*

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<sup>8</sup>namely LIS, Lingua dei Segni Italiana

*come parole: la comunicazione dei sordi*", in cooperation with other scholars (Volterra 1981)) that contributed to its creation and followed by the one written by Attili and Ricci Bitti in 1983 (Attili and Ricci Bitti 1983).

With this volume, Volterra explores for the first time the Deaf World from an Italian perspective, in light of the research conducted in the United States and seems to draw the first embryonic shape of the theorization of LIS. The vocabulary of her work is still ingenuous, a sense of genuine curiosity emerges and we find many improper words (*linguaggio dei segni, gesti* and others) that have been corrected later with a developing awareness. However, thanks to this volume the Italian Sign language is analysed and hopefully observed, and in 1987 the author publishes an updated version of the 1981 book.

Even if Sign language helped the Deaf communities to be acknowledged as linguistic communities, Fontana and Zuccalà (Fontana and Zuccalà 2009) support the theory that at present time it has not received the academic attention it deserved. One of the most important task of anthropology is to define targets and to create inquiry methodology to understand what is diverse from us. The interest for the humankind of the anthropologist let them compare diverse cultures and understand how the existing communities can make the world a meaningful place. The studies of post-colonialism contributed to the elimination of hierarchy of cultural and linguistic systems, highlighting their single uniqueness, dignity and richness (Fontana and Zuccalà 2012). After the colonialism era, every culture and every language has been considered equal and interesting thanks to the observation of its social structure, the cultural activities and rituals. However, due to historical and cultural reason the Sign languages were excluded from the cultural critique.

As already seen, it is necessary to wait until Stokoe, until the 60's of the 21<sup>th</sup> century to see an interest growing for the Sign languages. The Sign language becomes interesting because was studied through the lens of disability, integration, institution and linguistic anthropology. The disability point of view led to topics such as prevention, diagnosis and cure, while the integration one led to discourse such as diversity, equal opportunities

and diverse abilities. The institutional perspective led to discourse about the acknowledgement and the possible facilitations, and the linguistic anthropology to the concepts of culture, community and linguistic minority. Anyway, the interest for Sign languages remains merely a way to talk about something else. (Fontana and Zuccalà 2012)

Philosophers, pedagogues and linguists<sup>9</sup> have used the concept of deafness and Sign language as a conceptual category of something diverse in order to reflect about the origin of language, or the challenges that such a hearing deprivation throws down to the development of the languages. As Volterra also states, the aim of the first volume of American research about deafness and sign language was to

«evidenziare soprattutto l'estrema rilevanza storica che il problema del linguaggio dei segni ha per chiunque sia interessato a indagare più a fondo le caratteristiche della capacità linguistica, in quanto capacità peculiare della specie umana.» (Volterra 1981:9)

The aim of many "allied" scholars with the Deaf World, was to extend the linguistic models of vocal languages to the Sign language in order to prove that the Sign Language is a real language under every aspects. That means that the Deaf community has to prove that some feature of its language are in common with the vocal language as a proof of evidence for the existence of a real language called Sign Language. However this appears to be an inevitable comparison, a step was to be taken in the Deaf history, even if led to an excessive focus on the research of common points with spoken languages and to an underestimation of the uniqueness of the Deaf culture *per se*.

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<sup>9</sup>Paddy Ladd describes a third figure involved inside the process of acknowledgement of the Deaf Community, except the Deaf people and the professionals which hold power over the community: the lay people, or mainstream members for Burgio, G. (2009) . He states that “the concept of the lay person is central to the entire process by which we must approach Deaf issues. I define such a person as anyone who is neither directly employed within Deaf-related domains, nor within adjacent professional domains.” It could happens that “the views and attitudes of ordinary people are either more positive or less damaging than those held by the professions which hold power over our communities

The comparison with spoken languages that opened new perspectives to the Deaf cultures offers a key of interpretation of the problems that an ethnic group such as the Deaf one has to face to be recognised by mainstream world meant as those who detain power. Burgio supports the idea that an oppressed group such as the Deaf or the Gay ones need to have the combination of three sociological element to make its existence relevant to the mainstream world. He states that:

«Visibilità, consistenza numerica e caratterizzazione sociologica, nonché la loro reciproca interazione, sono gli elementi che definiscono un gruppo che non sia solamente oppresso ma che fornisca anche una "copertura" simbolica ai suoi membri.» (Burgio 2012:55)

Among the three elements listed in the quotation, it is interesting to take the visibility in consideration because its relation with the issue of comparison between oral and sign languages. As already stated, the Sign Language has attracted the interest of the academic world right after the comparison with the already studied spoken languages. It can be seen with a metaphor of a mirror: the spoken languages watch their image reflected on the mirror, that represents the Sign Language. This means that spoken languages have no real interest in studying and analysing the mirror *per se*, but want to use it merely to inquiry hidden parts of their aspects.

The academic world has underlined and deeply analysed the Sign language to satisfy a kind of linguistic narcissism that take in consideration just what can please it and exclude the other fundamental branches of it, just as culture. This comparison, this reflection of spoken languages inside the Sign language has been both the umpteenth underlining of mainstream individualism and the fortune for visibility of the Deaf group.<sup>10</sup> As matter

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<sup>10</sup>Fontana and Zuccalà underline that there is another kind of interest in the Sign language: «Del resto il primario interesse per la sordità oggi, da parte di chi non ha legami diretti e quotidiani con essa - genitori, figli, professionisti, studiosi . è rappresentato da quella percezione della differenza che si declina per lo più in interesse per il "linguaggio in altra modalità": le persone udenti spesso vengono attratte non tanto dalla sordità quando dalla "lingua dei sordi".»

of fact, after the studies of Stokoe the visibility of the Deaf group increased and the process of empowerment began.

In conclusion of this consideration, in light of what has been affirmed, I can state that being the mirror of the mainstream group was the pledge for visibility of the Deaf group, and that the existence of an identity such as the Deaf one is made visible and relevant just in reflection of the mainstream culture.

### 1.2.2 Of normality and abnormality

«One cannot see that a person is deaf until he or she speaks. An inaudible, nonphonetic language springs into view, flashing about the hands. One first sees this disability only when discovering one's own inability to read Sign or gesture language, more like a gestural counterpart of deafness itself like illiteracy. Deafness exemplifies disabilities as difference, an alternative path to language, speech and writing – "differently abled." Deafness is, in this sense, national or ethnic identity, a minority culture distinguished by its language; and indeed the Deaf have been pioneers in thinking of disability as a political issue. They raise the question: What is it to be "able"? What is "-ability"?» (Mitchell 2001:396)

The concept that prevents Deaf people from being acknowledged by the hearing people with the officialness of the Sign Language in many country such as Italy is the accepted and shared concept of *normality*. The collective consciousness consider the deafness an illness that can be cured with an early diagnosis, neonatal screening, prevention and cochlear implants. The aim of these interventions is to cure the deaf individual, seen as an ill body, something that needs to be repaired and brought to a hearing normal status and socially accepted condition<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup>with regards to the social accepted condition, it is interesting to recall a public moment, on the American television program *Sixty Minutes*, in which Gallaudet University's president, I. King Jordan, was asked if he would like to be hearing. He replied:«That's

In this context the deafness is seen as a symbol of alterity, a “nonstandard condition” (Fontana and Zuccalà 2012), and Sign language an imperfect and limited language, a primitive way of communication, a “body-emotional-gestual expression from which the whole humanity must distance itself because of the power of writing/reading.” (Fontana and Zuccalà 2012) Moreover, before all the studies that highlighted the existence of the Sign language as a real language, Klima and Bellugi state that they

«had read that Sign language is ‘a collection of vague and loosely defined pictorial gestures’; that it is a pantomime; that it is ‘much too much concrete, too broken in pieces’; that ‘Sign language deals mainly with material objects, dreads and avoids the abstract’; that ‘sign language has disadvantages, especially those of grammatical disorder, illogical systems, and linguistic confusion’; that Sign language has ‘no grammar; that it is ‘derived from English, a pidgin form of English on the hands with no structure of its own.» (Bellugi and E. 1979:3).

Sign language provoked scandal just as the mental illness, so it needed to be confined into psychiatric hospitals. Mental illness and deafness have a common story, given the fact that the Deaf were considered retarded, schizophrenic and perverse. Even nowadays, it is hard to talk about the Deaf culture as a treasure, to define the Deaf community characteristics, to define the cochlear transplantation as an *ethnocide* (Ladd 2003), given the high value that the medical community confers this object, the *bionic* instrument that gives the hearing back to the Deaf. Lane explains that Deaf people are not to consider as disabled group in need of medical cures and there are four reason to support this theory:

«deaf people themselves do not believe they have a disability;  
the disability construction brings with it needless medical and

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almost like asking a black person if he would rather be white ... I don't think of myself as missing something or as incomplete. (...) It's a common fallacy if you don't know Deaf people or Deaf issues. You think it's a limitation» see more in FINE AND FINE, P. (Executive Producers). (1990, March). Sixty Minutes. New York, NY: Columbia Broadcasting System., 1990

surgical risks for the Deaf child; it also endangers the future of the Deaf-World; finally, the disability construction brings bad solutions to real problems because it is predicated on a misunderstanding.» (Lane 2005:291)

The reason why the Deaf<sup>12</sup> people have been often prevented from communicating with a spontaneous Sign language is clear: they have been led to a homogenization process, where everything had to be brought closer to a concept of normality, where what was normal or not was determined by the mainstream hearing culture. For those who feel part of the Deaf-World the language is the cornerstone of their community, and to deprive an ethnic group its communication faculty means to deny its view of the world (Lane 1984).

Only in the past 250 years, Deaf community found itself strong and self-determined, thanks to recognition of the true nature of their being-in-the-world. Due to the studies conducted by Stokoe, the Sign language becomes border and symbol of belonging for the Deaf community.

The process of self-acknowledgement has its roots in different sociological elements on the structure of a community. These elements are connected to each other and form the base of a community, the breeding ground from which the community takes its energy. They form a net on which the story of the community is written. The community finds in these elements the reason why of its existence and it is deeply influenced by how these elements are combined together. For the particular case of the Deaf group, these elements have been researched for a long time, to assure the community a solid structure and to make its members feel united and safe within its borders. The effort made by diverse scholars<sup>13</sup> to compare the Sign language to the other vocal languages, to pose central challenges to aspects mainstream linguistic,

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<sup>12</sup>This contrast is underlined by the different use of Deaf with capital 'D' and deaf with a small 'd' in scholarly literature, in order to separate the medical condition of deafness and the status of those, who were born Deaf or became Deaf in early age. Those who entered the community from an early stage of life are Sign language users and "have created a linguistic and cultural environment in which they take both comfort and pride" (see more in Ladd 2003).

<sup>13</sup>see: Stokoe 1960; Bellugi and E. 1979; Volterra 1981; Sacks 1989

history, anthropology, psychiatry, artistic and politic theories<sup>14</sup>, and thus the attempts of convincing the academic world that the Sign language is a proper language, has been obscured by the negation of this evidence by the mainstream oralist group. The hostility that the hearing world feels towards this language is due to the particular communication dimension of the Sign languages. This dimension appears to be completely different from the one used by the *homo loquens*, the model of normality: in history this model has been carried out by philosophical movements such as Eugenics as seen before in this dissertation. Bell was not alone when pursued the Eugenics cause, when he theorized the existence of a perfect model of human individual, and persuade governments and people to follow the abhorrent aim of sterilize deaf people in order to stop the *propagation of the illness*. This sense of diversity has its roots in the act of confrontation with individuals not considered *normal*: it goes without saying that the mainstream majority finds the language used by the Deaf inferior and even risky. The vocal languages and the Sign languages have different communication modalities, the comparison between them were made only to prove the superiority of spoken languages.

As an example, Ong 1982 made us reflect about how the writing had a deep influence on the organization of modern thought, stating that who writes talks and thinks differently from those, who live in an oral dimension. The two worlds are divided by a dichotomy that generate a difficulty in comprehension, and this dichotomy can be perfectly applied to the distance between hearing and deaf world. The hearings have changed their thinking process thanks to the process of writing that modified their talking process as well: those who write organize their thoughts differently and use some verbal forms that they would not use if they could not write. Another remarkable characteristic of those who write is the fact that they consider banal and naïve every other way of communication that do not use the write form. «Because the thought based on orality does not follow these patterns, the literates consider this organization ingenuous.»(Ong 1982:56)

The contact of the hearing world with the Deaf dimension might have

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<sup>14</sup> see: Denmark 1981; Lane 1984; Groce 1985; ; Wrigley 1996; Jankowski 1997



diverse reactions: on one hand, curiosity, wish of contact, learning and a kind of emotional enthusiasm towards the context of deafness. On the other hand, it is possible to find alienation, estrangement, denial by those scholars who refuse the idea of a comparison between sign and vocal languages and by those, who identify in Sign Language the *anti-word* (Fontana and Zuccalà 2012), a form of marginalization of a disabled group, or more, the ostentation of a handicap. The groups, that exclude the possibility of a Sign language as a proper language, believe in the concept of normality as an inalienable right of the individuals, and believe that the Deaf that use the Sign language cannot be included in this right.

In respect of what it is considered normal, it is not difficult to find a episode in which a public figure draws a line between the so-called normality and sub normality, by openly calling a Deaf person “retarded”. Some episodes of racism happened in 2011 recently emerged on The Daily Beast thanks to some witnesses that decided to report it to the press (*Daily Beast* 2016). The episode involves the American presidential candidate Donald Trump<sup>15</sup> who called the deaf actor Marlee Matlin ‘retarded’ during her stint on *Celebrity Apprentice* in 2011. The witnesses are some staffers of the show that decided to report these episodes and decided to remain anonymous.

Matlin is an American actor, she won an Academy Award for the Best Female Leading Role in 1986 with the movie “Children of a lesser God”, she is the only Deaf performer to win the award, and she is a prominent member of the National Association of the Deaf as well. According to the press «Trump, who was accused of making sexual comments to Marlee Matlin, who once competed on Trump’s *Celebrity Apprentice*, also apparently had a habit of insulting, mimicking, and demeaning as mentally handicapped his star female contestant.» According to the three long time staffers who worked on Matlin’s season of *Celebrity Apprentice*, Trump would regularly disrespect the actress and would even treat her as if she were mentally disabled. The day after this article was published on The Daily Beast the actor responded

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<sup>15</sup>this paragraph was written few days before the election of November, 9th, when the election of this man as the representative of the United States of America was just as unlikely as wacky.

with a post to Twitter. She states that she finds unacceptable to use this word in such a delicate moment of the history of the United States. She does not condemn Trump for his statements but she is horrified by this word. Then she proudly underlines that she is deaf, and that

«there here are millions of Deaf and hard of hearing people like me, in the United States and around the world who face discrimination and misunderstanding like this on a daily basis.» (*Daily Beast* 2016)

In conclusion, she pinpoints that the most powerful weapon we have in our hands is our right to vote. This is just one famous episode that became famous because of the popularity of the two parts involved, but is one in a million that happen every day in the world. The fact that is a presidential candidate<sup>16</sup> who calls *retarded* a famous deaf actor, make the episode even more serious. In his figure it is possible to recall the superficial layer of the distance that the hearings put between them and the Deaf, he is the symbol for all of those person who are not against Sign language or the Deaf, but even do not ask themselves a question about what it is diverse from them<sup>17</sup>. This episode explains a lot about how much the Deaf need to struggle before seeing their status and their language acknowledged.

