

ARTICLE

The Race for Rehabilitation: Sign-Mime, the National Theatre of the Deaf, and Cold War Internationalism

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In 1967, the US Vocational Rehabilitation Administration (VRA) awarded \$331,000 to the Eugene O’Neill Memorial Theatre Foundation to fund a new company, the National Theatre of the Deaf.¹ Endowing such an enterprise was bold, but not entirely unprecedented for this federal agency tasked with restoring disabled Americans to productive employment. Founded in 1920, the federal–state vocational rehabilitation program, or VR, ascended to institutional and ideological prominence during World War II and maintained this position well into the 1960s and beyond.² VR distinguished itself not only through positing competitive employment as the solution to disabled Americans’ dependence on the state, but the specific means through which it would restore the disabled to productivity: the multidisciplinary expertise of physicians, psychologists, physical therapists, and rehabilitation counselors who collectively sought to render rehabilitants employable through a series of therapeutic interventions. Whereas disability activists focused on combatting the structural barriers disabled workers experienced in the labor market, “rehabilitationists” emphasized the imperative for disabled people to acclimate to existing work environments through individual physical and psychological transformation.³

In the 1950s, theatre workers joined the medical and helping professions in their rehabilitative efforts. For example, VR began commissioning one-act domestic dramas from Plays for Living to educate nondisabled audiences about VR and encourage them to adopt rehabilitation as a cause for civic participation. But unlike these earlier efforts, which largely excluded disabled artists from the theatrical process, NTD’s rehabilitative potential hinged on two original premises: (1) it would feature the aesthetic contributions of deaf artists who (2) would be remunerated for their theatrical labor.⁴ In the face of a deaf unemployment crisis, rehabilitation leaders hoped that the ensemble’s representational labor might help deaf Americans gain a toehold in the theatre industry, improve the image of deaf workers in the eyes of potential employers, and facilitate communication between the deaf and the hearing.⁵

This article is based in part on Chapter 2 of my *Disability Works: US Performance after Rehabilitation* (NYU Press, forthcoming). This essay’s title, “The Race for Rehabilitation,” echoes David Serlin’s phrasing in *Replaceable You: Engineering the Body in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 54–5.

VR first considered supporting a deaf theatre company in 1959, when psychologist Edna Levine and actress Anne Bancroft, then preparing for her role as Anne Sullivan in *The Miracle Worker* on Broadway, approached VR head Mary E. Switzer about the possibility. A production at Gallaudet College had inspired the women's vision, although they were hardly the first to imagine such an enterprise. For decades, the school's alums had dreamed of increasing professional opportunities for deaf actors, a goal enabled by its "stout advocacy of sign language, by which many of its graduates have achieved their education (and appreciation of drama)."⁶ Among these was Bernard Bragg, the Berkeley-based teacher-turned-mime who caught Levine's eye when he began touring his nightclub act in the late 1950s, and who eventually joined NTD as lead actor and administrator. Despite multiple attempts at securing grant funding, government coffers remained closed to the untitled theatre project until its advocates identified a private foundation to partner with VR. Eventually Broadway scenic designer David Hays, who would become NTD's Artistic Director, found a home for the company in the newly configured Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center in Waterford, Connecticut.

Several factors made the deaf a compelling population for state intervention. Like other disabled Americans, the deaf had enjoyed a temporary reprieve from underemployment during World War II, when nondisabled workers vacated their jobs for military service.⁷ But following the war, deaf unemployment skyrocketed. By 1966, when the national unemployment rate stood at 3.8 percent, VR's Mary Switzer declared that 25 percent of the nation's deaf were "in urgent need of a total rehabilitation program."⁸ What's more, "deaf peddlers" who begged and sold "petty things" risked sullyng the reputation of the deaf.⁹ The peddling crisis cohered as both an economic and representational problem: alleviating the burden of the unproductive deaf on the nation's coffers would require redeeming them from disrepute in the eyes of the hearing.¹⁰ As VR would have it, deafness's visibility lent promise to the prospect of representational rehabilitation. Unlike other disabilities, rehabilitationists reasoned, deafness achieved visibility not through impairment itself, but through sign language, which could quite literally resignify disability. Other initiatives in "The Deaf Decade" hoped to eradicate deafness as an audiological condition, but NTD was part of an emerging federal infrastructure, such as the establishment of the National Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, dedicated to destigmatizing sign language.¹¹ Given the longstanding prohibition against the instructional use of sign language in deaf schools on the grounds that it *produced* intellectual disability, destigmatizing sign was a priority for integrating deaf Americans into the national body—and the labor market.¹²

