

The National Theater of the Deaf

Name _____ Class · period _____ Date _____

THE SHORT VERSION

Founded in 1967 with twelve actors, the National Theater of the Deaf put sign language on the professional stage. It has toured all fifty states and all seven continents, won a Tony, and changed how hearing audiences see Deaf artists and ASL.

THE BEGINNING

An idea, a grant, and twelve actors

01 FOUNDED IN 1967

- 01 The National Theater of the Deaf (NTD) was started in 1967, with Dr. Edna Simon Levine credited with the initial idea to explore Deaf theater.

Its start is seen as their stage production of *The Miracle Worker*, which showed the potential for sign language to carve out its own spot as an art form on the stage.

- 02 Edna contacted Arthur Penn (director) and Anne Bancroft (lead) with the concept, and they also brought David Hays (lighting director) into the mix.

David worked on securing funding, and finally landed a grant from the federal government through the Department of Education.

- 03 Bernard Bragg came on board as NTD's first professional actor and helped shape the company in the time to come.

- 04 Fun fact: many people involved in the school went on to establish their own theatre troupes.

02 THE LITTLE THEATRE FOR THE DEAF

- 01 Soon after the start of NTD and the Professional Theatre School, the Little Theatre for the Deaf was started for a younger audience, and is also still going today.

The early momentum of these groups was very impactful because the initial surge happened when closed captioning, interpreter telephone and video services, as well as qualified interpreters, were not common practice; the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) did not exist.

ON STAGE AND BEYOND

What an NTD performance looks like, and what it changed

03 AN NTD PERFORMANCE

- 01 NTD involves both Deaf and hearing actors, but not in the ways that you might expect.

Deaf artists are traditionally in the lead roles with the hearing actors voicing off stage, a practice known as *shadowing*.

Some Deaf actors may speak during an NTD performance, but **all** will use sign language. As NTD states, the performance ultimately emphasizes human communication, and “the resulting style blends the spoken word, ASL, sign-mime, invented theatrical sign language, music and stylized individual ensemble movement.” Their performances are unlike anything else.

04 HELPING THE DEAF COMMUNITY

- 01 The NTD helped the Deaf community by educating the hearing, while also opening doors for Deaf individuals.

They showed the artistic capabilities of the Deaf, and by doing so shifted the attitudes of a dominant society that historically may not have viewed Deaf people as intelligent, capable, and deserving of equal rights.

NTD’s use of sign language has also removed some of the stigma that was associated with the language.

- 02 This breaking down of barriers has been evident in the many ways NTD has contributed to the world, including supporting Deaf playwrights through the National and Worldwide Deaf Theatre Conference.

05 NTD’S IMPACT

- 01 NTD has toured all fifty states, along with all seven continents, including NTD’s accolades for being the first theatre troupe to tour South Africa after United Nations sanctions were lifted, as well as being the first western group to perform in the People’s Republic of China.

- 02 They have also performed on the Disney Channel, *Sesame Street* and at the White House, and ran workshops as far away as Antarctica.

- 03 NTD has been critically acclaimed and has received many awards, including a Tony for Theatrical Excellence only ten years after it was created.
-

- 04** NTD was started with only twelve actors, and has now created a worldwide impact. The organization was also given its own day: Connecticut Governor M. Jodi Rell proclaimed November 22nd, 2008 as National Theatre of the Deaf Day.

They were also awarded Best Theatre Troupe in *Connecticut Magazine* more than once.

By placing sign language on the stage, NTD showed the world that sign language was a beautiful, powerful, visual language.

06 NAMES AND TERMS TO KNOW

NAME OR TERM	WHY IT MATTERS IN THIS STORY
Dr. Edna Simon Levine	Credited with the initial idea to explore Deaf theater, and the person who brought the concept to Arthur Penn and Anne Bancroft.
David Hays	The lighting director who secured the federal grant that got NTD off the ground.
Bernard Bragg	NTD's first professional actor, who helped shape the company.
Shadowing	The NTD practice of putting Deaf artists in the lead roles while hearing actors voice the lines from off stage.
Little Theatre for the Deaf	The companion company started soon after NTD for younger audiences, still running today.

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Answer in complete sentences using what you read

07 WRITTEN RESPONSE

- 01** Who had the initial idea for NTD, and who did she bring into the project?

- 02** Explain shadowing in your own words. How is it different from what an audience might expect?

03 NTD started before the ADA, closed captioning, and widely available interpreters. Why does that make its early work more significant?

04 List three places or programs NTD has performed for. What do they tell you about the company's reach?

05 How did putting sign language on a professional stage change the way hearing audiences viewed Deaf people and ASL?

08 WHERE THIS INFORMATION COMES FROM

"National Theatre of the Deaf" Carrie Sandahl · Encyclopaedia Britannica, October 31, 2014 · britannica.com

"NTD Puts Quality As Primary Goal" Steve Dale · Chicago Tribune, March 1, 1985 · chicagotribune.com

National Theatre of the Deaf ntd.org