### 1.2.3 Of Deafhood and deafness

Considering the stories of the Deaf and hearing people<sup>18</sup> who feel part of the Deaf-World, their emotions and feelings, Ladd found himself coining a new label: *deafhood*. This term is anything to relate to the medical condition of deafness, rather it represents the «process – the struggle by each Deaf child, family and Deaf adult to explain themselves and each other their own existence to the world» (Ladd 2003).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>which is now president, one of the most powerful person in the world

<sup>17</sup>see Ladd, lay people

<sup>18</sup>«la *sordità* non è una prerogativa che determina l'appartenenza alla comunità dei sordi e non è sufficiente essere sordi per possedere una cultura sorda.» (Zinna 2010:8)

<sup>19</sup>It is important to underline, that not all of the deaf people belong to the Deaf World. There is larger group called deaf and hearing impaired and these must be divided from

Ladd explains that for the Deaf people who lost their hearing at early age, the issue of loss has no meaningful reality and on the contrary, feel proud of their linguistic and cultural environment. To confirm this term, it could be interesting to compare the Deaf to the blind and gay people. Alker (Alker 2000) states that no one would suggest that spectacle wearers and blind people inhabit the same conceptual space. One would not consider the millions of people in the United Kingdom who wear glasses to be blind – that designation is reserved for the 10,000 or so who are officially registered as such (Alker 2000). Burgio also states that

«Sentirsi culturalmente Sordo significa identificarsi con uno spazio sociale positivo e composto da pari, quale quello della comunità dei sordi. Così come essere gay non significa tanto andare a letto con persone del proprio sesso, quanto essere coinvolto nella socialità gay.» (Burgio 2012)

The term *deafhood* reflects the different shades of what being a Deaf person in a Deaf community might mean, it proves the existence of a community ruled by its social rules, language and culture. This might be obvious to the Deaf, but centuries of predominant mainstream cultures have darkened and oppressed the existence of the Deaf reality, labelling the Deaf community as a disability group and preventing it from finding the way to a shared language and a clear ground to build a culture of minority. In many ways a large part of speech therapists, oralists, eugenic supporters and psychologists had tried to prevent the Deaf from accessing to one the most important conjunction element of an ethnic community: a common language. Although the self-acknowledgement the Deaf have been subjugated by Oralism, that is the set of policies used by those professions which hold power over the Deaf communities to prevent them from using the Sign language and teach them

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the Deaf-World as they do not consider themselves part of Deaf Community. They «communicate primarily in spoken languages; they do not use its language, participate in its organizations, profess its values, or behave in accord with its mores; rather, they consider themselves hearing people with a disability» (Lane 2005:291). There are many oral deaf adults, who hardly feel part of the Deaf Community because they consider they just have hearing impairment and because of their early education in a hearing context.

to speak. And to let a community have its own language means to let it achieve a political status, an instrument to get social empowerment.

According to Fontana and Zuccalà, some characteristics of the Deaf community are fundamental for the elaboration of effective models of analysis that concern both the structure and the relational dimension, and it is necessary to consider them as mobile and not fixed. One of this characteristic is for sure the language, which is undeniably one of the pillar on which the community is built, a lens through which it is possible to observe the variegated face of an ethnic group such as the Deaf one. Sign language is the symbol of distinction that let the Deaf find their place inside their community with a positive distance that disagree with the condition of diversity based on the acoustical deficit meant as a handicap; the strength of an official Sign Language becomes the instrument to increase and reinforce the empowerment of the Deaf community.

«Dunque, non semplicemente il linguaggio è fondante della realtà sociale; è la consapevolezza di ciò che è e rappresenta il proprio linguaggio a ribaltare la prospettiva della percezione della sordità da patologico a socio-culturale.»(Fontana and Zuccalà 2012)

In their text about the change of perspective of what was “the language of the Deaf”, that is now the Sign Language, Fontana and Zuccalà underline that the construction of a Deaf socio-linguistic path has always to face the linguistic reality and socio-cultural context of the mainstream hearing majority. The mistake of this interpretation of social context could be the ethnocentrism, as first studies about deaf cultures show, that tends to focus on the distance between Deaf and hearing community rather than the main characteristics of a the group, trying to succeed in an self-determination process. Nevertheless, deafhood as theorized by Ladd, is a condition that includes various identification paths(Fontana and Zuccalà 2012) built by the educational and different choices made by the families. The characteristics of the international Deaf community are so peculiar that tend to make the socio-linguistic categories useless. As we have seen in the last section, the attempts made to succeed in a self-determination process manage to high-

light the comparison with vocal languages and to obscure the peculiarity of sign languages, making the borders of deafhood even harder to define<sup>20</sup>.

#### 1.2.4 Of diversity and difference

What we have just analysed, is one of the of the modality by which the Deaf world and the rest of the world get in touch and interact. The relation of the Deaf group with the mainstream world is undeniably unbalanced in favour of the obvious predominance of the mainstream powerful group over the Deaf, that have been subjugated by different means, one of these is being labelled with the category of disability. However, the relation between the two social groups is fundamental to the existence of both, as Young states,

«I modi della costituzione dei gruppi sono in stretta relazione con le dinamiche della più vasta compagine sociale: un gruppo sociale esiste e si struttura in relazione ad almeno un altro gruppo.»  
(Young 1990:36)

The contact between the two groups results to be necessary to the proof of evidence of the existence of the minority group such as the Deaf. With respect to the existence of a Deaf group, diverse anthropologists reflect about the identification of the nature of the group in order to take distance from the label of disability given by the hearing majority. While Burgio poses the question whether Deaf people can be considered a community, a minority and social group (Burgio 2012), Lane focuses on the apology of the ethnic group (Lane 2005) against the categorisation of disability. Professor Lane underlines that

«in societies in which Sign language use is mostly restricted to Deaf people, hearing people commonly see being Deaf as a serious problem requiring professional intervention; but in societies in which Sign language use is widespread because of a substantial

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<sup>20</sup> «Deafhood is not seen as a finite state but as a process by which Deaf individuals come to actualise their Deaf identity, positing that those individuals construct that identity around several differently ordered sets of priority and principles» (Ladd 2003).

Deaf population –on Martha’s Vineyard and Bali, for example– being Deaf is simply seen as a trait, not a disability» (Lane 2005:296).

Many Deaf scholars reject the label of disability not because they want to avoid stigma associated with disability (Ladd 2003), which would be to give them little credit. Rather, they reject it because it *does not compute* (Humphries 1993). Lane then makes a list of ethnic *properties* by which it is clear that the Deaf group can be considered an ethnic group rather than a disabled group: these are collective name, customs, feeling of community, social structure, norms for behaviour, language, values, art forms, knowledge and history<sup>21</sup>.

Young add some interesting guidelines in order to define the identity of a group: Deaf people can be considered a social group as long as it relates to another group, which is the mainstream group. Then, as Young states,

«un gruppo sociale è definito in primo luogo non da un insieme di attributi comuni, bensì dal senso di identità» (Young 1990:38)

As we have seen, the sense of belonging to the Deaf community is a synonymous for Deafhood, that explains the pride of feeling part of the Deaf group as its active members. The relation with the external world underlines the definition of identity, that according to Young is a matter of how an individual is seen and labelled from the outside. The forces from the outside that label an individual according to its characteristics make a group get together and form a social group. According to Young, in fact, the identity

«(...) si definisce in relazione al modo in cui gli altri ci identificano, e gli altri ci identificano in riferimento ad alcuni gruppi. (...) a volte un gruppo diventa tale soltanto perchè un altro gruppo esclude una categoria di persone e le attribuisce una certa etichetta, e solo a poco a poco le persone così etichettate arrivano

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<sup>21</sup>see more in Lane 2005

a vedersi come appartenenti a un gruppo, in base all'oppressore.»  
(Young 1990:38)

In light of this definition Deaf people could be considered just a social group, but Italian scholars of the Deaf issues prefer to use the terms minority and community. Burgio states that:

«I sordi sono all'interno di un processo di soggettivizzazione come quello già percorso, ad esempio, dagli omosessuali, ma che non abbiano completato tale processo.» (Burgio 2012:53)

Until 1940, the Italian government used to define Deaf people *incapaci di intendere e di volere*, therefore insane people rather than human subjects (Collu 2009). A lot has been done to overturn this perception of deafness, to turn deafness from *diverse* - identified starting from a loss and opposed to a normality concept - to *different* -among the others that cross the social context (Burgio 2012). As Fontana and Zuccalà state:

«Questo rovesciamento di prospettiva, da deficit a cultura, non è altro che la ricerca e l'espressione di una voce propria delle persone sorde: né volontà di auto segregazione, né negazione della disabilità, ma attribuzione di senso al proprio vissuto, che da esperienza privata diviene patrimonio collettivo.» (Fontana and Zuccalà 2012)

Burgio compares this kind of changing movement to the one of the LGBT<sup>22</sup> group, which struggled to «de-patologizzare l'omosessualità per farla accettare non come diversità ma come una differenza interna alla variegata sessualità umana» (Burgio 2012) In fact, the Deaf community wants to affirm its culture following the example of the LGBT community, an oppressed community as well, that managed to be a united minority, to face the *stigma* and to give value to its cultural specificity with its literature, art and poetry. The Deaf community builds its culture to show it as a face to

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<sup>22</sup>Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transexual

the mainstream culture, as a undeniable proof of existence of the group. For this reason Burgio states that it is important for this process to move from a community status to a social group. In conclusion, it has already been said, that there is a distinction between the use of the word deaf and Deaf. Burgio add another theory and value to the different use of these word: he supports all of the theory about Deafness presented by Ladd and proposes his social interpretation. He distinguishes *Sordo* from *sordo*, stating that the first one is for a cultural-acknowledged individual while the second one is to indicate an individual affected by hearing loss. Then add that

«Tale distinzione si basa sull'ipotesi che una denominazione possa diventare un'emblema di un'identità di gruppo e, quindi, fonte di rivendicazione di diritti politici e sociali, così come per gli omosessuali è avvenuto attraverso il passaggio da *invertito*, *finocchio* a *gay*.» (Burgio 2012:54)

Burgio wants to underline the power of words, and paraphrase the famous quotation of the feminist Simone de Beauvoir, by which one is not born, but rather becomes a woman, to impress the concept of Deaf-deaf. He states that «sordo si nasce, ma Sordo, cioè membro consapevole di una comunità e di una cultura sorda si diventa, attraverso un processo politico e sociale.»(Burgio 2012) A different use of a word means a different perspective on the concept that that word represents. This theory about the use of the capital letter is far more than a style clarification, or a point made to avoid stigma, rather a social and political instrument to use to claim elementary rights to protect the value of difference.

## 1.3 In search of walls and bridges

### 1.3.1 Language and Culture

«Una collettività può essere definita una comunità quando i suoi membri agiscono reciprocamente e nei confronti di altri, non appartenenti alla collettività stessa, antepoendo più o meno consapevolmente I valori, le norme, I costume, gli interessi della



collettività, considerate come un tutto, a quelli personali o del proprio sotto-gruppo o di altre collettività.» (Gallino 1983:144)

In this section, I aim to investigate the importance of the Sign Language and the Deaf culture as fundamental elements for the structure of the Deaf community.

The structure of this section derives from the idea that Sign language and Deaf culture are the bases on which the Deaf community is built. In order to analyse the importance of language for the Deaf community it is necessary to underline the status of minority of the Deaf group, which lives surrounded by a majority with which shares some features. As an example, an American Deaf is still and American like a hearing person. Moreover, Ladd states that each Deaf communities share characteristics, which indicate a profound cultural commonality, but each Deaf culture is almost certainly nation-specific. This fact underlines the commonality of the deaf minority with the majority culture.

Another important analysis to bring on is the discourse about borders and confines of the community as the lines on which the communication action happens. Berruto (Berruto 1999) pinpoints the importance of the analysis of the linguistic event and the communicative behaviour to define the borders of the community. The nature of a community can be observed by the use of the language used within its borders and how the communicative events unify its members and make the structure of the community solid. Given the fact that the Deaf community is a minority surrounded by hearing, Fontana and Zuccalà find two different dimension of analysis of the community: an exocentric and an endocentric dimension. The exocentric level comprehends the relation with the external community, a relation that involves deaf and hearing people. The endocentric level refers to the inner circle of the community, that involves the communicative action between the members of the group. Fontana and Zuccalà state that

«Nel caso della comunità sorda edificata sulla consapevolezza linguistica è un concetto relazionale che emerge da un processo che si realizza in modo discontinuo nei vari membri della comunità,

non solo in relazione ad innumerevoli variabili legate alle diverse percezioni di sordità, ma anche al livello di partecipazione alla vita sociale della comunità.» (Fontana and Zuccalà 2012)

Language and culture seem to incorporate both of these two levels, given the fact that they take action both inside and outside the circle of the community. Both language and culture could be defined with the metaphor of bricks, which compose a wall that face inside and outside the community at the same time with two faces: they are bricks that compose the walls that define the borders and the bridges that led outside the community, towards the outside world.

Fontana and Zuccalà affirm that:

«La comunità è una costellazione di azioni sociali centripete, cioè tese ad educare la comunità stessa a liberarsi dall'oppressore promuovendo la consapevolezza linguistica nella comunità, e centrifughe, volte a costruire l'autodeterminazione nella maggioranza udente. Il confine nasce dalla contrapposizione tra le spinte normalizzatrici e assimilatrici, e il tentativo di promuovere la consapevolezza linguistico-sociale e l'autodeterminazione.» (Fontana and Zuccalà 2012)

With regard to what has been said so far in this dissertation, culture and language can be considered as two forces in a minority culture. They can be imagined as two social actions that push in two opposite directions, inside and outside the community, with opposite and equal strength. As seen before, language unifies the members of a community by giving them a shared language: this can be analysed as a *centripetal* movement, a social action that combines the walls of a community. At the same time, language could be seen with a multiple metaphor, both a brick on the wall and a bridge that brings to the outside: this could be considered the *centrifugal* movement that gives the chance to the Deaf community to explain itself to the world. These two forces face the internal and external world, and put them in communication; these two bricks connect the community with the

outside world and represent the physical borders that contain members and their social rules. In this case, language is a flag, under which a community gathers to find the answers of its existence issues. In the case of the Deaf community, Sign Language has been the cementum, the decisive step to demonstrate to the hearing majority its existence and pride. As the professor Lane states,

«The more Deaf people celebrate their language and culture, the more they affirm their distinct identity, the more they reinforce the boundary delineating them from the hearing world. Language comes first for it always plays a powerful role in maintaining ethnic boundaries, but especially so in the case of Deaf people because hearing people are rarely fluent in visual language and members of the Deaf-World are rarely fluent in spoken languages.»(Lane 2005:294)

At the same time, culture of a minority community shows the same dualism characteristics of centripetal and centrifugal movements of the language. It pushes the essence of the community inside it to reinforce its inner structure and is its watchtower that can be seen from the external world.

«For culture is the key held in common with other colonises peoples and linguistic minorities. Both the key and the lock in which it turns is culture. A people may exist without a living language unique to themselves, but without a culture there is no people.» (Ladd 2003:14)

As professor Ladd states, without culture there is no people, there is no members of a community which gather and join together their existence within the boundaries drawn by culture. Learning about other people's culture is challenging, and the description and explication of minority people's cultures requires considerable resources and patience, but defining our own white Western majority can be difficult as well. Can one define what the American or the French culture mean? Can be they resumed in few sen-

tences? It is still difficult, however «therein lies the crucial distinction between majority and minority cultures - the former are under no obligation either to make explicit the beliefs which drive their actions, let alone to have to justify their actual existence.»(Ladd 2003)

If culture is important to all the Western communities, is fundamental to the Deaf one. Culture and all of its forms are crucial for a minority culture such as the Deaf community. It supports the basis of the group and can be its ensign inside the majority mainstream group. Deaf culture is articulated in many forms: the most known and appreciated are the ones that involves the *performing arts*.

These form of culture have been a real ensign inside the mainstream community: they have been able to attract many hearings to the Deaf World, and at the same time they managed to keep deaf people together, gathering them around shared principles which are celebrated inside the Deaf cultural forms. Deaf cultural studies are relatively young and are now living a period of rebirth and experimentation that started about the 70's in the United States of America. As we will see, the Deaf performing art forms are many and variegated, such as poetry, music, Visual Vernacular, dance and theatre.

All of these performing arts go with culture in the centripetal and centrifugal movement around the community. They are the fingers of a hand which gathers all the Deaf people together and at the same time is the representative of the community outside its borders. They are boundaries and ensigns. Walls and bridges that keeps the Deaf people together, free from an oppressive environment, and bridges that connect and represent them in the outside world.