This concern with visibility made sign-language theatre an attractive vehicle for transforming the American public's perception of deaf people's capacities for "productive citizenship," but understanding why rehabilitationists gravitated toward this medium requires looking beyond the fictive boundaries of the nation.¹³ Deaf Americans enjoyed rich histories of amateur theatre in deaf social clubs and grew familiar with their impressive counterparts during the 1930s, when Soviet authors published articles on Moscow's amateur troupes in US deaf newspapers.¹⁴ In 1963, four years after Switzer first considered funding NTD, the USSR established Moscow's Theatre of Mime and Gesture (Teatre Mimiki i Zhesta, or TMZh), which gained international renown as "the world's first professional deaf

theater.”¹⁵ Born of a public–private partnership between the VRA and the O’Neill, NTD emerged as the US alternative to the Soviet Union’s direct regulation of the arts. Drawing on the momentum of State Department–funded theatre, music, and dance tours that had anchored US foreign policy since 1954, NTD linked the pursuit of cultural diplomacy (always structured within the Cold War grammar of the universal) with the increasingly internationalist ambitions of Switzer’s office, which hoped to remake rehabilitation throughout the world in the image of “the American ideal.”¹⁶ At its broadest, this meant codifying productive employment as the culmination of the rehabilitative process, in turn promoting rehabilitation as an exceptional form of social welfare. NTD did more than register and represent this internationalist ethos: it became a key institution through which the US exported rehabilitation theory and practice, and by extension, the superiority of capitalist democracy to communism.

This article examines how NTD contributed to vocational rehabilitation between 1966, when Artistic Director David Hays (hearing) and lead actor Bernard Bragg (deaf) drew up blueprints for the ensemble, and 1978, when Bragg completed a goodwill tour sponsored by the State Department.¹⁷ By attending to NTD in the context of an expanding rehabilitative apparatus addressing deaf employment and an internationally ambitious federal agency, this essay charts how government officials invested theatre with rehabilitative promise and the aesthetic practices through which NTD accepted this charge. Throughout, this essay addresses the relationship between the aesthetic and the infrastructural. It queries how these performance conventions created the theatrical conditions of US rehabilitation’s visibility on the global stage by yoking the supposed universality of NTD’s theatrical idiom, *sign-mime*, with the supposed universality of rehabilitation as a language of state care. I accomplish this by examining the company’s aesthetic development and cultural exchange initiative with TMZh in the context of both “the cultural Cold War”¹⁸ and transformations to the racialization of rehabilitation in the United States. Ultimately, this essay demonstrates how NTD’s internationalist ethos was an affordance of whiteness that inflected the terms upon which Bragg began to imagine deaf theatrical practices that promised to exceed the bounds of rehabilitation.

The Invention of Sign-Mime

The evolution of sign-mime, a new theatrical technique that could “liberate [the company] from traditional signing,” captivate the attention of (largely hearing) audiences, and shape US rehabilitation’s influence abroad, played a crucial role in NTD’s institutional development.¹⁹ As Bragg and Hays awaited the fate of the grant application that would launch the company, they spent much of 1966 debating the appropriate performance idiom for their venture. Questions of audience appeal and novelty proved paramount. How could a deaf ensemble attract both deaf and hearing audiences, and how could this theatrical form become the undisputed province of deaf actors, a theatrical experience no hearing company could hope to replicate? The two men and their occasional interlocutors—Douglas Burke of the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) and San Francisco–based playwright and actor Eric Malzkuhn, both deaf—disagreed frequently en route to

Bragg solidifying “sign-mime” as the company’s defining medium. While they would not decide precisely how this idiom would “mimeticize” sign and “extend [it] into lyrical significance” until NTD’s first Summer School (1967), they were certain that synthesizing sign and mime would be indispensable to fulfilling their goals of deaf originality and mainstream audience appeal.²⁰ Sign-mime offered an elastic rubric for naming the permutations this synthesis of manual language and mimic enactment could take. Bragg even offered “*The Company of the American Sign-Mime Repertory Theatre* or *The Company of the American Repertory Theatre of Sign-Mime*” as potential names for the still-untitled company, although neither stuck (thankfully, as he would later admit).²¹

