

THE UNIVERSAL DRUM

- a dramatic, visual poem with drum accompaniment

by

Willy Conley

The Bethesda Academy of Performing Arts' Imagination Stage commissioned this performance piece for the Deaf Access Company in 2002. The goal was to offer something quick and simple to set up on tour to perform before deaf and hearing audiences that would express the essence of the company. It was first performed at Imagination Stage's 24th Annual Benefit held at the Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School on November 23, 2002. It was directed by Lisa Agogliati; the sign master/visual dramaturge was Donna Salamoff; and the music composers were Rachel and Henry Cross. Members of the Deaf Access Company were:

Alexis Beveridge
Anna Bittencourt
Annie Dillon
Sarah Gumpert
Aaron Fields
Julie Miller

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An actor comes on stage rolling a short barrel, tube, and/or a large bowl. A few people come on with a flexible drum head and use it like a mini-trampoline, flinging up some object that's easy to bounce. Another person can bring on the fasteners or whatever is needed to secure the drum head over the barrel. Some could come in with bongos and tambourines. Others could use their own bodies as drumming instruments (slapping the thighs or chests, clapping hands, stomping the feet, or popping the hand against the open mouth). All of this could be done in a fun, entertaining way. One by one, the ensemble develops an entrancing beat which leads to a funky dance.

As the dance dies down, members of the ensemble narrate this poem in American Sign Language while others voice in English, perhaps all choreographed to a background drumbeat. Specific percussive beats can be used to underscore or punctuate parts of the poem.

Drum.
(fingerspell)
 D-R-U-M.

Musical instrument
 of two membranes,
 called "heads"
 stretched over a frame
 lacing binds tightly
 over the frame

Drums
 found all over the world
 since 6000 B.C.
 in almost every culture
 the most precious of
 all musical instruments

In Africa and Europe
 certain drums symbolize royalty

In Asia, Russia, and
 Native American tribes
 drums are used for ceremonial dances

In Deaf culture, a drum
is the one musical instrument
that reaches the heart
of a deaf person

Drums are universal
creating strength and solidarity
reflecting the rhythms of life:
the dawning of a new day
the setting of night

Trees swaying in the breeze
The rumble of thunderstorms
A door slamming
People walking
Hearts beating
Rhythms of life

Strike the instrument
with the hands
and we can create

(ensemble acts out each of the following creations)

Music
 Rhythms
 Signals
 Marches
 Dances
 Conversations

A drum can express
who you are
and who we are

I'm deaf and I live
in a Deaf world

I'm hearing and I live
in a hearing world

(Deaf and hearing actor, simultaneously)

I'm Deaf and I live
in both worlds

I'm hearing and I live
in both worlds

Like the drum
we are
woven together
in one place –

Like the two drum heads fastened
to the frame
tight
our hands reach out
to both deaf and hearing worlds

Using our drum to communicate
we sent our message to you...

(Deaf and hearing actor, simultaneously)

Look

Listen

to the rhythm of our family

Deaf...

hearing

equal
connected
united