### **1.3.2 A step forward**

At this point of the first chapter of this research work, after the needed premises to step into the Deaf World, I would like to move on to the main point of this dissertation. The premises I have made are fundamental to take a journey into a specific aspect of Deaf culture which I would like to face from this point on.

In the last sections, supported by the considerations of anthropologists, psychologists and sociologists, I aimed to describe the metaphoric trajectory that culture and language draw inside and outside the a minority community, in this particular case in the Deaf community. From this point on, for the next chapters of this dissertation I aim to focus especially on the Deaf Culture, in particular the artistic culture that comprehends performing arts. The pattern I would like to follow is a scheme based on the cultural contamination that could derive from the contact between two cultures.

The aim of the following chapter is to reflect about integration and Deaf identity through the lens of performing arts: theatre, dance, music. I will take into account diverse example of performing arts that concern the Deaf Culture or just the use of Sign Language and I will try to analyse them by applying a scheme that focus on the connections that these artistic forms draw between the Deaf and hearing world. The focus on these performing arts that put together Deaf and hearing culture together draws a circular scheme that can be seen as a *cultural contamination scheme*. Main subject of this research is the cultural contamination that through the performing arts opens a research discussion in which it is possible to divide artistic forms in two categories characterized by two diverse functions. In the first one I will analyse the various performances that bind the two dimensions starting from the Deaf and ending in the hearing, fulfilling a function of Deaf *representation* in the mainstream world. The second category contains all that sort of performance that connect the hearing to the deaf world carrying out a function of *inclusion*. The analysis will take in consideration the definition of Deaf identity and will be questioning about the meaning of words such as integration and inclusion through the instrument of performing arts, that will be considered in the centripetal and centrifugal movements theorised for Language and Culture.

## Chapter 2

# Deaf Performing arts

«Il teatro come espressione culturale rientra in quella forma d'arte che si propone di rappresentare storie di fronte ad un pubblico attraverso la combinazione di vari elementi: la parola, la danza, la musica, i gesti, i suoni.» (Zinna 2010:61)

In this chapter I aim to analyse the connecting nature of performing arts. As I have already stated in the last chapter, performing arts such as drama, dance, and music, - artistic forms that involve performance before an audience - are the one of the way of expression of a culture. Therefore, they could be analysed as extensions to the concept of culture, as bridges that bring the culture of a ethnic community such as the Deaf one to the outside of its essence. Giving space to the last chapter I would like to go through the importance of the performance for the expression of a cultural form, and explain the difference between Deaf Theatre and Theatre in Sign Language. It is then fundamental to underline the crucial concept of translation in Sign Language and Deaf Theatre, therefore this chapter investigates a list of translation methods used in order to produce representations accessible to all kind of audience. Lately, my aim is to study and illustrate examples of famous Deaf acting companies which sprout in many corner of the planet, starting from the very first certified acting company, the American National Deaf Theatre, and which managed to spread the Deaf Culture among hearing people.

## 2.1 The importance of performance

Theatre and performing arts are part of the culture of a community. They are the forms of expression of an ethnic group, a way to communicate its social rules and values to the external world and a boundary around the Deaf culture. In this sense the act of *performance* embodies a fundamental role for the explanation of the essence of the Deaf community in the mainstream hearing community.

Tom Humphries (Humphries 2008) states that performance is the result of a cultural process which led the Deaf people to transform their narrative in their language, and clarifies that it can be considered both as the performance of everyday life and the theatrical performance. (Humphries 2008:7) In particular for the American Deaf context, the most prolific and lively Deaf national context, he pinpoints the very beginning of the recognition of importance of the act of performance in the linguistic research made by William Stokoe in 1960. From the creation of *The Dictionary of American Sign Language* on, the Deaf began to talk about the existence of a proper language, they began to argue about it, and interestingly, to do so in public. Prior to this time, Deaf people had never wanted, dared, or been able to do talk about ASL in public (Humphries 2008:6). Deaf people were free to talk in their language that was confirmed to be a language indeed, and did it in public, wanting the others to know the mechanism of a language that no Deaf person had to be ashamed of.

The research led by scholars such as Stokoe and by those who took this journey into the Deaf World made the way for a the Deaf identity awareness and the desire to show it to the hearing world. This desire was expressed by the tool of performance. As the American context, also the Italian Deaf performance brought the unaware insight of the Deaf culture: «è probabile che inizialmente lo scopo delle rappresentazioni teatrali fosse di puro intrattenimento, ma è in tal modo che, inconsapevolmente, si è dato inizio ad un percorso che avrebbe portato pian piano alla presa di coscienza da parte dei sordi di appartenere ad una comunità, la comunità sorda.» (Zinna 2010:51) The performances embodied the Deaf culture and

accomplished to many cultural tasks. As Humphries underlines,

«these performances and many others like them across the country [United States of America], performed by many other Deaf people, had the ability to do several things. They confirmed what Deaf people knew or wanted to believe about American Sign Language. They convinced disbelievers that they had been wrong or at the very least that they should re-examine their beliefs.» (Humphries 2008)

The desire of having a strong Deaf identity was helped by the act of performance, which the Deaf community used to talk about their values and beliefs. «Nasce così il desiderio di raccontarsi e di identificarsi attraverso l'arte, di far conoscere la propria cultura, ma anche avvicinarsi a culture altre, a cui spesso i sordi non possono avere accesso perchè proposte solo attraverso il canale uditivo.» (Zinna 2010:52) Deaf people performed their lives to show the hearing world the existence of a newborn ethnic community, which can lean on a language that was confirmed to be a real language by several scholars from diverse disciplines<sup>1</sup>. According to Humphries the act of performance

«was an important tool that Deaf people adopted in several ways. First, it was used to bring their language and culture into the public sphere. Second, performance had the power, through aesthetic and entertainment qualities, to compel an audience of both Deaf and hearing people to listen. It was not enough to just talk culture; Deaf people had to offer something that would compel attention. And third, performance was used to bridge the gap between folk explanation and scientific explanation... Performance allowed the introduction of some ideas and the demonstration of some processes without jargon and in traditions that people recognized or in forms that people were willing to attend.» (Humphries 2008:7)

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<sup>1</sup>see chapter 1



The adoption of the act of performance by Deaf people led to a growing curiosity that compelled the Deaf to prove in a new public that they were a real community of language and culture. The Deaf community adopted the act of *collecting* and *displaying* in order to create the new public story and image of themselves (Humphries 2008). The idea on which the curiosity towards the Deaf culture based its roots was in fact suspicion, a sort of scepticism that brought the hearing people to look for evidence, a proof that such a culture existed. As response, the Deaf community started to "collect themselves" (Humphries 2008), namely they collect, displayed and explained everyday episode, joke, story that could tell something about their lives, the Deaf way of life. This effort was made in order to show that they were culture and language people and they had the prerequisites to be a cultural group in need of a solid identity.

«Realizing that the hearing people's science found their signing behaviour interesting, Deaf people found ways to make their traditions new beyond the scientific laboratory and in public space. [...] They made us of the public fascination with the aesthetics and exoticness of their language, their poetry, and the very idea of a human culture of deaf people. In doing so, they have been able to shape scientific explanation about themselves in specific ways.» (Humphries 2008)

This cultural mechanisms explain the importance of the artistic forms such as performing arts and theatre as an evidence to the existence of a Deaf Culture and as a tool to bring these proofs to the outside world. The performing arts have been from the very early stages of Deaf community the main door to the hearing world. The reason why it is evident: theatre and performing arts can have a simple language that eludes the scientific explanations that were unknown to most of the Deaf and also hearing audience. Emerging scientific explanations of ASL (in this case) having linguistic features and processes were initially too foreign, too intellectual, and too abstract for consumption by most Deaf and hearing people (Humphries 2008:7).

The performance language results to be easy to understand to both Deaf and hearing people. It allows the Deaf people to reflect about their *modus vivendi* in order to collect it and make the boundary around the community stronger, and give the hearing people something to prove the existence of something called Deaf Culture. Performance appears to be a brick of those bridge and wall which connect the Deaf and hearing world. It faces the two worlds simultaneously, connecting and dividing them at the same time. The members of Deaf community let the *outsiders* join the Deaf culture through the bridge made by the inclusive concept of culture and its ramification such as theatre and performance, which helped the Deaf people understand their inner values and social rules.

The connection between the world of hearing and deaf people can be done also through irony and satire <sup>2</sup>:

«La crescente consapevolezza della propria identità, ha fatto sì che le tematiche teatrali si concentrassero sulla stessa lingua dei segni, sulla satira rivolta al mondo degli udenti e alla loro ignoranza nei confronti della lingua dei segni e dalla cultura dei sordi (Zinna 2010:53).

## 2.2 The Deaf Theatre

From the 70's of the XX century, after the ostracism towards the use of signs of the Congress of Milan in 1880, many Deaf theater companies come into existence. They were made both of professional and amateur actors. In this context it is interesting to observe the diversity of the audience of this performances.

According to Zinna (Zinna 2010) the European Deaf theatre is mainly addressed to a deaf audience. Precisely, it was born and developed thanks to the organisations and to the clubs that have the task to support the Deaf culture and spread the use of sign language. The Deaf Theatre in

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<sup>2</sup>She proposes the example of the Danish acting company *Doves Teater Loftet*, which make irony of the way hearing people handle with deaf people. An Italian example is displayed by the work of Gabriele Caia, *PA-PA*, which will be seen later in this dissertation

the United States of America is proposed to a mix audience that is mainly made of hearing people. The companies are often formed by deaf and hearing actors and directors that sympathised with the deaf cause<sup>3</sup>. In spite of this distinction, the American and European Deaf acting companies had common targets. Both of them want to demonstrate the ability of deaf people in the field of professional theatre, reaching the same level as the hearing colleagues, wanted the sign language to be recognized by the institution and support the right of communicating with it.

For these reasons many companies decide to represent their own shows in sign language, without the help of interpreters or narrators, because they intend to perform before a prepared audience, someone who was already aware of the richness of Deaf culture. This choice implicates the knowledge of the sign language, just as the language fluency needed to see a show in a whatsoever foreign language. Other companies, despite the use of sign language, decide to offer the support to understand the action on the stage. They give help to the audience through the interpreters or other tools that make the scene clear to those who can find a spark of interest in the Deaf culture in the performance. Zinna (2010) gives the example of the Italian acting company *Laboratorio Zero*, which used to give a short recap of the actions on stage before the show began<sup>4</sup> The Deaf Theatre has not only the social and political targets which have been handled short before. It has also the desire, the necessity, the pleasure of the cultural enrichment derived from the performance of classic shows such as the Greek tragedy by Euripides, the dramas by Molière, Shakespeare and Chekhov.

Nevertheless, the process of translation is harder as one can think. According to Zinna (2010:54) it is not easy to prepare this kind of shows, because the translation from the written text to the sign language can be hard and misleading. The plays by Shakespeare or Molière are rich in metaphors, double meanings, word puns which can be lost in translation. These kind

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<sup>3</sup>David Hays is an example of hearing director who sympathised with the deaf culture and became the director of the National Theatre of the Deaf (Zinna 2010)

<sup>4</sup>She refers in particular to the show "The house of Bernarda Alba" by F.G. Lorca.

of difficulties can be faced in every process of translation from a language to another, but in this case it must be considered that the language system is completely different. It must be reminded that sign language is a *visual* language, so the adaptation of double meanings based on sounds has to be made with a particular approach.

The difficulty of translation from a written text to a sign language is made harder by the lack of a writing system (Zinna 2010:54). Many sign writing systems have been theorized so far, one of the most famous is the *Sign Writing* (SW), but it is still hard to write down the signs and keeping into account the facial expressions, the non-manual components, the embodiment and the iconicity. Therefore, the process of translation from written text to signs requires the intervention of the director and of the same actors, who have the delicate task to decide the appropriate sign for every sentence of the script.

As far as concerns the translation on stage, if it happens, the playwrights and the director have to take some decision in order to give full access to the public of the dialogues on stage. A drama can belong to the Sing-Language Theatre or to the Deaf Theatre, as it will be illustrated in the next section, and it has different priority of translation depending on its nature.

Here it is possible to observe a list<sup>5</sup> of translation methods through which an art director can make the drama accessible to the whole audience.

1. *Shadow* interpreter;
2. Interpreter on stage;
3. Booklet;
4. Revoked dialogue;
5. Interpreter on screen;
6. Subtitle.

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<sup>5</sup>This list is the result of a first observation to the different kind of translation on stage among which a drama director can choose in order to translate the action on the drama: it is under construction and will surely need to be updated in time.

The method of the **shadow interpreter** is a technique used by many theatre companies that aim to make the contents of the show accessible thanks to the presence of sign language interpreters on stage. This method, without the support of other accessible methods helps signing deaf people but does not take into account non-signing deaf people. They would need subtitles or a written support. The interpretation technique called "shadow" interpreter, is called after the moves that the interpreter has to make on stage, while following the actor he/she is interpreting just like a shadow. If the director chooses this kind of translation he would provide an interpreter for each actor on stage. The *shadow* interpreter has evident advantage for what concerns the translation of more than one character, because each actor has its own personal translation.

The *shadow* interpreter shows disadvantages in the theatrical fiction: the audience can be dazed by the presence of so many people on stage, and can find weird that a character is followed until the end of the representation. The figure of the interpreter should be invisible and could be hard for the audience to get used to its constant presence on stage.

The **on stage interpreter** is a professional interpreter who is still on a side of the stage and which translate all the action under the spotlights. This technique is not as disturbing as the *shadow* interpreter and it does not spoil the theatrical fiction, however it can dazed the audience in translating many voices at the same time. Not only the interpreter has to have a perfect control of the stage space with a proper use of the signing space, facial expression and gaze direction, but he or she has to make clear who is talking in that exact moment. The risk is to make confusion about the talking order of the actors on stage. This technique become confusing when the character are numerous on stage and have quick lines to give. It becomes hard for the interpreter to make clear who he or she is translating in that exact moment. Moreover, this technique can be tiring for the deaf people that constantly have to change focus, from the actors to the interpreter.

A **booklet** can be an effective choice if the director wants to make the whole script accessible. It can be very useful if used in Deaf Theatre dramas,

which are realized entirely in Sign Language. The realization of booklet with the explanation of the script can be of help for non-signing hearing or deaf people in a show realized in Sign Language. The realization of this booklet should be very handy with the help of modern technology, or it can be even distributed by email before the show. This translation method is already used in the opera, in which the audience receives booklets with the script before the beginning of the representation.

The method of the here so-called “**revoked**” dialogue is a technique that might facilitate the comprehension to the deaf and non-signing hearing. This technique uses a very effective way to translate what happen on stage without spoiling the theatrical fiction. It is about the exchanging of lines between a deaf and hearing signing people, in which the one answer to the other signing and repeating with mother tongue what has been just said. For example, the deaf character will repeat what the hearing character has just said in spoken language and vice-versa. This method allow the audience to follow the dialogue, however there is one risk, which is redundancy. Redundancy can be disturbing to those, who can both speak and sign. However this technique is used in many companies because it does not disturb the action on stage and is accessible to both deaf and hearing people, both signing and speaking.

Many acting companies use the **interpreter on screen** which simultaneously translates the action on stage into Sign Language. It can be a good solution to the interpreter present on the side of the stage. The visual tiring activity is now solved and the video can be realized before the show, on the contrary of the interpreter who has to translate in the present moment. However this technique is not accessible to the whole audience because it is not suitable for non-signing deaf people who prefer subtitles.

The **subtitles** are a kind of closed captions that, on the contrary of the cinema and television, are on lowest part of the screen. They report the lines of the actors on stage and give the non-signing people in the audience a comprehension of the drama. However this method is not fully accessible

to all kind of audience taken into account so far. As the non-signing deaf people do not understand the Sign Language, the mother tongue of signing deaf people is Sign Language, and not written language in which the subtitles are written. To reach a full comprehension for every kind of audience, and to respect all the language minorities is not enough to project subtitles on a screen. If the director want the reach the whole audience with its different language needs, he has to combine the method of subtitles on a screen and the interpreter. This dual mode would ensure the respect of language minorities of both signing and non-signing people.