These early letters reveal how NTD’s founding artists thought about sign language theatre for the audiences who stood to assess the company’s realization of its rehabilitative promise. One track within this correspondence focuses on how sign-mime would reach both (ostensibly signing) deaf and (ostensibly English-speaking) hearing audiences in the United States. While initially insisting that their “startlingly beautiful medium” of “manual language theatre” would “stress[] intelligibility to the deaf,” they shifted focus to the “hearing people” who would compose the audience’s “overwhelming majority.”²² When Hays suggested that they “evolve methods of performance which will create an art, no longer merely a way of bringing theatre to the handicapped,” Bragg agreed: “Our theatre should not be limited to the deaf, but rather made into a new medium that appeals to all audiences.”²³

A VR-funded test performance of *Iphigenia in Aulis* before an audience of “non-deaf theater professionals” secured hearing audiences as the company’s primary concern. Bragg, Hays, and their colleagues designed a survey to assess whether “an all-deaf cast was capable of developing into a professional acting company that would appeal to a nonsigning hearing audience.”²⁴ Sign’s intelligibility proved to be of little interest. Instead, the survey dwelled largely in affective registers concerned with the “mood, atmosphere, or spirit” of the performance. Was the ensemble’s theatrical sign “visually pleasing,” achieving “universal appeal[]” by transcending deafness, they wondered? Or did this performance strategy render audiences “*continually* conscious of handicap?”²⁵ Discussions of repertoire confirm their goal of theatricalizing sign in such a way that maximized hearing audiences’ visual pleasure while obfuscating deaf specificity.²⁶ Sign-mime, it seems, would need to please hearing audiences by paradoxically indexing disability through the ensemble’s aesthetically stunning communicative skill while also exceeding deaf particularity.²⁷

To mediate these competing goals, they struggled over the universality of their emergent mode of theatrical sign, sometimes positing universality for both “the deaf and hearing public” as the basis upon which their theatre might prove “vocally justifiable.”²⁸ Universality proved protean, variously referencing some combination of deaf US audiences, hearing US audiences, deaf international audiences, and hearing international audiences. That sign language theatre might successfully travel across “the hearing line” in the United States as well as national borders suggested its unrivaled status among the Cold War arts practices for which universality was a requisite aspiration, no less compulsory for its being impossible.²⁹ While each of these collaborators remained committed to universality as a governing ethos for

NTD's theatrical practice, it was Bragg's (often polemical) avowal that sign language was itself universal that structured the evolution of their form. Reading Bragg's writings on the subject reveals how he labored to animate competing universalities of "[d]eaf internationalism" for Cold War cultural politics.³⁰

Bragg first developed this line of thinking in "A Word on Universal Non-Verbal Communication," heralding sign as "the only language that can be called universal, in the true sense of the word." Sign achieved this, he argued, because it was "pantomimic as well as explicitly graphic," a combination primed to overcome the barriers between different spoken languages. Yet Bragg's efforts to establish sign's universality prove inconsistent and contradictory. In some instances, he asserts distinct national sign language traditions' mutual intelligibility, as in one anecdote about befriending "three deaf tourists" at a "sidewalk café in Vienna," where the four found themselves signing across linguistic difference in an impromptu scene of "good-will ambassadorship." At other times, he writes of the World Federation of the Deaf's (WFD) decadeslong effort to codify an international sign language, Gestuno. Moreover, he conflates this highly organized supranational effort with deaf communities' "inadvertent[]" composition of "medley[s] of their native or natural signs" through "necessity, intuition, and common experience."³¹

Bragg's conception of universality, then, reconciles competing understandings of sign. Twenty-first-century linguists explain that deaf communication succeeds "across language boundaries" not because sign is universal, but through DEAF-SAME, an internationalist "*moral orientation* . . . 'embedded in deaf notions and practices of sameness,'" and because deaf people across the globe have expertise in creatively deploying visual communication to navigate an audist world.³² In the absence of a "shared sign language," deaf people use strategies of "visual communication" linguists describe as "international sign."³³ In the contexts in which Bragg learned sign—first through home signs in his extended deaf family and later through studying with Robert Panara at Fanwood and Ted Hughes at Gallaudet—there was not yet a consensus that "sign language is not a universal language."³⁴ While linguists now attribute commonalities across sign languages to their relative youth and their shared employment of "iconic, pantomimic, and gestural strategies," many deaf Americans had previously adhered to "the myth that Sign was simply pictorial and therefore universal."³⁵

Bragg revived this earlier perception while also tapping into new understandings of sign's linguistic specificity. At the WFD Congress in Zagreb (1955), international leaders began campaigning for a "unified form of sign speech."³⁶ This eventually took the form of Gestuno, a highly codified form of international deaf communication composed from "the most 'naturally spontaneous and easy signs in common use by deaf people of different countries.'"³⁷ WFD leaders designed Gestuno in order to "enhance international sign communication" through a signed language with universal properties that discrete national sign traditions lacked.³⁸ But Gestuno proved unable to realize this promise. Assembled piecemeal with vocabulary from a range of languages, it "was not understood by the majority of Deaf people."³⁹ This effort to challenge languishing myths of universal sign through a deliberately internationalist sign language system grounded Bragg in a universalist ethos that would structure his search for a properly theatricalized sign language practice that maintained sign's artistry alongside its linguistic legitimacy.

