

Who was Phyllis Frelich?

Name _____ Class · period _____ Date _____

THE SHORT VERSION

Phyllis Frelich (1944–2014) was a Deaf actress who helped build the National Theater of the Deaf and won a Tony Award for *Children of a Lesser God* — a play written for her, about her, after a hearing playwright learned ASL.

EARLY LIFE AND COLLEGE

From a Deaf family of eleven to a Library Science degree she never wanted

01 DEVILS LAKE, NORTH DAKOTA

- 01 On February 29, 1944, during a leap year, Phyllis was born Deaf in Devils Lake, North Dakota.

Frelich was a part of a large family of nine children, all of whom were Deaf, along with her father, a typesetter, and her mother, a seamstress.

- 02 Phyllis attended the North Dakota School for the Deaf, but states that she still faced prejudice against sign language due to it not being considered a language yet. She recounts that when she was little, “[her] teacher would slap [her] hand with a ruler if [she was] caught signing in class.”

02 COLLEGE

- 01 Even after facing some prejudice in her childhood, Frelich still continued her education at Gallaudet College (now Gallaudet University) in Washington, D.C.

While there, Phyllis took interest in their theater program, but Gallaudet did not offer a degree in the field at that time. Phyllis was encouraged to get a Library Science degree by others who felt that she could follow whomever she married and pick up work at a library.

Although Phyllis did acquire a Library Science degree, she continued to pursue her passion for the theater after graduating by helping to build the **National Theater of the Deaf** (NTD) in Waterford, Connecticut.

A LIFE IN THE THEATER

A friendship, a play written for her, and a Tony Award

03 ENTERING THE ACTING WORLD

- 01 Frelich met her husband, Robert Steinberg, who was working as a scenic designer.

Through Robert, when they were living in Rhode Island, Phyllis met playwright Mark Medoff, who had never had a Deaf friend before.

- 02 Medoff vowed to learn ASL after being captivated by it while Phyllis shared her frustrations regarding the limited acting roles for the Deaf. Because of these issues, Mark responded by writing the play *Children of a Lesser God*.

Phyllis's relationship with her husband, who was 100% hearing, influenced the storyline and characters.

After a trial performance in New Mexico, followed by shows in Los Angeles, the play caught enough attention to make it to Broadway, where Phyllis starred opposite John Rubinstein.

04 THE STRETCH OF HER CAREER

- 01 Frelich won a Tony for Best Actress in the *Lesser* role, and she went on to have parts in several other stage plays (many also written by Mark Medoff), a television movie, and television shows such as *Barney Miller*, *L.A. Law*, and *ER*.
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- 02 Phyllis also earned several honors, including North Dakota's highest honor, the Theodore Roosevelt Rough Rider Award, an Outer Circle Award, two L.A. Dramalogue Awards, and Gallaudet's Humanitarian Award and Honorary Doctor of Fine Arts.

Phyllis also served as the first Deaf board member of the Screen Actors Guild, running workshops and classes as well as working as a lecturer and a keynote speaker.

05 THE END OF HER LIFE AND HER LEGACY

- 01 Phyllis died at the age of 70 due to a rare brain disorder called progressive supranuclear palsy (PSP), which has no treatment.

Fans can still see her performances through her film work.

We are a cultural minority. We feel we are different by language, not by physical disability.

PHYLLIS FRELICH

Over those hundreds of performances, she brought the A-game onstage every single time: that flashing energy, the ferocious strength and the open-hearted vulnerability in her vibrant eyes, the perfect timing and boundless sense of humor, the willingness to go the distance.

JOHN RUBINSTEIN · CO-STAR IN *CHILDREN OF A LESSER GOD*

06 NAMES AND TERMS TO KNOW

NAME OR TERM	WHY IT MATTERS IN THIS STORY
National Theater of the Deaf	The company in Waterford, Connecticut that Phyllis helped build after graduating from Gallaudet.
Mark Medoff	The playwright who had never had a Deaf friend before meeting Phyllis, vowed to learn ASL, and wrote <i>Children of a Lesser God</i> .
<i>Children of a Lesser God</i>	The play that went from a trial performance in New Mexico to Broadway, and earned Phyllis a Tony for Best Actress.
Robert Steinberg	Phyllis's husband, a scenic designer. Their relationship influenced the play's storyline and characters.
John Rubinstein	Her co-star on Broadway in <i>Children of a Lesser God</i> .

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Answer in complete sentences using what you read

07 WRITTEN RESPONSE

01 What was Phyllis's family like, and how might that have shaped her relationship with sign language?

02 What happened to Phyllis at school when she was caught signing, and what does that tell you about how ASL was viewed at the time?

03 Why was Phyllis encouraged to study Library Science instead of theater, and what did she do about it?

04 How did a conversation between Phyllis and Mark Medoff lead to a Broadway play?

05 Phyllis said Deaf people are “a cultural minority... different by language, not by physical disability.” What do you think she meant, and how does her career support that idea?

06 Phyllis spent her career opening doors for other Deaf performers. Name two specific things she did that made it easier for the actors who came after her.