Another tough part of the preparation of a show in sign language is the part that involves the technical arrangements on stage. Zinna (2010:55) pinpoints five aspects of the preparation on stage that have to be accurate if the director want to make the scenes effective for a deaf audience. The first of the five is the *scenic design*, which has to be realized in order to make the signs as much visible as possible from every different point of view of the audience.

The second one is the *theatre scenery*, which has under no circumstances to obstacle the vision of the actor who is signing. The actor has to use every free space to let the audience see his signing, and has always to be clearer as possible, so that every single person in the public can see him.

Another important elements to keep into account is the *costumes*, which are one of the most important choice to make in every show. In that shows, which involves the use of Sing Language the costumes can play a fundamental role in the communicative process. As we have seen for the theatre scenery, nothing has to obstacle the correct sight and realisation of the signs, so neither has the costumes. In this sense, the costumes used in the shows in Sign Language have to be designed so that the actors are not impeded in the realisation of signs. The shirts are designed with short sleeves that let the signer communicate with other actors. Just in case of particular wanted effects, the director can choose a costume that can make the communication harder. The choice of colors influences the action on stage too, and that is why the director tends to choose costumes with solid colors that let the signs

and expression of the actor stand out. The hairstyle must be done in order to leave the face clear of hair, and it is preferable not to wear hats or - of course - masks, that can cover the face of the actor. In the end, the make-up is to be simple to avoid distortion effects on the eyes and mouth.

Then the *lights* is a fundamental aspect to consider in the arrangement of a show in sign language. From the proper use of the lights on stage depends the success of a show or its failure. A weak light can be insufficient to let the action on stage illuminated enough to the eyes of the audience. Of course the use of complete dark is not to be considered, as long as the eyes are the tools with which deaf people can *hear*. In this sense, sometimes diverse colours are used to reproduce audio effects<sup>6</sup>

In the end, the *audio effects*. In many shows addressed to deaf people the audio effects have been completely banished, but some directors take the decision of take into account the fact that in the audience some hearing person can be present. So they choose to put in the show some music or audio effect to involve hearing people as well. There is many expedient that directors use to make the deaf people hear, and that is the use of *sensory audio* that can be realized thanks to air balloon that, if touched with bare hands, vibrate to the sound waves<sup>7</sup>.

### 2.2.1 Sign Language Theatre and Deaf Theatre

Dorothy S, Miles and Louie J. Fant, jr. (Fant and Miles 1976) pinpoint two kind of theatrical language that concern with the Deaf World: the *Sign-Language Theatre* (SLT) and the *Deaf Theatre*. They find the very first distinction between these two languages in the communicative meaning, because while the actors in the Sign Language Theatre use simultaneously the Sign Language and the spoken language, in the Deaf Theatre they use the Sign Language only. According to Miles and Fant (Fant and Miles 1976:46) and Zinna (Zinna 2010:57) this choice is due to the nature of the audience and to the targets that a acting company wants to reach. The audience that

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<sup>6</sup>I will discuss the use of light effects to reproduce audio effects later in this dissertation

<sup>7</sup>A part of this dissertation will be dedicated to the experience of some artists that tried to involve a deaf audience through the use of this sensory expedients



attends to Deaf shows is formed both by deaf and hearing people, that might or might not know Sign Language. The contact of the hearing and Deaf Culture in the audience allows the acting company to face a linguistic challenge that can lead to a display of the values of the Deaf World. These two kind of theatrical language have different applications and choose different messages to transmit to the audience.

The Sign Language Theatre often brings on stage shows that come from the hearing theatre culture, and according to Zinna (Zinna 2010:58) companies that act both in Sign Language and in spoken language choose social and artistic targets. This means that companies have both deaf and hearing actors but just the deaf ones can sign. The SLT, as we have seen before, uses Sign Language and the spoken language simultaneously to help the people who cannot sign, but might be intrigued in its use. The simultaneous use of the two languages is realised thanks to theatrical expedients such as voice-over or the simultaneous translation from an actor to the other.

By using this *bimodal* language the Sign Language Theatre companies manages to focus the attention on the versatility and usage of the sign language and attract those, who did not know anything about the Deaf World. The contact of the Deaf with the hearing world in the audience allows the companies to display a proper image of the Deaf and to give value to the sign language. The Sign Language Theatre manages to underline the importance of the existence of a language such as Sign Language, and feed the curiosity of those who do not know anything about Deaf Culture. It can be seen as an open door that let the outsiders in the Deaf World, that attracts them thanks to the multiple way of communication both Sign Language and spoken language.

However, this openness and this peculiar focus on the way of communication that has to be accessible for everyone might led to an underestimation of the message that the show wants to communicate. The need of accessibility for everyone might lead to an underestimation of the inner values of the Deaf World, which can be seen as less important as the need of accessibility for the whole audience. In other words, in order to keep the social

target of promotion of the Deaf World, the Sign Language Theatre accepts to trivialise the Deaf message:

«Naturalmente, esprimersi simultaneamente in due lingue diverse comporta delle difficoltà di adattamento, non solo rispettivamente alla lingua vocale e alla lingua dei segni, ma anche alle diverse culture ad esse legate. Quando, invece, un testo viene tradotto in un'unica lingua si garantiscono maggiormente gli elementi artistici, le metafore, il significato ultimo del messaggio» (Zinna 2010:58)

There is another variation of the Sing Language Theatre, which is the translation of a traditional show into Sign Language. That cannot be included in the concept of Sign Language Theatre, because it does not concern with having deaf actors in the cast, but just acting in sign language. An example might be the Italian show "Notre Dame de Paris" by David Zard, which have been translated for a deaf audience in may, the 27th, at the Auditorium Legione Allievi Guardia di Finanza in Bari, Italy. According to the press,

«Tale iniziativa si pone come obiettivo quello dell'abbattimento delle barriere della comunicazione consentendo ai Sordi di seguire l'opera insieme agli udenti allo scopo di garantire in termini di accessibilità l'applicazione di un diritto sancito dalla Convenzione Onu per le persone in condizioni svantaggiate.» ([www.sordionline.com](http://www.sordionline.com))

This kind of show aim to sensitise the hearing audience to the problems that the Deaf community has to face in the context of acknowledgement and tutoring. The observation of this kind of theatrical language that involves Sign Language and the Sign Language Theatre let us focus on the perception that these kind of companies have on the Deaf World.

The Sign Language Theatre puts the support of Sign language of the theatre first by promoting it among the hearing, underlining the importance of

a proper language for the Deaf and trying to convince hearing people to support the cause. In a similar way, the kind of show such as the *Notre Dame de Paris* in Italian Sign Language supports the struggle of the Deaf in a world that denies rights to people in *disadvantaged conditions*. The perception of this theatre on the deaf people is of disadvantaged people, a class in need of help, a help which can derive from the hearing mainstream majority. This is reason why of their promoting the sign language and the sensitisation to the Deaf Culture, which however deny the condition of disability<sup>8</sup>.

Therefore, one peculiarity of the Sign-Language Theatre is that it consider the deaf people as people in need as result to label them as disabled people. Their target is the sensitisation of the hearing majority, and they perpetrate it ignoring the aim of the Deaf Culture, which is to affirm the Deaf Identity beyond the condition of disability. In fact, the playwrighter of Sign-Language Theatre dramas prefer the aesthetic aspect of the show, rather than its possible social perspective. Michael Bristol, a drama historian, states that the modern theatre, just as the Sign Language Theatre, «as an artistic enterprise, is carefully crafted and orchestrated for aesthetic ends.»(Bristol 1985) He underlines that there is no seek for identity issues: «rather than addressing critical issues, they usually offer momentary escape: for two to three hours in a darkned hall, the theatregoer is caught up in a completely different, artificial world.»(Bristol 1985) The different nature of these two theatre is new a controversial matter that receives more than an opinion from the scholar universe. In a broad sense, these different perceptions of deafness involve the whole Deaf World which includes deaf people with or without hearing implants, hearing people relatives to deaf people and speech therapy professionals. Every part of this World have different opinion on the issue, and these opinions draw a line in the perception of the Deaf individuals in their everyday actions and in their culture, deciding how to react before the matter of deafness. Even with the cultural tool of theatre.

In fact, the Deaf Theatre has a different perception of deafness, that is

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<sup>8</sup>see chapter 1, Inside the Deaf World

more close to Ladd's theory of *Deafhood*<sup>9</sup>. The acting companies that can be included in this kind of theatrical language do not consider the deaf disabled, and therefore do not openly promote action of support or sensitisation of the sign language to the hearing majority. The Deaf Theatre does not openly aim to support the cause of the deaf as disabled that ask for more rights, because the support it gives to the Deaf Culture comes indirectly through the show on stage. This means that the Deaf Theatre has a support function too, but it is not transmitted by a public intention of seek of help, as in the Sign Language Theatre. In the Deaf Theatre we find the sense of pride that permeates the sense of belonging of the Deafhood.

According to Zinna (Zinna 2010:58) in the Deaf Theatre there is just one language on stage: Sign Language, which is used only by deaf actors. However in the Deaf Theatre is possible that also hearing actors use Sign Language. In fact, within the performances presented by companies which can be considered part of the Deaf Theatre, the use of signs has to have a sense inside the action on stage. An example could be a show in which a character is a C.O.D.A.<sup>10</sup> and is likely for him to sign while talking. In the Deaf Theatre there is rarely voice-over which translates the signs into spoken language. On the contrary of Sign Language Theatre, the classic shows of the theatre tradition are not translated but adapted to the common Deaf experience, so it is very unlikely that, for example, a deaf person picks up the phone if it rings in the fiction of the show. The main language is Sign Language, there are many shows in which the Sign Language is the only language, so that every person in the audience has to understand a bit of signs to enjoy the show.

The most important characteristic of Deaf Theatre is that it reports about the everyday life experience of Deaf community, its struggle, its joy of communicating thanks to sign language, its humour.

«...ciò che caratterizza di più il Deaf Theatre è la diffusione di testi teatrali che raccontano la vita e le esperienze dei sordi. Il fine ultimo di queste rappresentazioni consiste nel proporre spettacoli

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<sup>9</sup>see chapter 1 Inside the Deaf World

<sup>10</sup>Child of Deaf Adults

nei quali il pubblico possa identificarsi, condividere le emozioni provate con i membri della propria comunità e rafforzare la consapevolezza che la lingua dei segni è in grado di esprimersi anche attraverso un linguaggio poetico.» (Zinna, 2010:59)

The difference from the Sign Language Theatre is the perception of the Deaf people as individuals, the choice of labelling them as disabled or members a ethnic group, the choice of support them as people in seek of identity or to help them as people in need. In Sign Language Theatre the companies support the spoken languages with sign languages, while in the Deaf Theatre is Sign Language at first place. As Zinna explains, «è attraverso il Deaf Theatre che si vuole dimostrare l'indipendenza della lingua dei segni nella lingua vocale, e se una delle due deve essere sacrificata per ragioni artistiche sarà la seconda a cedere il passo alla prima.» (Zinna 2010:59) The main different point of these two kind of theatre is the object that the companies want to display on stage, the way they want to portray the Deaf community. Starting from this they decide what kind of language to use, the adaptation to make, the message to transmit to the audience. Deaf Theatre and Sign Language Theatre are very different and often misunderstood.

«In Deaf Theatre, the creation of and delight in a feeling of collectivity take precedence over the more narrow assessment of literary and artistic values»(Bristol 1985:5)

The Deaf Theatre, on the contrary of the Sign Language Theatre aim to show the hearing world the inner values of the Deaf World. However it shows push in another direction, too. The first chapter of this dissertation illustrated how the culture of an ethic group has two forces which push from the inside out the group and vice-versa. The force of culture that pushes from the inside out brings the values and rules of the group from the inner heart of the community to display them to the outside world. However there is one force to take into account. There is one force that pushes the members of the ethnic group such as the Deaf people to the very nucleus of their community and bring them together to discover and enjoy the most

deep reasons of existence of the Deaf community. These two forces are conducted by the various artistic forms that fulfil the Deaf culture. Among these there is Theatre, which is represented at its best in the form of Deaf Theatre.

Cynthia Peters (Peters 2006) studied the case of Deaf American Theatre, which is one of the first Deaf Theatre to develop in the early 70's. She takes into account this national theatre but it can be taken as an example for the Deaf Theatre in general. Peters states that the main point of the Deaf Theatre is to «bring together and foster cultural pride and identity in a widely scattered people.» (Peters 2006:78) Enjoying a show of a Deaf Theatre company means to unify the members and to define the borders of the ethnic group. «in its most indigenous form, the Deaf American play is cultural performance, uniting the community of the culture's identity and viability.» (Peters 2006:59) Bristol underlines that «by participating in this production (whether by staging, acting, or simply viewing it), the Deaf Americans construct and revel in their identity.»(Bristol 1985:6)

In this respect, Werner Sollars brings an example to support the hypothesis of the unifying action of the Deaf Theatre within its members. He resembles the Deaf communities with the Greek communities, in a first moment divided in small groups and then unified by the need of a great force to defeat the invader enemy. He finds a comparison between Deaf American Theatre and the Greek epics, which he defines as the "cultural encyclopedias"(Sollars 1986:239) of their times. Just as the Deaf Theatre and culture, also Greek epic used to have an unifying action that tried to bring together people organized in rival tribes.

«In classical times, the Greeks were scattered about in small communities, which sometimes fought among themselves; but they were at greater risk from outside forces and cultural systems. By fostering a cultural identity and thus a shared loyalty, the epics gave the Greek people a common history and helped enlarge their sense of homeland. Drawing on this cultural identity encouraged them to band together to resist foreign expansionist

empires.»(Peters 2006:59)

Peters underlines the fact that the Deaf culture is made available to diverse people belonging to Deaf community or not thanks to dramas such as *Institution Blues*, *My Third Eye* and other Deaf dramas. Moreover, she states that also the mainstream culture is spread among the Deaf thanks to these dramas.

«Using both vernacular Deaf and mainstream languages and genres, both artistic and extra-artistic, the nativist drama helps Deaf Americans better understand and connect to their own culture and also learn how to deal with hearing society. Indeed, Deaf performances often include too much cultural information.» Peters 2006:60)

### 2.2.2 Deaf Theatre in the world

In this subsection I would like to observe the overview of the Deaf Theatre in different parts of the world and its development in time.

The information about the origins of the Deaf Theatre is meagre. The few data about the early Deaf theatre companies make the philologists think that the first Deaf dramas realized by deaf actors were brought on stage about the 19th century. The deaf who used to join these acting groups cannot be called proper companies, rather people who gather in order to tell stories about their everyday life experience. On the contrary, today we can focus on proper theatre companies, which bring on stage real professional actors.

There are many Deaf acting companies, which contributed to the development of the Deaf Theatre as a form of expression for the Deaf community, something to display to the mainstream hearing world about the Deaf culture. Deaf Theatre became one of the symbol for the Deaf community in the external world thanks to original plays written by members of the deaf community.

Here a list of the main deaf acting companies that have been a model for

all the acting companies around the world. These are companies that «si distinguono per la loro professionalità e impegno nel garantire accesso alla cultura ai sordi dei diversi paesi»(Zinna 2010:62)

1. National Theatre of the Deaf USA;
2. International Visual Theatre (France);
3. British Theatre of the Deaf;
4. Swedish National Touring Theatre;
5. Australian Theatre of the Deaf (ATOD);
6. Berlin Company and Hamburg Company

### **National Theatre of the Deaf**

The United States of America is one of the most important place for the development and empowerment of the Deaf community. The American linguist William Stokoe was the first one to conduct an enquiry about the sign language and to make hypothesis about its consistence as real language. His work was supported by a social environment that was ready to support his ideas. At the time of the research conducted by Stokoe, deaf people could already study in school and receive a good level of education thanks to the *Gallaudet University* in Washington D.C., started by Edward Gallaudet in 1864. The existence of such a institution supported the growing self-consciousness of the Deaf people as community and made the creation of cultural paths possible.