These universalist commitments stemmed from internationalist deaf linguistic projects, but they also responded to the particular challenge at hand. Bragg and Hays began devising NTD's theatrical medium in anticipation of premiering at the 1967 WFD Congress in Warsaw, to be followed by a brief but politically ambitious European tour. The prospect of debuting at Warsaw's Palace of Science and Culture was an exciting one. Switzer and her colleagues were eager to challenge the Federation's communist stronghold.⁴⁰ And Bragg delighted in imagining sign language theatre as a scene of Cold War contest, celebrating the possibility of a competition between the two countries.⁴¹ The prospect of internationally touring as a decidedly US alternative to TMZh further confirmed Bragg's commitment to achieving universality through the unification of sign and mime.

Beginning with "Thoughts for Sign-Mime Theatre of the Deaf," Bragg tempered his previous claims, now insisting that mime yielded the universalizing capacity that sign lacked. As a unification of sign's precision with mime's universality, sign-mime, Bragg offers, "best describes what the nature of a theatre of the deaf will be." Arriving at a name for their medium was as important to Bragg as devising the techniques through which that medium would be realized. Sign-mime would at once indicate that the theatre "is entirely non-spoken and, so, will tap the abilities of actors whose hearing is not required" and that it "deals in pure mime together with signs—signs intelligible to the deaf everywhere."⁴² Sign-mime, then, promised to resolve the rehabilitative paradox that had structured the test performance of *Iphigenia in Aulis*. It rendered the company's sign-mimes as sufficiently deaf for their theatrical proclivities to appear as the unique abilities of *deaf actors*. At the same time, it would encourage universal publics to understand sign-mime as a form of "deaf gain" with potential consequences for the labor market.⁴³ The specifics of sign-mime would still need to be ironed out in practice through "experimentation, refinement, and discipline."⁴⁴ But he was already certain "that together sign-language and mime will constitute the mainstays of our new theatre."⁴⁵ In a telling synthesis of rehabilitative individualism with US nationalism, Hays agreed. With "Thoughts," he wrote, Bragg had issued the company's "Declaration of Independence."⁴⁶

Cold War Rehabilitation Internationalism

Sign-mime was well-suited for VR's increasingly internationalist ambitions. Although the Warsaw premiere fell through, NTD's first decade (1967–77) was filled with international tours, transnational collaborations, and exchange programs that sought to introduce sign-mime, as an aesthetic strategy, and NTD, as a public-private rehabilitative enterprise, to global audiences. NTD thus offered a theatrical mechanism for representing the United States "as a body of people who care" and championing the productivist ethos of the US rehabilitation system as the international norm for rehabilitation practice.⁴⁷ Situating NTD's international reach within the broader context of US Cold War rehabilitation internationalism reveals how the company served these prerogatives. Rehabilitation internationalism first emerged as a foreign policy strategy in the late 1940s, "as nations began to readjust their economies to a post-war world."⁴⁸ VR adopted a broad range of strategies to bring rehabilitation to the world, and the world to rehabilitation. At the core of these efforts

were research demonstration programs, through which Switzer's office invited international researchers to observe US rehabilitation practice in action. Between 1947 and 1963, fourteen hundred international researchers representing more than eighty nations visited the United States, many for a year or more.⁴⁹ US rehabilitation professionals also ventured abroad. By 1965, VR was funding projects in fifty-one countries, including Israel, India, Brazil, Egypt, and Burma.⁵⁰

US rehabilitation internationalism was vast in scope but uniform in aim. Whether conducting prosthetics research in Russia or desegregating a blind colony in Israel, VR aimed to replicate the defining feature of US rehabilitation practice—productive employment—across the globe. Switzer informed audiences at a 1962 conference in Tel Aviv that “the importance of productive employment in our rehabilitation program in the United States gives it [its] distinctive quality.” People with disabilities deserved to benefit from the “inherent dignity in work,” and this made the US approach exceptional.⁵¹ Israel's rehabilitation system may have been exemplary in many respects, but Switzer reported that their existing work programs were inadequate, and that her hosts did not “understand completely the sort [of rehabilitation program] like our own—the primary emphasis on employment.”⁵² Creating publicly observable events that displayed the centrality of productive employment to the US system was rehabilitation's *raison d'être*, and NTD would soon join this repertoire of research and demonstration programs.

