



IETM REPORT

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LOOK AT ME!

Understanding what you cannot understand

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Moderator/Presenter: Josette Bushell-Mingo

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“Hello, and welcome!” greeted presenter and moderator Josette Bushell-Mingo, who introduced herself to every participant with an exuberant and earnest handshake. She started with a confession: “I am an IETM virgin.” Ms. Bushell-Mingo endearingly admitted her nervousness and excitement about being a part of the meeting, not only to educate and raise awareness about the work of her company and of the deaf performing arts community, but also to open a discussion about notions of communication and understanding, in and outside of the theater; “I hope that the dialog today will set you thinking about language, communication, and misunderstanding, throughout the IETM meeting.”

Ms. Bushell-Mingo proceeded to sign a rather lengthy speech, which we all watched with great interest. “I imagine using this language may make you feel a little uncomfortable” she gave us as the translation of her silent opening statement. “But it is simply because you don’t understand.”

In the theme of misunderstanding, of course language plays a large role. Ms. Bushell-Mingo’s experiences working with a deaf theater ensemble have raised her awareness of this fact, and opened her eyes to alternative means of communication, outside and around traditional notions of language. From this she has gained a more complex view of what it means to communicate, to truly understand one another; a view of different means and modes which has served to lessen the fear and stress which is often involved in the attempted communication between people of different cultures. A view of the range of possibilities in finding ways of being understood, which she hoped to share with us through the discussion.

“I want to make theater, not work with

deaf people.” Ms. Bushell-Mingo is a British actress and director with no previous association to deaf people or deaf culture. She has been the artistic director of Tyst Teater since 2005, and at the time, did not know any sign language. However she viewed the use of not only a different language, but of a different type of language, not as a hindrance, but as an exciting challenge. She believes the theater is a place for issues to be aroused, and does not seek merely to entertain or to create “theater for theater’s sake”. Working with a deaf ensemble is just one aspect of her artistic practice.

Tyst Teater (Silent Theater) is a professional ensemble, which has been part of the Swedish National Theater since 1977. It is the only all deaf professional ensemble in the world, and has been very active in promoting the recognition of deaf culture, and the use of sign language as a language of the theater. They play for all ages and both deaf and hearing audiences, and steadily tour internationally, as well as instigate international collaborations with other deaf artists from around the world. But the Tyst Teater is also a lively meeting place, which through theater, seminars and workshops, works to educate and invite political and artistic discussion about the status of deaf performing arts.

Our exuberant and specific moderator gave us a brief, informative (and necessary) education in sign language and deaf culture. One very widespread misconception is that there is one common sign language for deaf people worldwide- there isn’t. The signs, structure, delivery and grammar vary in every country and in every culture- just like spoken languages. Another misconception is that all deaf people want to hear- they don’t. Many deaf people do not at all view themselves as having a disability or a handicap; instead they view themselves as being part

of a rich culture that the hearing world cannot imagine. Ms. Bushell-Mingo says when asked about whether they are sad or angry that they cannot hear, her deaf colleagues laugh, “I would never want to”.

Yet the deaf community is still subject to prejudice and oppression. In Greek times, it was legal to kill a deaf child up until the age of 3, and up until the 1800’s, many believed that to be deaf meant you did not have a soul. Oralism, the practice of forcing deaf people to speak, is still widely practiced, and through the use of technology, specifically the Cochlear Implants which give deaf people a certain amount of hearing, are threatening to make deaf culture disappear. This is a concern that some of Ms Bushell-Mingo’s deaf colleagues have, and she wonders about the proper representation for deaf people to protect their culture and their rights, like any other minority group. “Of course, everything I say to you today comes from a hearing perspective” she said. “I cannot imagine, and neither can you, what it is really like to be deaf.”

To allow them to have their own voice, Ms. Bushell-Mingo shared with us a list of things her deaf colleagues wanted her to share with us; statements in their own voice about the deaf experience:

To be deaf is to have a full, rich and creative, normal life.

It is not a handicap.

It is a cultural and linguistic minority.

Deaf people are still oppressed. In many countries today, the language is not accepted.

Deaf people are restricted from certain jobs – police or fireman, but can be forensic scientists, choreographers, cultural ministers, dancers.

There is a world federation for the Deaf that unites some 46 million deaf in the world, and probably double and triple that figure for people who are hard of hearing.

The deaf have rich and full cultural lives – birth, death, marriage, school, jobs, and parties.

Deaf people are racist, homophobic, sexist, lovable, courageous and inspirational.

Respect sign language and deaf culture.

We can do everything a hearing person can – you just won't let us.

We are both a local global and international community.

Tell them: see the person not the deafness.

To illustrate the magnitude of this often unheard minority, Ms. Bushell-Mingo told us that there is an active deaf community in every country in the world; with schools, an active cultural sector, and most likely, a theatre. "Have you contacted them?" she asked us. Only one or two hands went up. The ignorance of the deaf community as artists may mean missing out on an interesting and unique approach and practice within the theatre- as we would soon learn.

Ms Bushell-Mingo shared with us a documentary about the Tyst Teater's most recent and largest production, which was collaboration with deaf actors from 7 different countries. It was very impressive

and quite enlightening to see the working process of this group, as well as what they produced. The show was very rich visually, and the actors seemed to communicate with every pore of their bodies, without having sounds to rely upon, their voices and intentions came through in every movement. Ms. Bushell-Mingo also clarified for us the difference between silent work and deaf work. Deaf work is not without language, it merely uses a language which is not spoken aloud (sign language). However, the use of this language onstage is regarded just as specifically as with spoken languages; the delivery of the text through the articulation of gesture was coached and rehearsed, just as vocal intonations and emphases would be

worked with a voice and speech coach. There were many other conditions I had not considered; for instance that the blocking and choreography had to be constantly conscious of the actors' organ of speech- their hands. The gesticulation of the mouth and eyes is a very important conduit for communication as well. "Gesture is always a part of our exchange", said Ms Bushell-Mingo. "As an actor, you physicalize the idea using gesture and language." In this instance, the two are just much more closely related.

It was a challenge for the international collaborators to find a common language in which to perform the piece, as it would be for any other collaborative work from artists of different cultures and languages. "Language is always in process," said Ms. Bushell-Mingo. "I'm fascinated with the ability to make a language." The text translated 3 times- from the original Swedish into English, and then into an adapted sign language, which had to be agreed upon by all of the actors. Long table work sessions were needed to find common signs that all the actors were comfortable with. However, I was struck by the openness, excitement and willingness to seek a common intercommunication on the part of the deaf actors who were encountering each other for the first time. Even though Swedish, Japanese, French, and English sign language are as different as their spoken counterparts, all of these collaborators found means to work around this obstacle, and were laughing together within minutes. I wonder if their vocal speaking counterparts could have found a commonality so easily, seemingly without embarrassment or hesitation.

"We see language as a barrier because we don't understand it," said Ms Bushell-Mingo. Of course you have to work communicate, which is indeed the basis of much success and failure; a mutual understanding, or a misunderstanding. Perhaps we could all learn from the deaf community, and their willingness to take the challenge of communication with others as an exciting task, not an impossible feat. An increased acceptance of different means of communication, including the use of other languages, spoken and unspoken, would mean a bridge towards greater clarity and the discovery of a common ground- where there are fewer misunderstandings for us all.