The Gallaudet University encouraged from its very beginning the realization of cultural events, due to its inclination to humanistic subjects. In light of this fact, the very first drama realized by deaf actors is in 1884, in the Gallaudet University context. From this point the university will witness



the born of many deaf performing arts and in the first years of 1960 promotes its first acting class. According to Zinna (Zinna 2010:62) the *Theatre Arts Department* was instituted in 1964 and in 1979 took this name. The University aimed to support young deaf people who wanted to find their place in the professional world of performative arts. Zinna states that:

«L'impegno in campo artistico e i programmi scolastici della Gallaudet University hanno permesso a molti giovani sordi di intraprendere la carriera di attore professionista, come è successo a Bernard Bragg, e a molti altri, di diventare importanti sceneggiatori e commediografi, come nel caso di Gilbert Eastman noto per aver scritto numerosi spettacoli teatrali tra cui il celebre *Sign Me Alice*.» (Zinna 2010:62)

In 1967 Bragg, Eastmann and a group of other professional performers starts the *National Theatre of the Deaf* which set up its head quarter at the Eugene O'Neil Center in Waterford, Connecticut. This center becomes a cornerstone of Deaf performing arts, where performers, actors and dancers can practise their professional skills. The group is leaded by David Hays, a famous Broadway screenwriter, which is inspired by the idea of Dr. Edna Simon Levine, a psychologist who worked in the field of deafness. Levine's idea has its origins in the union of her two biggest passions: theatre and Deaf community. She manages to let theatre professionals know the Sign Language and the Deaf community in order to create the very first acting company composed by deaf professional actors. The National Theatre of the Deaf aimed to create the first deaf company in the world, to demonstrate the professional skills of deaf actors but also to let the people know the existence of the Sign Language<sup>11</sup> .

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<sup>11</sup>The first chance the company had to accomplish its aims was given by television. Zinna (Zinna 2010:62) reports that the project was called "Experiment in Television": it was a one-hour-show in which the NTD style was performed. «Hayes chiamò a partecipare al progetto un gruppo di attori sordi con un'importante esperienza teatrale e molti dei quali provenivano dalla Gallaudet University. Tra questi si ricordano: Robert Panara, Eric Malzkuhn, Douglas Brurke, Bernard Bragg, Gilbert Eastmann, Tom Fant, quest'ultimo, figlio udente di genitori sordi, si occupò per il NTD delle traduzioni in lingua vocale delle battute espresse in segni» (Zinna 2010:63)

«Con la nascita del National Theatre of the Deaf si voleva dimostrare la capacità delle persone sorde di essere in grado di raggiungere alti livelli di professionalità, ma tra gli obiettivi della compagnia, vi era soprattutto quello di far conoscere la bellezza della lingua dei segni al mondo degli udenti.» (Zinna 2010:63)

The company travelled a lot to let the world know its mission and was awarded with many prizes, among which the most important is the Tony Award for Theatre Excellence received in 1977.

«The Tony Award is the most prestigious honor bestowed by Broadway in recognition of the talent and creativity of its actors, directors, musicians, choreographers and stage personnel. The NTD won a Tony for its ensemble work and its pioneering use of sign language in the theatre. The NTD appeared on Broadway twice (First Broadway run – March 1969 at Longarce Theatre Second Broadway run – January 1970 at ANTA Theatre) to critical acclaim (Clive Barnes of the New York Times wrote glowingly of the company in his theatre reviews). This was the first time a deaf theatre company was honored in this way.» (*www.bernardbragg.com*)

The style of the National Theatre of the Deaf is composed by several performing arts. It has to reach more than one profile of audience, so it has to be easy to understand both to deaf and hearing people. Therefore the company chose an alternative communicative system which could be understood by diverse audience. The company chose a style which could speak to everybody, so it created a visual style in which many visual techniques were involved and used, «tra cui tecniche acrobatiche, la danza, il mimo e la ginnastica.» (Zinna 2010:64) Zinna states that the company used to act in a "visual acting language", which every Sign-Language users could enjoy. The company used this visual language along with the simultaneous use of the signs and of the spoken language.<sup>12</sup> The actors had the freedom of make

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<sup>12</sup>see: Deaf Theatre, pag. "revoked dialogue"

up or modify some signs that were thus transformed in artistic signs thanks to the interpretation of the performers.

These artistic transformation were praised by the hearing audience for their beauty and elegance, and their resemblance with the art of dance. However, many deaf person criticized the creative use of these signs, claiming their seriousness in everyday life and the fact that they were unclear and too far from their real use. David Hays's answer to these controversies was about the sensitisation of the hearing people to the use of Sign Language and to the Deaf community. He was convinced that the National Theatre of the Deaf could represent the Deaf community to the hearing world and bear its banner, and that they could bring the deaf culture into hearing people's life through the curiosity, awoken by the peculiar signs communication. The Hays's aim was accomplished, even if in its first years of the company used a kind of facilitated Sign Language called "signed American", which tended to make the signs more visual and immediate to the non-Sign Language users. Then Hays tried to make the company swift from the signed American to the proper American Sign Language, in order to support to the studies conducted by Stokoe in those years, by which he affirmed the Sign Language to be a *bona fide* language. Hays states that:

«This is not, let me repeat, not a theatre *for* the deaf. It's a theatre *of* the deaf, just as the name says: a new form of theatre, aimed at general audience, but always to remain intelligible to the deaf.» (Baldwin 1993:38)

The National Theatre of the Deaf is included in the category of Sign Language Theatre.<sup>13</sup> However the company presented also shows and dramas that can be considered belonging to the tradition of Deaf Theatre, shows as *My Third Eye* (1971) and *Parad* (1975), which bring on stage the deaf everyday lifestyle, with bitter-sweet episode; *Children of a Lesser God* (1980) which is perhaps one of the most famous deaf drama, became famous thanks to its cinema version; *Sign Me Alice* (1973), the story of a young deaf girl

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<sup>13</sup>The distinction between Deaf Theatre and Sign Language is to find at page....

who has to face the hearing expectations on her. It is possible to affirm that the very first try of the National Theatre of the Deaf was to represent the theatre tradition to a wide public, which could include both deaf and hearing people, in order to show the world the professional skills of great deaf actors. The company has accomplished more than this first aim: it has brought on stage many shows, it has supported the spread of Deaf culture, it has contributed to the development of Deaf theatre and has awoken curiosity towards *Deafhood* issues by making the distance between the hearing and deaf world shorter.

### **International Visual Theatre of France**

To get in contact with the International Visual Theatre of France is necessary to take a step back to the history of the Deaf community in France.

The history of the French Deaf community is marked by communication difficulties and empowerment struggle. The French hearing community isolated the Deaf community by the idea that any form of communication with deaf people was possible, and that the Sign Language was not to consider a proper language. Without a complex language system is not possible to create a dialogue inside the society, and moreover is more than difficult to develop one's own intellectual capabilities. This difficulty derives from the idea that deafness was a consequence of a mental retard, and thus that all of the deaf people are mental retarded. Just a little percentage of all of the deaf babies has access to an alternative communication that could replace the spoken language: most of them are children of deaf parents, while the babies that have no contact with a visual and complex language system are mostly from a hearing family. Thanks to scholars such as Stokoe, it has been proved the Sign Language to be a *bona fide* language, and consequently it has been demonstrated the importance of a visual language for the deaf subjects.

The first scholars who believed in the importance of an alternative language system for deaf subjects based their work on the French soil: the in-

structors Abbé de L'Épée (1712 - 1789) and his disciple Abbé Sicard (1742 - 1822) dedicated their life to the education of deaf children by theorizing what later became the *Langue des signes française* (LSF), the French Sign Language. However few decades later the Congress of Milan in 1880 cancelled the success of the LSF promoters efforts and installed the supremacy of the spoken method above the visual system of the Sign Language. Those who agreed with Alexander Graham Bell's spoken theories were not persuaded of the existence of a proper Sign Language. From their idea derived most of the prejudices on the deaf people of the modern era. At last, in 1991 the *Fabius* law support the bilingual education which comprehends both spoken and sign language, and in 2005 the State declares the LSF to be an official minority language of the Deaf community.

In this context Alfredo Corrado, a deaf American artist who enjoyed the enthusiasm of the National Theatre of the Deaf and Jean Grémion, writer, journalist and playwright, create the International Visual Theatre (IVT) in 1976. They aim to create a Deaf culture centre, a place where Deaf people and members of the Deaf community could join to share arts and ideas about the Deaf issues. They involve Bill Moody, an American comedian and ASL interpreter and Ralph Robbins, another comedian who takes care of the instruction of young deaf artists.

The International Visual Theatre has a wide range of audience, and manages to attract the curiosity of hearing people beyond the natural interest of the members of the Deaf community. The company has the chance of growing in quality and numbers of representations thanks to its social aims and to its numerous activities. The IVT first representation on stage took place in 1978. Zinna underlines that the focus of the company is on the search of identity of the Deaf ethnic group.

«Si ricorda, infatti, che il primo spettacolo rappresentato nel 1978, avvolto completamente nel silenzio, aveva come titolo "[ ]" che significava, per gli artisti sordi, la comunità ripiegata su se stessa, alla ricerca della propria identità, della propria cultura, e dei giusti mezzi teatrali per rappresentarla» (Zinna 2010 :69)

In the first period, the aim of the International Visual Theatre was to investigate the inner values of the Deaf community. It posed questions to the Deaf, asking the meaning of a Deaf identity, what were the Deaf rules, values and boundaries of the group. The representation "[ ]" is the symbol of the first era of the company, which aims were to investigate the Deaf but also tried to attract the curiosity of outsiders of Deaf community. Therefore the company presented another representation that was the reflection of the first one. Once inquired the deepest question of the Deaf identity, the company turns its face to the outside world, presenting its essence to the world. The name of the show, as reflection of the first one, is "]" ["], and was presented on stage in 1979.

«La forza del messaggio simbolico dimostrava l'apertura della comunità verso gli altri, e sebbene il lavoro di ricerca attraverso il teatro fosse rappresentato anch'esso nel silenzio totale, esso si apriva maggiormente ad un pubblico udente.» (Zinna 2010 : 69)

The company aptitude is a mix of the tradition of the Sign Language Theatre and the concept of Deaf Theatre. In fact, beyond the plays created by the company itself, it represent and perform dramas that come from the traditional theatre such as *L'avare* (1987) and *Le malade imaginaire* (1992) by Molière, *Antigone* (1995) by Sophocles, *King Lear* (2007) by Shakespeare, *Le Fable* (2007) by La Fontaine and also modern plays such as *Le Reveil* (2007) by Dario Fo and Franca Rame. The company aim to reach a wider audience, which comprehends both hearing and deaf people and try to accomplish this aim by keeping into account the importance of the Sign Language as a primary channel of communication for deaf people. The methods used to reach hearing people while using the Sign Language on stage are subtitles, the add of music and sounds on the scene and the visual effects of light projection on a screen on stage or on actors bodies. The intention is to enrich the communication in every possible way, including all of the possible instruments to reach the deaf or hearing heart of the audience. This approach requires creativity and versatility, in order to bring a wind of change on the stages that have never been so inclusive towards so

many kind of audience to that point of theatre history.

Beyond the International Visual Theatre scenic work on stage, it started also other activities that aimed to promote and spread the Deaf culture and the use of Sign Language in France. (Zinna 2010):70 pinpoints that these activities can be gathered in three macro areas: these are the *theatre*, the *formation* and the *publishing*. The company is now a professional acting company but it offers the opportunity to get in touch with the Deaf culture with activities that concern with the arts, poetry, music and dance. In these activities one of the most important is the creation of Deaf theatre and French Sign Language classes (LSF) to involve those who feel curious but are not members of the Deaf community. In the language classes there are many hearing parents of deaf children or person who work with deaf subjects, but there are many other person who just feel curious about the Deaf World and want to discover more about it. These classes are held by professionals of different fields: deaf professors, psychologists, linguists, sociologist, actors. These professionals are not only a bridge between hearing parents and their children, but also persons who create a breeding ground for those who want to have a carrier that deal with deafness. The last macro area is publishing: the company promote the production of bilingual vocabularies and documentaries on DVD. The aim is to involve many people in the Deaf culture as possible through the help of a captivating graphics, that could be attractive and accessible to both deaf and hearing people. The aims of the IVT are ambitious and forward-looking: it is presented as a center of the Deaf culture, a cradle for young deaf artist, a shelter for those who want to create pieces of art belonging to theatre, cinema and dance and an institute for the promotion of the LSF. Thus, as Zinna states, it is presented as:

«Luogo di produzione teatrale, che offre agli artisti sordi mezzi adeguati attraverso i quali esprimersi; luogo di diffusione (presentazione spettacoli, film, coreografie, esposizioni; luogo di formazione teatrale, cinematografica e coreografica; centro internazionale di ricerca sulle lingue dei segni e sul loro insegnamento.» (Zinna 2010:70)

One of the most famous art director of the IVT is Emanuelle Laborit, author of *Le Cri de la mouette* (Laborit 1994), her autobiographic book, a French prize awarded deaf actress, with the *Molière de la révélation théâtrale* in 1997 thanks to her leading role in *Les Enfants du silence* in 1993. She is convinced that the Deaf community has to struggle to reach the acknowledgement of its language and of its community status, and this struggle has to be made in collaboration with the hearing world. She makes the IVT live in an atmosphere of constant confrontation and mutual enrichment, which are the fundamental ingredients to spread and promote the Deaf Culture in the hearing world.

### **British Theatre of the Deaf**

The British Theatre of the Deaf is an acting company formed by hearing and deaf actors that was set up by Pat Keysell and Ursula Eason in 1969 from the original *NID MIME GROUP*. This first acting group developed into the British Theatre of the Deaf after few years. Following the NDT footsteps, the BTD supported the simultaneous use of British Sign Language and spoken English on the stage. The company brought a wind of change in the English theatre, and managed to obtain government funds to support its activities. However, the director Keysell left the company few years later and determined the end of the company existence.

After the BTD experience many other non professional companies have presented different representation, however in 1992 John Wilson, deaf actor, set up the *Deaf Theatre Forum*, an acting project which took inspiration from the popular *Living Theatre company* (founded in 1947), an acting group which principal aim was to interact with the audience during the representation. It important to underline the existence of another fundamental deaf company, the *Signed Performances in Theatre*, founded in 1994, which aimed to reach many deaf people thanks to the translation of classical pieces. In the end, one of the most important British Deaf company is *Deafinitely Theatre*. In 2002 Paula Garfield set up Deafinitely Theatre alongside Steven Webb and Kate Furby



«after becoming frustrated at the barriers that Deaf actors and directors face in mainstream media. When they launched in 2002 audiences queued in the street for return tickets for our sold out premiere of Deaf History at The Gate Theatre in London. They performed the first ever British Sign Language Shakespeare play at the Globe Theatre, Love's Labour's Lost, attracting deaf actors and audiences into the venue for the first time in it's entire history, and for the first time audiences and reviewers looked beyond the deafness of the actors, and instead judged us on the quality of the arts experience.»(*Deafinitely theatre*)

### **Swedish National Touring Theatre**

The Swedish National Touring Theatre is originally an amateur acting group. However, thanks to the contact with deaf companies a group inside the company becomes independent and sets up the *Tyst Teater* (Silent Theatre) under the enthusiasm of the director Gunilla Wagstrom-Lindquist. It becomes one of the most famous deaf companies in the world: it brings on stage classical and modern theatre pieces and representations for children.

### **Australian Theatre of the Deaf**

This company sees the light in the seventies, when Adam Salzer, Nola Colefax and a group of deaf people decide to set up an acting group in order to entertain the Deaf community and to give the deaf the chance to express themselves through the theatre. The first company aim was to crate a theatre *for* the deaf, but in years it changed in being a theatre *of* the deaf: it addresses to a wider audience than just deaf people, and wants to involve and attract hearing people in the use of Sign Language. The representation are translations of the most famous dramas such as Shakespeare, Beckett and Tennessee Williasm. These dramas are brought on stage both in Sign Language and spoken English through the help of interpreters, so that the whole audience can get involved in the action on stage.