Shaping rehabilitation policy was never only about disability. Many of these interventions throughout the 1960s occurred under the auspices of the United States Information Agency (USIA) to foster exchange while remaking the world in the image of US capitalist democracy. In an early example of “disability nationalism,” agency leaders positioned rehabilitation as synecdochal for US foreign policy.⁵³ Circulating US rehabilitation expertise across national borders promised to restore the “economic soundness” of nations that otherwise allowed unemployed disabled people to live in states of “helpless dependency.”⁵⁴ Enacting “measures that protect world health and enhance the welfare of the disabled” was imperative for a newly “interdependen[t]” world characterized by the dissolution of “time and distance” between previously discrete nations.⁵⁵ At the 1960 International Society for the Welfare of Cripples' Eighth World Congress (New York), papers concurrently translated in English, French, Spanish, and German for audiences “from almost 50 nations . . . expressed” the idea that international collaborations “to solve common problems in rehabilitation can help dispel some of the tensions that exist as a threat to world peace.”⁵⁶

Foreign policy lent legitimacy to a field that had only recently begun to cohere as a feature of the US welfare architecture. VR, leaders reasoned, offered a particularly expedient means for securing global dominance because “rehabilitation of the disabled is a universal language.”⁵⁷ Not only did rehabilitation embody the aspirational Cold War grammar of the universal; it lent spectacular visibility to “America's concern for the average person.” Switzer distinguished the appeal of international rehabilitation from “large scale sanitation or immunization programs” whose benefits remained largely imperceptible to international audiences. By contrast, she offered, “it is dramatically effective to see a person walk when he formerly crawled; to see a blind person walk alone when he formerly was led by another; to see a man receive his first paycheck; and to see a child who joins playmates when he formerly was a

lonely onlooker.” Whereas other forms of aid could be met with “resistance or apathy,” the path promised by rehabilitation—the disappearance of impairment, the entrance into productive employment, and the resulting broader participation within the social—“shows results more quickly and more dramatically.”⁵⁸

The exchange of personnel, projects, and resources across national lines positioned rehabilitation’s exceptional visibility as evidence of state transparency. Whereas “Russia’s program of rehabilitation, of course, is not as open to observation as those of most countries,” the US cultivated “opportunities for personal contact, first-hand observation, and the direct exchange of ideas and practices.”⁵⁹ US rehabilitation’s supposed superiority stemmed as much from its availability for observation as any of its content. Touring increased international audiences for US rehabilitation as a spectacular mode of foreign aid while situating disability policy within the “face-to-face interactions” that coalesced as a defining feature of US foreign relations under Eisenhower.⁶⁰

By employing deaf actors, NTD linked rehabilitation internationalism to the government’s instrumentalization of the arts in the cultural Cold War. Historians have amply demonstrated how the State Department tasked the performing arts with promoting images of US racial liberalism abroad to counter the reality of the legacies of Jim Crow at home. As Penny Von Eschen notes, “officials pursued a self-conscious campaign against worldwide criticism of U.S. racism” by “promot[ing] black artists as goodwill ambassadors.”⁶¹ The often covert nature of such programming has lent significant intrigue to this history in which, as journalist Frances Stonor Saunders notes, “the CIA was in effect acting as America’s Ministry of Culture.”⁶² But the CIA was hardly exceptional. “In some ways,” Charlotte Canning notes, “every arm of the US government would be called upon to operate as a cultural ministry, as if the arts were too important to be left to a single agency.”⁶³

Still, historians have yet to appreciate VR’s role in these efforts. Canning’s assessment of the decline of US theatrical internationalism in the 1960s,⁶⁴ for example, cannot account for the addition of NTD to the US foreign policy repertoire. This suggests the need to take seriously how the government supplemented its representations of racial liberalism with a rehabilitation internationalism that championed disabled people’s “productive citizenship.”⁶⁵ The cultural Cold War’s repertoire included intersections of Blackness and disability, of course. Perhaps most notably, for his company’s State Department–sponsored tour in 1961, Alvin Ailey choreographed *Been Here and Gone*, a work featuring music by and kinesthetic representations of blind bluesmen.⁶⁶ And certainly, anti-Blackness and ableism operate in tandem.⁶⁷ But at the level of infrastructure, government agencies isolated racial liberalism and rehabilitation internationalism as institutionally distinct, if complementary, political projects. More than a decade after theatrical diplomacy had supposedly exhausted its potency, and as the State Department “embraced a multiplicity of black musical forms,” the US incorporated an almost exclusively white ensemble of deaf actors into its Cold War arsenal.⁶⁸