### **Berlin Company and Hamburg company**

The most important deaf company in Germany are the Berlin company and the Hamburg company. The first one is directed by Peter Schick and the second one by Thomas Zanman; the Berlin company support the use of the signed German while the Hamburg acting group prefer to promote the Deaf Culture by bringing on stage the German Sign Language (*Gebärdensprache* in german). The actors of both companies use the Sign Language along with evident movements of their mouths: the support of lips reading is probably a trace left by the speech method culture which still predominates on Europe. Many European countries are influenced by the speech method so that the deaf children of hearing parents get to know the Deaf culture late in life, after having met some member of the Deaf community. Moreover, another difference between the companies is the choice of representations. While the Berlin company brings on stage traditional dramas, the Hamburg actors prefer to create and represent plays that refer to the Deaf World. The Hamburg company representation tell about the Deaf culture in Germany, about it history in time and in particular tell about the persecutions of the the Third Reich period.

## Chapter 3

# Cultural contamination scheme

«Le forme di espressione artistica sono forme di comunicazione culturale che si sviluppano sulla base di processi evolutivi del sistema linguistico originario, e i membri di una comunità sono in grado di comprenderli/apprenderli sulla base di prototipi acquisiti. In tal senso cultura e lingua evolvono spontaneamente e contemporaneamente, e la cultura diventa sistema di partecipazione, ovvero un insieme di pratiche condivise da una comunità.» (Berruto 1999:109)

The third chapter of this dissertation aims to investigate the double function of culture, which can be expressed through many perceptive channels. Art is one of the voices which animates the concept of a community culture, and can be observed from its different forms: in this chapter I aim to analyse the performing arts and their double function inside and outside the Deaf community.

Culture and its expressive forms such as literature or performing arts play an important role for an ethnic community. As I have already briefly stated in the first chapter, performing arts can be considered as bridges and

boundaries at the same time for the Deaf community. Performing arts such as dance, theatre, music and other forms of expression that bring a group of performers before an audience - that will be illustrated in this chapter - are the bricks that draw the boundaries and bridges around the Deaf community. The dramas, the ballets and the shows that bring performers on stage face the inside and the outside of a community at the same time. These forms of art manage to bring the members of a community together - giving them shared norms, values and a common cultural background. In this sense the Deaf performance draw a line around the community and define the Deaf identity boundaries , acting as walls that bring together and *protect* the heart of the community from the outside. At the same time the performing arts face the outside of the community, let the outside world know the inner mechanisms that enliven the Deaf World: the stage is not only a stage but also a bridge, upon which Deaf people can display what being Deaf in a world of hearing really means. Harmons (Harmon 2006) illustrates this concept stating that Deaf people are united by the cultural performance and that they can reveal their identity through it:

«In its more indigenous form, the Deaf play is cultural performance, uniting the community (including its marginal members) and facilitating a bonding and defining of the culture's identity and viability. By participating in this production (whether by staging, acting, or simply viewing it), Deaf people construct and reveal in their identity.»(Harmon 2006:171)

Thus, the hearing context and the Deaf World are connected by culture, thanks to its several forms of expression. At the same time these forms are able to unify the community, to give the members a solid ground to cultivate shared values and to feed a common cultural sense. Performing arts, on behalf of culture forms, connect these two worlds and allow the exchange of ideas, values and norms and let them *contaminate* each other with culture.

This scheme represents the hearing and the Deaf world, two different nucleus with diverse cultural norms, social rules, language system and iden-

tity. Despite the fact that hearing and Deaf are separated contexts, they are however included in a circular scheme which allow two elements to bind them together. These elements are the products of art, the performing arts in this analysis. The circular scheme indicates the vast field of culture in which different universes can be connected thanks to these artistic forms. These *cultural bridges* draw a line between the Deaf and the hearing world and let them be culturally contaminated one each other. By *cultural contamination* it is meant the contact point of the two cultures, the precise point in space in which the worlds meet and allow each other to be contaminated, to bring and receive cultural contributes and enrich their cultures. Two arrows pointing at the worlds and moving in opposite direction draw a circle here called *Cultural Contamination Scheme*.

In this particular case I would like to take into account the function of the performing arts in the perspective of the Deaf universe. Taking into account the point of view of the Deaf world, the performing arts that bind together the hearing and the Deaf world can be sorted in two cultural function categories, represented in the scheme with two arrows that unify and draw a circle with the hearing and deaf nucleus. The culture nucleus are distant each other, to confirm a space of separation between the hearing and the Deaf World. They occupy distant position in the space to underline the cultural distance that separate them. It is however important to underline that many performances involving the Deaf world can be analysed both in the light of representative or inclusive function, as they could have different aspects that relate them both functions.

The arrow that starts from the Deaf culture nucleus and points to the hearing culture nucleus represents those performances that tend to bring the essence of Deaf culture outside the community, to bridge the Deaf with hearing values, to make the Deaf display the hearing world what being Deaf means. In this category, lay those performances that represent the Deaf culture on stage and bring its meaning to the outside, with the result of attracting many hearing people and feed their curiosity towards the Deaf World and to Sign Language. These performances are included in a cultural

function that is here labelled **representative function** for its representative nature of Deaf ambassador in the hearing world.

In this category can be included all of the performing products belonging to the Deaf Theatre tradition, performances that aim to be *for* and *of* the Deaf, that aim to reach the hearing world with the use of Sign Language and with the Deaf values. As example it is possible to take into account the National Theatre of the Deaf plays like the first version of Children of a Lesser God, or the Italian PA-PA by Gabriele Caia. Despite the difference between these two performances it is possible to identify a common characteristic, which is to export the Deaf culture outside the Deaf culture. The director of Children of a Lesser God, Mark Medoff chose a language that could be understood both by deaf and hearing people, alternating ASL and spoken American on stage, while Caia chose the use of a pure use of Italian Sign Language and require a little knowledge of the language to enjoy the play. These performances play a representative function of the Deaf World in the hearing world.

Then, the arrow that goes from the hearing culture to the Deaf culture nucleus embodies what is here called the **inclusive function**, which includes those performances whose aim is to transform the traditional music entertainment into sensory experience through diverse perceptive channels. Those, that bring on stage inclusive performances, are aware of the diversity of deaf and hearing: their work is based on the transformation of the music into sensations and not on the attempt of making deaf people *hear* something that they can not obviously hear. The inclusive function includes those performances that changes the context and create something new, thanks to the new technology of our era, creating environment in which deaf can *hear* with the *Third Ear*, as supposed by Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren.(Kochhar-Lindgren 2006)

These performances are too *for* and *of* the Deaf, in the sense that the companies that bring on stage such plays are formed by both deaf and hearing performers with no discrimination. Through this inclusive function the hearing culture tries to include the deaf culture and to make deaf people

experience sound in a different way than the hearing way. It is here called *inclusive* and not *integrative* because for the first time in many years the companies try not to get deaf people closer to a shared concept of "normality", on the contrary they change the environment and change the music itself in order to push it closer to the deaf. Later in this chapter I will take into account the example of some of the many performing companies or artists who try to create something new for the Deaf art, like *The Conversation* by Francesca Grilli, *Zerovolume* by Subsonica and Bluvertigo and the dance crew *Silent Beat*.

The representative and inclusive functions represented with the arrows bind the hearing and the deaf culture nucleus together. Thus, performing arts connect the two universes allowing them to be contaminated one each other and to expose themselves to what is diverse.

### 3.1 Representative function

In this section I would like to analyse examples of performance that can be included in the section of performances with representative function. In order to understand the representative and inclusive function I will illustrate the metaphor of the brick already used in the first chapter. Using the metaphor of a brick, art and literature are like bricks of the wall that separates the Deaf community from the rest of the world. These bricks face the inside and the outside of the community at the same time and manage to accomplish two different tasks, which are unifying the Deaf community and exporting its values outside its borders. These tasks are embodied by the functions of art and literature, thus in the performing arts as well.

After many years of self-recognition process, the diverse Deaf communities around the world still struggles to see its status recognized with diverse results. Many efforts have been made to build layers of culture inside the community through unifying processes. As I have already stated in the first chapter, culture and its forms, like literature and art, push in two different directions, which are towards the outside and inside the community. Litera-

ture and arts help the members of a community to be more united to build a common cultural ground under their feet, a place where feeding a cultural common sense, pushing the community to be heterogeneous and solid. The centrifuge pushing force of art helped the Deaf community members to choose common values and social rules and to give names to every element of their life concerning with Deafhood. In this sense the art could be seen as the wall that draws the confines of the *hortus conclusus* in which Deaf identity grows and flourishes thanks to the attentions given by the Deaf community members.

On the other hand, the centripetal force of art helped the Deaf community in exporting the Deaf culture and the Deaf values outside the borders of the community. The many forms of Deaf art helped the members in building a solid and unite community, to feed a common sense of Deaf Identity, and to bring these concepts outside the community. The universal nature of the performance supported Deaf people in export their ideas to the hearing world and to make room for a contact space, a contamination point in which the cultures can meet and grow thanks to the other. In the 19th century the performances which involved deaf actors worked as bridge between the deaf and the hearing worlds, that were put in contact for the first time. As Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren states:

«The play, as it were, takes the demonstration of ability and its rhetorical staging of the right of a deaf-mute to its inheritance, his property, out to the people and poses the question to the general public. In this case the play succeeded in creating a contact zone alternative to the schools and courts between the hearing population and the deaf population.»(Kochhar-Lindgren 2006:30)

Thus, the performing arts were proved to be one of the bridges that could be build to reach the hearing world, by building a contact zone. Ambra Zagherro states that the Deaf arts can be sorted into six different expressive styles:



«I diversi stili sono la manifestazione del 'sentire sordo', e la comunità sorda italiana presenta un proprio repertorio in LIS costituito da sei stili: Narrativa, Mimo, Poesia in segni, Canzone in segni, Visual Vernacular e Visual Vernacular musicale.» (Zaghetto 2013:53)

These are the artistic styles by which the Deaf community expresses its values and culture. Zaghetto affirms that the *corpus* created by these artistic styles is a cultural patrimony for the Deaf community, which helps the community grow and spread the Deaf culture in the hearing world. She also states that the new technologies helped along the spreading of Deaf culture among a hearing audience .

«I sei stili espressivi della LIS rappresentano un corpus letterario in evoluzione che è parte della cultura sorda italiana e che viene trasmesso attraverso le generazioni usando la LIS, all'interno della comunità e sono il mezzo di diffusione e trasmissione della cultura e sensibilità dei sordi italiani. L'avvento delle nuove tecnologie e l'uso dei social network ha consentito una rapida diffusione delle diverse forme espressive in lingua segnata nei confronti di un pubblico udente.» (Zaghetto 2013:74)

The different declinations of art managed to build a strong connection between the hearing and the Deaf world, creating a contact zone in which the two culture could be contaminated one by each other.

Here I illustrate three examples of performing arts, in this case theatre and signed music, that was originally created in a Deaf context and lately was used as connecting point for hearing people to explore the Deaf culture. These are the play *PA-PA* by Gabriele Caia, the music experience of the deaf rapper Francesco Brizio and the drama *Children of a Lesser God* by Mark Medoff.

### 3.1.1 PA-PA

*PA-PA* is a play written and brought on stage by Gabriele Caia, a deaf performer who graduated in *Discipline dello spettacolo dal vivo* in Bologna, Italy, in 2007 and who currently teaches Italian Sign Language at Ca' Foscari University, Venice in the role of language assistant. His field of study are Deaf Culture, Deaf community history and Sign language linguistic. His most known work is the solo-play named *PA-PA* (2010), a monologue written and entirely played by him.

The center of the play is the Deaf in all of its shades in everyday life. Starting from the very first contacts with the hearing world, he tells some episode of his childhood as a deaf child who attended an institute for the deaf and experienced speech therapy just like other million deaf people like him. All along the play, deafness is never seen as a negative condition or a disability. Caia affirms the importance of the Deaf pride, a concept that permeates the whole play from the very beginning until the last line.

Through the embodiment of different character and talking for himself, for his personal experience, Caia makes use of the instrument of irony to expose the issue of Deafhood and the perspective of a deaf person in a world made by and for hearing people. He describes many episode of his life (real or not - this is not the point) that forces the viewer to think about the point of view of the Deaf community. The use of irony and the special use of the Deaf humour, a special kind of humour that is hard to translate into spoken language and that tells a lot about what makes the deaf laugh - prevent the audience from feeling sorry or feeling pity for the Deaf. On the contrary, this play overturns the question and makes the viewer ask him or herself whether being hearing is normal or even a loss.

The play is originally not translated into spoken language, so the live audience had to be aware of Italian Sign Language to understand what went on the stage to enjoy the Deaf humour. However after the show, Caia decided to record a DVD in which subtitles were added: these subtitled finally constituted the bridge to reach the hearing world and to contaminate

it with a Deaf person everyday experience. In fact, the vision of this DVD is required to succeed in the first level of Italian Sign Language at Ca' Foscari University.

### 3.1.2 The deaf rapper Francesco "Brazzo" Brizio

Francesco Brizio is an Italian young man, deaf from birth. He is deaf son of deaf parents and experienced the Deaf life since the earlier stages of his life. He grew up in a Deaf context, surrounded by deaf parents and friends who use the Italian Sign Language and struggle to make the language recognized by the Italian government. Born in Taranto, he now lives in Milan where he works as employee and composes music that sticks up for Deaf rights. His artistic name is *Brazzo*: he writes, composes and sings the lyrics of his rap songs which tell a lot about the Deaf World and its need for an open recognition by the hearing majority. In December, 2016, he presented his first song, with the title "*Sono sordo mica scemo*" (I am deaf, not dumb). Brazzo do not hear the music or the lyrics but feels to the vibration coming out of the loudspeakers. He states that he had to learn to lip-read and trained his voice thanks to the help of a speech therapist.<sup>1</sup>

He is very devoted to the Deaf cause and chose rap to express the frustration of the Deaf Italian community in not having a recognized language. This first song wants to reach the hearing majority and stick up for Deaf rights, in particular for the recognition of the Italian Sign Language by the government, and for the inclusion of the Deaf in the social life. At the present time, 2017, Italian Sign Language is still not a recognized language. As the young rapper states, «In Italia purtroppo la lingua dei segni (LIS) non è ancora riconosciuta dalla legge. Noi sordi non siamo invisibili, vogliamo essere

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<sup>1</sup> Ambra Zagherro reports a musical teaching method that is not used in Italy since 1977, after the *Scuole Speciali* were shut down and the deaf pupils were sent to normal *Istituti Statali*. She describes the musical education of the Deaf, and states that «l'educazione del sordo non si riferisce ad un'educazione musicale in senso classico, ma descrive quella pratica collaterale e di supporto alla rieducazione alla parola durante la riabilitazione logopedica del singolo. Attraverso l'apprendimento e la comprensione delle nozioni di ritmica e accentuazione musicale, il sordo impara a: scandire temporalmente la sequenza delle parole nel discorso parlato, dare un'accentuazione corretta delle parole pronunciate; dare un'intonazione al discorso.»(Zagherro 2013)

integrati nella vita sociale.»(*Francesco Brizio*)

Brazzo's music could be seen as a bridge between the Deaf and the hearing world. With his rap songs he managed to touch a form of art which was seen as inaccessible to the deaf such as music. His art connects the hearing and the Deaf Culture exporting sensations felt by a Deaf young person in the hearing world. Brazzo's voice aim to be heard by the hearing universe, and sings in rhymes because of the power of the messages brought by rap music. Songs like "*Sono sordo mica scemo*" have a strong representative function because it presents Deaf issues to the hearing majority and invites it to be interested and join the cause.

### 3.1.3 Children of a Lesser God

In 1978 the National Theatre of the Deaf presented for the first time the original version of *Children of a Lesser God*, a play published in 1979 by Mark Medoff. This play was doomed to become very popular in the Deaf World and the most famous Deaf drama outside the Deaf community. The plot focuses on the romantic relationship between Sarah, a deaf former student in a institute for the Deaf and a teacher, James Leeds. The most popular version on this play is not the one under the spotlights of a theatre, however the one on the big screen: the 1986 film adaptation of the play directed by Randa Haines and written by Hesper Anderson was very successful thanks to the *Academy Award for Best Actress in a Leading Role* won by Marlee Matlin who played Sarah.

The plot has two leading characters, Sarah and James, who act on the background of the Deaf culture in the United States of America. Their romantic relationship is spontaneous but has to face the differences of their personalities as two individuals who belongs to diverse culture. Sarah is a stubborn deaf girl, who wants no pity and no help from the hearing world, and that shows proudly her belonging to the cultural sphere of deafhood. James is the hearing professor who knows American Sign Language but have difficulties in understanding the mechanisms of deafhood that permeates the lives of deaf people as Sarah and her friends. Their two worlds meet

and create a contamination zone where the Deaf and the hearing world are connected by a cultural bridge. However this contact point is weak and risks to collapse at every little stumble. The main two characters represent the distant worlds of Deaf and hearing. They establish a contact point and get to know each other thanks to that bridge, but finds obstacles due to the diverse cultural grounds. Their relationship is the symbol of the bridge that can unite the Deaf and the hearing world, a possible and delicate equilibrium between two universes.

*Children of a Lesser God* represents the possibility of a cultural connection thanks to its plot which brings together two different worlds on the same stage. Moreover, the play has a representative function on two levels: the first level is in plot, where one deaf and one hearing character meet and get in touch, challenging the borders of their own communities, being representatives of their cultures, bringing along their community values. The second level regards the outside aspect of the play and its accessibility to signers and not signers. *Children of a Lesser God* is equally accessible to deaf, hearing, signers and non-signers, and brings on stage the deaf perspective, Sarah's point of view, which results to be the less known by the audience. In this light, the play displays in a very clear and accessible way the Deaf values, ideas, fears and hopes. These concepts are brought outside the boundaries of deaf community and spread among the hearing audience. Thanks to the success of the film adaptation of this play, many hearing people got in touch with the Deaf World, many of them where attracted by this unknown ethnic community and learnt the Sign Language in order to communicate with its members. This play is one of the most clear example of the *representative function* of art and how its performing derivations manage get over the community boundaries and show the world the most intimate mechanism of the Deaf world.

The *representative function* of performing arts was hereby illustrated through brief observations of different performances to prove that Deaf culture can be brought out the Deaf community thanks to art and its deriva-

tions.

## 3.2 Inclusion function

The subject of this section is the inclusion function of performing arts. The scheme shows that the Deaf and hearing culture can be connected through art and its various forms. In the previous section I analysed three examples of performing art practice that manage to establish a cultural connection between the cultures by bringing the Deaf values outside the community, toward the hearing majority. These performances have their roots in the Deaf culture and their branches developed in the direction of the opposite culture. These performances embody the representation function, which export the Deaf values in the hearing world. The representation function in the scheme is displayed as the arrow that starts from the Deaf world and goes directly to the hearing nucleus.

In this section I aim to illustrate the other important function of performing art, which is the *inclusion function*. This function is related with the representative function and enriches the strength of art connecting function. These two function work together to build a solid cultural bridge between cultures, allowing them to contaminate and be contaminated each other with art. Art contains the cultural codes of a community and is a real mouth-piece for its existence in the world. According to the scheme, the inclusive function is graphically represented by the arrow that starts from the hearing nucleus and goes toward the Deaf culture. It is possible to gather many performances involving the deaf and the hearing world that can be analysed in the light of inclusion function. The inclusive function, as it is clear shown in the scheme, connects the hearing and the Deaf World from the heart of hearing culture. Therefore, the performances taken as examples can be either theatre performances, signed music or dance, and all of those art forms that traditionally belongs to the hearing culture.

The performances that will be taken as examples in this section are here

labelled under the category of the inclusive function. This categorisation is due to their aim to include the Deaf World into artistic processes that are unnatural to deaf people, like the music.

The reader could find weird that in an equal perspective of the cultural exchange the functions have different names. In an equal point of view, that respect both hearing and Deaf culture, both of the arrows of the scheme should have been called "representation", in order not to put a culture above the other in order of importance. As a matter of fact, both of these functions represent something of one culture to the other: the Deaf represents its values and identity, and the hearing brings its own form of arts - like music - to the Deaf side, by making it accessible through sensory expedients. In this perspective there is no need for the smaller community to "represent" itself to the outside world and the mainstream majority does not require to "include" the other culture with artistic practices. "Inclusion" and "integration" are hard to use, because they imply a hierarchy of importance among the cultures.

The reason why this arrow on the scheme has been nominated "inclusion" and not "representation", is not because the hearing community is more important or because the author implies the dominance of hearing culture above the Deaf one. The reason why this function is not called "representation" just as the other is because the author considers the Deaf community as a minority surrounded by hearing culture. The Deaf World is a small community which is permeated by hearing values, thus it does not need to *learn* the hearing values through connecting functions of art, literature and performing arts. On the contrary, the hearing majority is rarely aware of Deaf culture, so that art, literature and performing arts constitute real cultural bridges to reach the Deaf World. In this dissertation the function that connects the hearing with the Deaf World is called "inclusion" just because through it the hearing world aims to include the Deaf World in those artistic forms by which is naturally marginalized. The artistic form that most marginalizes deaf people is *music*, which has been turned into accessible art thanks to a sensory transformation. In this section I will try to analyse performances created by hearing in order to involve the Deaf into music and dance, two

artistic forms which used to be naturally out of Deaf culture boundaries. These performances have been created by hearing artists who manage to transform music into senses, and dance into observation of body movements. There have been many examples of these practices in the last decades, and many tried to realise sensory experiment on stage in order to involve a larger audience composed by deaf and hearing people.

In the light of the inclusive function, Kochhar-Lindgren 2006 formulated the idea of the Third Ear, which is the instrument through which is possible to *hear differently*. This definition refers to the capability of understanding the art of theatre through a diverse perception of sound, silence and body movement:

«The description of hearing differently, because it gives way to a greater understanding of the performing body and audience reception, can help us develop new frames for the current discussions about the politics of difference. Hearing through the third ear points to a dimension of understanding that exceeds the confines of an explicit verbal "meaning" of the performance. And what is just beyond our usual "hearing" keeps close company with the companion term, deafness.»(Kochhar-Lindgren 2006:62)

The scholars uses the metaphor of the Third Ear to illustrate the connections between hearing and deafness in experimental, Deaf, and multicultural theatre. In her book Kochhar-Lindgren aims to explore the richness of other performance elements which are not directly related to sound, and illustrate new art practices through the cross-cultural theatre. The hearing is not the only sense to be used on stage and in the audience.

In her book she illustrates the history of Deaf Theatre from the very early stages, and takes into account many performing practices that overturned the concept of traditional theatre. Kochhar-Lindgren observes the cross-cultural theatre as a possibility of theatre that allows many kind of audience to participate to the performance. One of the first exploration was



synaesthesia, which is a way of perception that involves more than just one sense:

«A primary area of exploration was that of synaesthesia. Derived from Greek *syn* (meaning union) and *aesthesis* (sensation), synaesthesia challenged the conventional view of the senses: that each sense could be accorded a specific sphere of activity. Synaesthesia has been used in reference to medical conditions in which a person experiences one sense in terms of another, such as in colored hearing.»(Kochhar-Lindgren 2006:38)

Ambra Zaghetto explores the dimension of silence in the context of performing arts, supporting the idea that there are many interpretation of its presence on stage. There are many definitions of music, among which it can be considered as sound, as language, as perceptive category, as social structure, as socio-anthropological document, as healing method. If deafness is seen as a deficit, it is incompatible with these definitions for many reasons, first of all because music intended as sound is «l'arte del produrre significati e sensazioni a seguito di una organizzazione della materia sonora e "non-sonora" (silenzio)»(Zaghetto 2013:78)

From a hearing point of view, a deaf individual lives in a condition of forced silence, which is normally considered negative absence of sound. However, there are many researchers that enquired the silence condition. A positive evaluation of silence is the «considerazione e nell'esplorazione di dimensioni percettive alternative associate al suono "sentito" e, di solito, tralasciate nel sentire quotidiano.»(Zaghetto 2013:78) Zaghetto underlines the importance of study the silent condition and the observation from a deaf point of view:«La rivalutazione positiva del silenzio permette di considerare in modo diverso le modalità percettive e di produzione "musicale" proprie del sordo profondo»(Zaghetto 2013:79) Moreover, according to Zaghetto is possible to:

«Definire/caratterizzare una *dimensione sonora sorda* attraverso l'analisi della produzione artistica in lingua dei segni e le espe-

rienze musicali che il sordo fa/cerca quotidianamente: il "sentire" e il "non-sentire" musica si traduce in presenza/percezione di vibrazione, oppure assenza di vibrazione, presenza/percezione di ritmo visivo o assenza dello stesso. L'esperienza "sonora" del sordo va analizzata e descritta in funzione di una percezione vibro-tattile, e la produzione "musicale" del sordo deve essere analizzata e descritta in funzione di una percezione visiva.»(Zaghetto 2013:80)

The audio experience of the Deaf must be realized through other senses than just hearing. The artist who realises an artistic product and addresses it to the Deaf community must be aware of the different perception channels used by deaf individuals to enquire the world. In this light the next section is dedicated to *sensory music*.

### 3.2.1 Sensory music

According to Zaghetto, the music has always been used by speech therapists in order to teach the Deaf to articulate words. However, the music has been used with the only intent of education, and it could be not appreciated by the Deaf community as instrument of cultural contamination and personal enrichment. A deaf individual experiences the music through vibrations thanks to the touch sense, that is well developed to balance the hearing loss.

«La musica può essere ascoltata anche dal sordo attraverso la vibrazione: questa è la modalità di esperienza sonora propria della persona sorda. Esistono nella Comunità Sorda sordi che non accettano il fatto di parlare di sordità e musica allo stesso tempo, mentre altri tenacemente desiderano capire/sentire la vibrazione sonora, ascoltarla, e per loro è naturale mettersi in ascolto della musica attraverso tutto il corpo, attraverso un'esperienza sonora vibro-tattile»(Zaghetto 2013:80)

The vibration experience takes place when the deaf individual touches a

vibrant surface with his/her hands or feet. The surface vibrates thanks to the audio waves stimulation. Technology has faced this need and recently created vibrant objects in order to transmit the music through vibration: «in relazione ad un comportamento di questo tipo la tecnologia ha risposto creando poltrone o lettini vibro-tattili da trasmettere la vibrazione della musica anche alla persona sorda per creare momenti di inclusione in contesti esclusivi per udenti.»(Zaghetto 2013:86) Thus, different forms of performance, such as music, dance or theatre can be felt by deaf people who cannot hear but feel the music language through vibrations:

«Il "sentire" e il "non sentire" musica si traduce in presenza/percezione di vibrazione, oppure assenza di vibrazione, presenza/percezione di ritmo visivo o assenza dello stesso. L'esperienza *sonora* del sordo va analizzata e descritta in funzione di una percezione vibro-tattile, e la produzione musicale del sordo deve essere analizzata e descritta in funzione di una percezione visiva.»(Zaghetto 2013:80)

There are many examples of Italian theatres which decided to include vibrant seats in their parterre. The *Fenaroli* Theatre of Lanciano (Abruzzo, southern Italy) was the very first Italian theatre that included four vibrant seats, which have been used by more than three hundred deaf people. These seats are lined with vibrant devices which transmit the vibration to the person who sits on it. Then, after this first example, the *Gaber* auditorium in Milan (Palazzo della regione Lombardia) installed 10 vibrant seats in its audience in 2010.

In this case the vibration experience is accompanied by a synaesthesia experience through which deaf people manage to mix the visual with the touch experience:

«In aggiunta alla percezione tattile, però, è anche presente la "percezione visiva dei suoni" (processo sintetico) attraverso una proiezione su schermo di una miscela di "colori in movimento" che

rappresentano il prodotto (visivo) dell'eccitazione di una membrana nanometrica appositamente realizzata nell'ambito del progetto.»(Zaghetto 2013:81)

Vibrating seats and synaesthesia are inclusive expedients that help the hearing performing culture to include the Deaf World. Recently many inclusive ideas have been realized thanks to the developing new technology. In this case, these expedients result to be part of that inclusive function which builds a bridge between the hearing and the Deaf World, allowing them to be culturally contaminated each other. As Zaghetto states,

«Le poltrone vibro-tattili rientrano in quella serie di progetti che hanno lo scopo di includere il sordo nella società udente, e di permettergli una fruizione dei medesimi eventi culturali dedicati a un pubblico normodotato.»(Zaghetto 2013:83)

The experience of vibrating seats clearly represents an example of inclusive function of performances that are created by the hearings but can be enjoyed by Deaf people through different expedients.

### **The Conversation**

Another example of inclusive performance, apart from theatres, is *The Conversation* by Francesca Grilli, that took place at the MamBo (Museo d'Arte Moderna di Bologna) in Bologna, in 2010. The performance can be included in the category of Musical Visual Vernacular, as it is performed by a deaf artist who transforms the audio waves into signs. Zaghetto describes the Musical Visual Vernacular as

«una nuova tecnica in LIS propria della cultura Sorda italiana, e rappresenta un tipo di performance inserita all'interno di un'opera d'arte che prevede interazione effettiva con la vibrazione musicale da parte di un segnante sordo.»(Zaghetto 2013:86)

A perfect examples for this new technique is the performance created by Grilli, who experimented a sensory environment in which both deaf and

hearing people could be involved. In her installation a deaf artist, Nicola Della Maggiora, while standing on a boat keel, interacted with audio waves produced by a cello and a double-bass that played at the bottom of the boat and interpreted the vibrations into Signed Poetry. According to Grilli's personal website there were precise instructions to follow in order to step into the room:

«The audience is invited to keep a balloon in his hands present in space. The floor of the room will be covered by balloons, through them you can hear the same sound vibrations that our performer feels with his feet in contact with the speakers sound. The action will begin with a message that will invite the audience to entering the room, to grab the balloons and sit on the floor. The message will be communicated by a professional sign language interpreter, both in Italian and simultaneously Italian Sign Language. The singer improvise a sign language song based on the vibrations he is feeling, coming out from the cello and the double-bass.»  
(*Francesca Grilli*)

The deaf artist stands on the boat keel with bare foot and performs the music he feels through the wood and transforms it in Signed Poetry. This kind of poetry is not improvised and comes from the personal feeling of the performer and from an accurate study of the context. Zaghetto illustrates this kind of performance comparing it with the Visual Vernacular, focusing on the role of vibration and its elaboration into Signed Poetry:

«Il *Visual Vernacular musicale* non è un'improvvisazione, il *performer* sordo fa precedere all'esecuzione finale un attento studio della vibrazione sonora per imparare a riconoscerne intensità, "direzione", ritmica. Lo studio della vibrazione consente al performer di acquisire confidenza con la vibrazione stessa ed elaborare un'interpretazione visiva delle sensazioni provate.» (Zaghetto 2013:91)

In this light, the performer is not the only character in this performance, as long as the spectators grab a balloon and sit on the floor. Through these expedients, they can feel the vibrations coming from the cello and the double-bass as much as the performer feels it. By this practice, the performer and the audience, deaf or hearing, are involved in the action and can enjoy through different perceive channels. This performance has been considered and included in the *inclusion function* of the contamination scheme for its inclusive structure towards people who have different perception channels like the deaf. An hearing artist translates into signs what can not be heard by deaf individuals through vibrations, so that both hearing and deaf can participate to the action.

### **Discolabirinto**

Another example for sensory music is the one brought by the Italian electropop band Subsonica featuring Bluvertigo bounded by the Zerovolume pioneering project in 2000. Subsonica and Bluvertigo used to be very well-known in pop culture that used to broadcast to the television channel Music Television. These two bands experimented another music dimension, trying to make a song with a universally understandable video without the help of sign language or vibrations. This project makes use of synaesthesia, as theorized by Zaghetto, with the help of lights and color. The video is opened by a English speaking voice and a sign language interpreter which explains to the viewers what they are going to watch. The introduction is also accompanied by Italian subtitles.