Sign-Mime and Cultural Exchange

Through NTD’s extensive activities abroad, sign-mime became the vehicle through which many international audiences became acquainted with VR. Between their

first international tour (England, France, Israel, Italy, and Yugoslavia) in 1969 and Bragg's departure from the company in 1978, NTD performed in seventeen countries throughout Eastern and Western Europe, West Asia, and Oceania.⁶⁹ Through these tours, the company forged relationships with foreign officials, deaf theatre-makers, and enthusiastic lay audiences; launched numerous collaborations, including summer school training and NTD guest residencies for non-US artists; and spurred the infrastructural and aesthetic development of professional deaf theatre companies throughout the world.

NTD's success in theatricalizing US rehabilitation's virtues figures prominently in correspondence between the company's artistic staff and VR leadership. In 1969, Hays apprised Switzer of the company's reception in Europe, reporting that "consuls or cultural attaches" [*sic*] in Florence, Rome, Torino, and London all notified the US State Department "that we appear as wonderful professional theatre." This suggests Switzer's office had succeeded in portraying the deaf as imminently employable, and representing NTD as a product of the market rather than state benevolence. "We made them proud because we represent a kind of government imagination (yours) that we are, too often, not reputed to have, in Europe."⁷⁰ For Hays, the international success of sign-mime as a theatrical medium becomes evidence of US success with regards to both the arts and disability, rescuing the United States from a reputation of aesthetic backwardness and positioning it as a nation that cares about people with disabilities by fostering their economic productivity.

That sign-mime could achieve this was not inevitable. The United States would need to confirm NTD's superiority by distinguishing it from other models of state care for the disabled and making deaf theatre—namely, those of the Soviet Union. While the companies would not cross paths until 1969 or engage in a formal cultural exchange program until 1973, the specter of the Soviet company inflected the shape and texture of NTD's touring itinerary from the start. The mere prospect of consummating a competition between the US and Soviet ensembles was appealing to private funders, with one foundation subsidizing the Yugoslavian leg of the company's first international tour (1969), where NTD first planned to "meet the Russians."⁷¹ Securing such funding sources was an indispensable part of US cultural diplomacy, demonstrating both that "cultural relations were too crucial to be left to the vicissitudes of private control" while advocating that private funding "could produce far better results than the government alone."⁷² In signaling both NTD's proximity to and distance from state support, such financial arrangements also promoted the US rehabilitation system as an exceptional form of welfare that paid for itself through the taxable wages of successfully rehabilitated clients.

Touted by the Soviet of Ministers as "the world's first professional deaf theater," TMZh was founded by graduates of a Moscow Theatre Studio established by the All-Russian Society of the Deaf in 1963.⁷³ As part of postwar Soviet deaf culture, TMZh represented the Society's effort to "identify, perfect, and institutionalize the various forms of cultural and social engagement by deaf people that had developed over the course of the Soviet period."⁷⁴ Like NTD, TMZh shaped its national sign language and fostered formal innovation before ultimately privileging hearing audiences. But in almost every other respect, the companies were distinct. TMZh emerged from a centralized, state-subsidized voluntary organization that facilitated

deaf life “from cradle-to grave.”⁷⁵ NTD was born of a partnership between VR and the O’Neill, modeling free enterprise in the form of the “state–private network.”⁷⁶ TMZh launched in a nation that privileged “labor as a criterion for normality” but tempered this productivist obligation through government pensions for the disabled.⁷⁷ NTD emerged during an intensifying unemployment crisis for deaf Americans and reflected the withdrawal of state support through productive labor as the rehabilitative ideal. TMZh was part of a broader effort to assign deaf citizens “full and secure” socially productive employment in an increasingly diverse array of technological and creative fields.⁷⁸ NTD was part of a broader effort to change employer attitudes about disabled workers by portraying deaf actors as employable. TMZh reflected the Soviet idea that deafness was not an individual problem to be overcome, but “a strikingly cohesive form of . . . community within the Soviet body politic.”⁷⁹ NTD traded in ideals of social and cultural integration rooted in eugenic ideas that ultimately demanded the eradication of deafness as an audiological condition. TMZh was born of a comprehensive institution of “deaf self-determination” by those “unwilling to entrust their fates to the structures of hearing society and governance.”⁸⁰ NTD was the product of a federal agency committed to consolidating medico-socio expertise in the form of the rehabilitation professional.