«Dear viewer, welcome. You are about to experience a pioneering project called *Zerovolume*. Our aim is to attempt to translate sound into light and movement. The band Subsonica featuring Bluvertigo immediately assured their support for the entire operation. Every musician will use a machine specifically designed to visualise the individual soundtracks of the song *Discolabirinto*. Thank you for your attention, now try to *see* the music.» (*Discolabirinto music video*)

The interpreter invites the viewers to "see" the music, because every instrument have been associated with a color and a light that moves to the rhythm of the song. During the introduction the interpreter explains the light and color associated to each instrument. There are also Italian subtitles during the video, but they are not the exact lyrics of the song, however a translation into a more immediate version of the Italian lyrics. About the project, the director Luca Pastore explains that:

«Il video-clip descrive l'esperimento , sfidando il media di supporto ossia la tv, a travasare tutto il suono nell'immagine, come per un radiosceneggiato al contrario. Come un cieco può immaginare paesaggi ascoltando un brano, così il sordo potrà percepire una melodia guardando il video. Un "macchinario" analogico contiene musicisti e trasforma il brano in leve, luci ed immagini, due "cubiste" segnanti sono le coriste: cantano in "body-language" con la lingua dei segni. Il brano "Disco Labirinto" è stato trasformato e tradotto in Zerovolume: quello che si sentirà con le orecchie è leggermente diverso da quello che si vedrà con gli occhi, le labbra di Samuel e Morgan si muoveranno alle parole del brano silenzioso, un errore apparente, invisibile se si preme "mute" e si guarda in zerovolume.»([www. subsonica. it](http://www.subsonica.it))

This kind of visual music can be considered within the inclusive function for its easy fruition by deaf people. The bands aimed to find a way to express music through different channels, avoiding the sign language for the central part of the performance, and including deaf people who can enjoy the music not by hearing it, not by feeling it but by seeing it.

### 3.2.2 Dance

«Dance that does not rely on music or a one-for-one transportation of words of a poem into gesture becomes a form of pictorial, kinesthetic expression. As the words are absorbed by the dancer, the body speaks at the interstices of sound and gesture.»(Kochhar-Lindgren 2006:45)

Dance is another form of performing arts that might involve deaf and hearing performers and be part of the contamination scheme. Dance is the performing art that have many similarities with Sign Language: the movements, the rhythm and the space management are common elements to dance and to Sign Language. Deaf people can feel they *hear* a melody while signing, and feel empathy with dancers on stage, which follow similar rules while dancing:

«Because of the use of gesture, dance, and acting are in the foreground, understanding evolves through a type of body-to-body listening. We "hear" gesture articulated through the body of the performer and transmitted to the body of the audience.»(Kochhar-Lindgren 2006:164)

What may result strange to the hearing world, is that deaf people could dance. There are more than just one way to teach deaf to dance: the first is through vibrations caused by audio waves. Zaghetto reports the experience of a salsa class that took place in *Ente Nazionale Sordi* (ENS) in Milan that had great success among deaf. Deaf individuals learn to dance through the visual channel and are guided not by music but by its vibrations.

«L'apprendimento dei passi di ballo si basa, in questo caso, sull'uso esclusivo del canale visuale: i ragazzi sordi affermano che la base musicale, anche se presente, non influisce sulla articolazione pratica dei passi di salsa perchè la vibrazione, avvertita in tutto il corpo in modo vibro-tattile, non è sufficiente per definire il ritmo effettivo di realizzazione dei passi.»(Zaghetto 2013:85)

The second teaching method is not about vibrations but it relies on communication between hearing and deaf dancers who can understand the music through a signed explanation of the feelings and through counting. There are many examples of companies that managed to bring on stage a dance performance that could be enjoyed by both deaf and hearing audience. One of the most famous is the *Justaucorps*, a dance project launched by



Emmanuelle Laborit between 2009 and 2010 in France. The project involved the *Non de Nom* company, the artist Pascale Houbin and a group of deaf and hearing artists. The show had its debut in 2010. The project invited to make contemporary and kathakali dancers, marionette artist and other to collaborate in order to allow the creation of a singular body language. This project had a strong inclusive aim, where hearing and deaf artist were called to join on the same stage and reinterpret classic ballets such as *Le lac des cygnes*, *La Sylphide*, *Roméo et Juliette*. This project is a perfect example of inclusive performance.

### **Silent Beat**

The *Silent Beat* is a group of deaf and hearing dancers settled in Rome, Italy. The aim of the dancing company is to bring Deaf Culture outside the Deaf boundaries and at the same time include deaf in a artistic practice which is traditionally bound to the hearing culture: dance. The leading figure of this dancing company is Ambra Bianchini, a hearing choreographer who knows LIS and has a degree in psychology. Bianchini explains the mood of her choreographies to deaf dancers through a first general explanation of the feeling expressed by the music (sadness, joy, melancholy etc.) with LIS. Then the group can explore the movements that are synchronized by a 1-8 counting. These movements are a complex transformation of signs, which become a new language for the dancers on stage.

«Utilizzando la LIS l'insegnante trasmette la disciplina e la cultura della danza, spiega il ritmo raccontandolo con le mani e col corpo, i segni stessi diventano movimenti coreografici. La LIS rende i ballerini indipendenti ritmicamente, facendo diventare i segni della lingua ed i movimenti del corpo una cosa unica con la danza.» *Silent Beat*

Dance can be included in the inclusion function as the representative function, because it can brought the Deaf Culture over the Deaf community boundaries but it is also inclusive towards the deaf, making them part of a

practice which is traditionally carried on by hearing artists. The representative function gives the chance to the deaf artists to display their culture to the hearing world:

« Lo spettacolo ha una forte valenza sociale: - vuole mostrare che la danza può essere uno strumento di autodeterminazione, di valorizzazione della propria personalità e di affermazione della propria autostima: ha permesso a questi ragazzi di (...) trovare una modalità di espressione in un mondo che li esclude, perché dominato dai suoni.»(*Silent Beat*)

This kind of performing arts can be observed by many points of view, both under the inclusive and representative function.

### **3.2.3 Musica Visiva - Signed music**

The expression "Musica Visiva" refers to a translation technique that transform the lyrics of a song into signs. In the Italian Deaf Community this expression is well-known and since 2000 many deaf and hearing artists have performed their show both in spoken language and Italian Sign Language (LIS). Zaghetto illustrates the procedure of this transformation during an interview in the occasion of the "Cinema senza Barriere" film festival:

«il processo prevede una serie di passaggi: analisi del testo originale della canzone che si vuole trasporre; analisi della musica che accompagna il testo della canzone; trasposizione in LIS delle parole; organizzazione dei segni secondo le regole della poesia per creare una ritmica interna al testo trasposto in funzione del ritmo della musica; arricchimento del testo trasposto in segni con descrizione "visiva" della base musicale.»(Zaghetto 2013:89)

The aim of these performances is to create visual metaphor which can be related to the lyrics of the song. Every Musica Viva performance is accompanied by the original song, however this is unimportant to a deaf person, as Zaghetto underlines, «è il corpo che domina la musica, e non la musica

che accompagna il corpo.»(Zaghetto 2013:89) Nowadays in Italy there are many performance in which both deaf and hearing are involved, for example choirs where the rhythm comes from the director who leads the signs and allow the deaf performers to follow the music. There is no contact of the deaf performer with the vibrations of the music.

The performing form of *Musica Viva* is very well known in the pop culture: there are many Italian pop artists who discovered it and used it in their video.<sup>2</sup> This is the confirmation that also *Musica Viva* can be considered part of the inclusive function of performing art, just as Zaghetto states

«Questa tecnica è, attualmente, molto diffusa all'interno della comunità sorda italiana anche in relazione al fatto che la trasposizione in LIS di canzoni famose permette di creare un "ponte" tra mondo udente e mondo sordo, e diminuire la distanziazione tra culture diverse»(Zaghetto 2013:93)

Zaghetto's statement confirms the hypothesis that various forms of culture, among which performing arts might connect distant cultures and let them contaminated one each other. The artistic form of *Musica Viva*, signed music, can thus be considered part of the performances that connect the hearing to the Deaf culture, aiming to include deaf people into arts traditionally animated by music. These artistic forms such as dance and or music itself can be reinterpreted using different perceptive channels. By doing so, the performance manages to reach also a deaf audience, and manages to connect the hearing and deaf culture as a bridge.

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<sup>2</sup>There are many examples of Italian pop and rock musicians who translated their song into Sign Language and used it as official video of the song. The most famous and recent examples in Italy are I *Tre allegri ragazzi morti* with "La mia vita senza te" (2013), *Il Teatro degli Orrori* with "Vivere e morire a Treviso" (2012) and "A bocca chiusa" (2013) by Daniele Silvestri. These bands chose the Sign Language interpretation as official video, but there are many pop songs unofficial videos made by Sign Language students and Deaf community members on YouTube.

# Conclusions

The elaboration of this thesis lasted six month between 2016 and 2017.

As I already stated in the introduction, the first sprinkle of interest in the Deaf Theatre issue came in 2015, thanks to the play *Figli di un Dio minore at Teatro Duse*, Bologna. From the very first step outside the theatre I have decided to pursue the Deaf cause, to investigate the cultural roots on which the Deaf community is built, with a special attention to the theatre and to the various forms of performing arts. The meeting organized by the Istituto Statale Sordi in Roma has played an important role in the elaboration and writing of this thesis, and it has cleared the way to the heart of the research. The meeting has underlined the question I aimed to answer with this work, whether culture could be really a bridge between diverse community members, and whether it could be the foundation of a community at the same time.

In conclusion of this work, is necessary to remark some aspect of the research and some considerations made during and after the realisation of this dissertation.

In the second chapter I tried to analyse different examples of performance that involved both deaf and hearing performers, or that could be suitable both for deaf and hearing audience under the light of the theory of *cultural contamination scheme*. Thus in that section I tried to analyse each performance and decide whether in that particular performance prevailed the representative or the inclusive function. The aim was to collocate the performances in order to illustrate and support the theory of cultural contamination.

However, this *modus operandi* has shown that many performances can be attributed both to the representative and inclusive function, and therefore that the division line is thin and flexible. I do not consider this as an error compromising the entire theory, because it is imputable to the flexible nature of performances. However it is useful to reflect about the rigidity of the two theorised function. In this dissertation there has been meagre mention to Sign Language Poetry. This choice is due to the fact that I decided to focus on the Theatre as the most ancient performing art in which the deaf were involved and I have chosen it as a symbol for all the Deaf performing arts.

Another interesting aspect to remark is the need of cultural bridge that is nowadays fundamental and urgent in the modern world. This issue goes beyond the Deaf and the hearing issue. The question whether culture could bridge between two distant cultures seemed banal to me in the beginning, as I would spontaneously give a positive answer. However a deeper analysis of the differences that we let grow between what we call "us" and "them", and a wider overview of what is happening in the world, made me reflect about the need of bridges between people.

Culture might be a connecting point between different communities, which could build wall made by culture instead by real bricks. All of the cultural derivation such as visual art, performing art and literature should be the only bricks used by countries to build their walls, made of knowledge, social norms, values, elements to remember the real essence of being part of a community. And at the same time, these would be the bridges build by people to reach the other part of the barricade and to establish a contact, to contaminate and be contaminated by something that do not spoil our community, but enrich it.

The world need bridges, and culture can go beyond any confines thanks to its universal language. Arts might be the expedient to unify a divided world, a world in which walls and bridges co-exists and that represent and include all the people without the need of the word "diverse".

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Appendix A

“ContaminAzioni” flyer



## I SEMINARI DEL GIOVEDÌ - 2016 TAVOLA ROTONDA

Giovedì  
13 ottobre 2016  
ore 16.30 - 18.30 - SALA SEMINARI  
ISSR | Via Nomentana 56

# CONTAMINAZIONI

'Signed Talk' su arti performative e nuovi linguaggi visuali

**FIGLI DI UN DIO MINORE** di Mark Medoff | Regia di Marco Mattolini

Con **GIORGIO LUPANO, RITA MAZZA, Cristina Fondi, Francesco Magali, Gianluca Teneggi, Deborah Donadio** | Casting **Laura De Strobel** | Interpreti **Arianna Testa, Elena Ferotti, Giuseppina Guercio** | Consulente LIS di **Giorgia Lupano Vincenzo Speranza** | Laboratorio teatrale **Francesca Di Meo, Luca Des Dorides, Laura De Strobel** | Artisti Associati con **Officine del Teatro Italiano**.

Portare sul palco due lingue, tre culture e due diversi universi percettivi per uno spettacolo fruibile da sordi e udenti, questa la sfida raccolta da **Marco Mattolini** e **Laura De Strobel**, con la consulenza di **Francesca Di Meo** e **Luca Des Dorides** per l'ISSR.

Premio Camera di Commercio 50° Festival Teatrale di Boggio Veruzzi | PREMIO PERSEFONE 2016 Premio Speciale del Presidente Maurizio Costanzo e Targa 'Carmelo Rocca' dal pubblico giovane.

**TRIBES** di Nina Raine | Regia di Elena Sbardella

Con **Stefano Santospago, Ludovica Modugno, Barbara Giordano, Luchino Giordano, Federico D'andrea, Alice Spisa/Deniz Özdoğan** | Interprete e aiuto regia per la LIS **Rosa Anna Rinaldi** | Preparatrice LIS **Deborah Donadio** | Interprete **Chiara Ipparelli** | Soprattitoli **CulturAibile** | Laboratorio **Luca Des Dorides** e **Francesca Di Meo** | In collaborazione con **Istituto Statale Sordi - Roma** | Produzione **Artisti Riuniti**.

Una commedia viva, scorretta e dall'ironia feroce che racconta un mondo dove quasi tutti sentono ma nessuno ascolta. **Elena Sbardella**, con la consulenza di **Luca Des Dorides** e **Francesca Di Meo** dell'**Istituto Statale Sordi - Roma** e di **Anna Rosa Rinaldi**, è riuscita ad assemblare attori sordi e udenti creando un insieme di lingua dei segni e lingua parlata.

**THE SILENT BEAT** | Gruppo del **THE SILENT BEAT** e **Ambra Bianchini**

*The Silent Beat* nasce da un'idea di **Ambra Bianchini**, ballerina e psicologa udente, convinta che la LIS abbia una dote estremamente artistica. Nasce così un metodo che possa spiegare il ritmo alle persone sorde, è il METODO LISDA creato e depositato dalla stessa Ambra. Essenziale è rendere il ritmo *visibile* e abbandonare l'idea che per ballare sia necessario udire. Per farlo Ambra si avvale sempre della collaborazione del gruppo nell'adattare i testi in segni che diventano essi stessi danza e raccontano una storia 'allo stesso tempo'.



**Moderano:**  
**Francesca Di Meo** e **Luca Des Dorides**, *Istituto Statale Sordi - Roma (MIUR)*  
**Nicola Della Maggiora**, *Artista Sordo*

**Intervengono:**  
**Gianluca Teneggi** e **Laura De Strobel**, *Figli di un dio minore*  
**Ambra Bianchini** ed **Eloisa Matina**, *The Silent Beat*  
**Elena Sbardella** e **Federico D'Andrea**, *Tribes*  
**Giulia Porcari Li Destri**, *Agenzia Danesi Talmy*  
**Arianna Testa**, interprete di *Figli di un dio minore* e *The Silent Beat*

Con performance dal vivo a cura di **Nicola Della Maggiora**

**Introduce:**  
**Ivano Spano**, *Istituto Statale Sordi - Roma (MIUR)*

**Il seminario è valido come tirocinio per gli studenti di II-III livello e del Corso Interpreti dell'Istituto Statale per Sordi di Roma**

**Il seminario è valido come tirocinio per gli studenti di II livello e del Corso Interpreti del 1° e 2° anno del Gruppo SILIS di Roma**

È previsto il servizio d'interpretariato: Italiano - LIS e viceversa



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