NTD and TMZh first crossed paths at the World Deaf Games in Belgrade (1969), the final stop of the US contingent’s international tour. Whereas “the Americans have theatricalized” their sign language “to accent its beauty,” writes Helen Powers, the Soviet company “modified their sign language to look like gestures.” What’s more, whereas the Americans had hearing actors speaking dialogue onstage in plain sight, the Soviets had narrators “hidden beneath the stage,” while deaf actors “mouth[ed] all the words” to “give the impression that they themselves are speaking.” For Powers, these performance conventions evidenced Soviet duplicity, with TMZh’s “concealed” sign paling in comparison to NTD’s sign-mime, which “established the theatrical values of their own idiom and bolstered the prestige of their language.” These conventions consolidated competing national understandings of disability, visibility, and difference, with “the Russian theater company tr[ying] not to remind their audience that they are handicapped,” Powers writes, “while the American company does not think about it at all.”⁸¹ In *Lessons in Laughter*, Bragg offers a different portrait of the Belgrade encounter, one characterized less by nationalist chauvinism than by a desire for exchange and understanding through deaf internationalism. He recounts his surprise, for example, that TMZh’s “sign language turned out to be so different from ours that we could not understand the dialogue,” an experience “the Russians” also had while watching NTD’s performance. Bragg attributes this mutual unintelligibility not to the failures of sign itself, but to the limits of each company’s approach to theatricalized sign.⁸²

This 1969 meeting spurred Bragg’s conception of a cultural exchange between the two countries, but it took nearly four years for the program to be realized. Hays attributed the delays to the inertia of bureaucracy, with Soviet officials taking six months to respond to his letters and introducing unnecessary administrative complexities into the venture. The supposed bureaucratic nonsense the Soviets introduced was suggesting that the exchange might benefit from translators accompanying the guest actors in their host countries. But “it will be entirely unnecessary

to have an interpreter for Mr. Bragg,” Hays informed Vladimir Fufaev, President of the All-Russian Society of the Deaf: “He has met your troupe, and there is no difficulty in communication.” If the Soviets wanted to send a second delegate to the United States, it would need to be another actor, as “it would spoil the interchange if Mr. Slipchenko had an interpreter. It is unnecessary and also harmful to the basic idea of our communication.”⁸³ Hays thought the matter was settled, with Bragg flying to Moscow in July 1973 and Slipchenko returning with him for a thirteen-week US tour that August. But Bragg would not leave for Moscow until that November, and Slipchenko did not join NTD until August 1974. Still, after “four long years . . . of heartbreaking postponements, misunderstandings, and reclarifications,” the US State Department and the USSR Ministry of Foreign Affairs Cultural Relations Division orchestrated the exchange of the two deaf theatre companies’ lead actors.⁸⁴ It unfolded, as Hays wished, without the aid of translators.

When Bragg arrived in “the land of Stanislavsky” in November 1973, he was struck by the “spectacle” of the state—the red neon star, and the guards in front of Lenin’s tomb—and disappointed to find that communicating across sign languages was hardly as organic as he remembered.⁸⁵ This first became clear in his interactions with Fufaev, who dined with him before introducing him to Slipchenko, who would orient him to deaf Moscow and prepare him to step into the role of Hermes in Aeschylus’s *Prometheus Bound*. Conversing with Slipchenko arrived at a similar impasse, so the two abandoned sign for “mimicry and gestures,” through which they “had no problems communicating” (125). At Bragg’s request, Slipchenko educated him in “Russian Sign Language” through “total immersion, rather than from dictionaries” (125).

Despite his introduction to TMZh’s performance conventions in Belgrade four years prior, Bragg’s account of watching their productions in Moscow is one of surprise and discovery. “The actors, all deaf, faced the audience instead of each other and clearly enunciated every word,” with interpreters “pronouncing the words to match the mouthing” while sequestered “in the orchestra pit” (125). For Bragg, this practice occluded the actors’ deafness while rendering the production accessible to deaf Soviets principally through lipreading, an artifact of oralist methods that required the deaf to imitate hearing norms. Bragg was concerned with how privileging spoken Russian affected TMZh’s embodied practices of theatrical sign. Facing the audience required a presentational, declamatory style with actors rarely addressing one another directly, as visual communication among the deaf would require. What’s more, their stage idiom consisted of “skimpy signs, more like gestures” (126), with actors constrained by a limited range of hand motions that never interfered with the visibility of their mimed vocalizations. Bragg distrusted the company’s performance conventions and their reception. “The house was always full, the tickets were very cheap, and the audiences were enthusiastic,” writes Bragg. “Yet from my observation of the troupe’s acting style, [Russians] must be really starving for culture” (126), making them dubious arbiters of government attitudes toward the deaf.

While Bragg had “come to learn, not to criticize” (126), the Soviets’ theatrical sign conventions had so disappointed him that he could not help but intervene. After three days of observing rehearsals, and with the understanding that he would learn Aeschylus’s text in English but perform in Soviet sign, Bragg stepped

into the role of Hermes for the first time, opposite TMZh's Dmitri as Prometheus. No sooner had Bragg entered his first scene than he "committed [his] first breach of propriety": in a violation of Soviet style, Bragg "signed [his] lines to Dmitri [and] looked up at him instead of facing the auditorium" (126). The director was less concerned with shifts in orientation than the fact that he wasn't mouthing the words in Russian, a skill, Bragg protested, that it would take him years to learn. Bragg offered a solution: the Russian actor he was substituting for could mouth Hermes's speech for the interpreter from the orchestra pit. Instead of signing in Russian, Bragg would sign in ASL, a performance choice that would allow him to "express my emotions as Hermes truthfully and with sincerity" (127), dimensions he considered lacking from TMZh's hollow gestures. In agreeing to have Bragg perform sign-mime without mouthing spoken Russian, TMZh confirmed that the lip-synching was for the benefit of hearing audiences while affirming Bragg's conviction that the truth and honesty of his performance would transcend hearing and deaf Soviets' ability to understand ASL.

Bragg used this opportunity to shape performance conventions more broadly, convincing fellow cast members to abandon TMZh's presentational style and instead to focus on visual contact with one another, a shift he believed had a transformative effect on the production, reaching an emotional depth they had yet to realize. Slipchenko affirmed the decision, noting that this "is where our compatriot Stanislavsky comes in. Instead of pretending that you are a hearing person who listens to words, you establish close contact with other actors by looking at them in the eye" (129). Slipchenko may or may not have known that Bragg studied Stanislavskian methods extensively alongside his training in sign-mime. In recounting this conversation, Bragg positions Stanislavsky as a national resource that TMZh could draw upon to adapt their practice such that it might, like NTD, admit, rather than disavow, deaf difference. This recollection suggests that Bragg understood himself as successfully enacting a politics that he had laid out in his early conceptualizations of sign-mime: signifying deafness even while paradoxically disappearing into universality. This also aligned with the goals of Switzer and other leading rehabilitationists who promoted NTD as a vehicle of rehabilitation internationalism. From their perspective, if sign-mime was better equipped than other modes of theatrical sign to simultaneously acknowledge deafness as a form of difference and an aesthetic of universality, these differences could be attributed to the economic infrastructures—both US-style rehabilitation and public-private partnerships more generally—that fostered the deaf innovation that achieved this theatrical effect. If sign-mime didn't index this infrastructure, exactly, it nevertheless created the theatrical conditions for US rehabilitation's visibility on the Cold War stage.

The Race for Rehabilitation

The terms of rehabilitation's—and sign-mime's—theatrical visibility were thoroughly racialized. Bragg rarely noted race in his extensive writings, but in "The Iron Curtain Rises," he offers a belabored—if ultimately superficial—account of how the prism of racial difference might elucidate TMZh's performance conventions. Bragg begins the article by noting that he read Hans Kohn's *The Mind of Modern Russia* to glean "the influence of Russian atmosphere on its literature

and drama,” anticipating that (according to Hays) TMZh might, like NTD, communicate “to the world the imaginative interest each state has in its minority citizens.”⁸⁶ No sooner had Bragg indicated his plan to assess how “deafness and its implications manifested” in TMZh than he invoked “other American minority theatres” as paradigms for understanding its universality, eventually distinguishing NTD’s universal performances from Yiddish and Black theatre. Whereas these traditions “reflect the social or ethnic concerns of their groups,” NTD “dealt with the broader spectrum of human concerns.” Was “this true,” Bragg wondered, “of the Russian Theatre of the Deaf?” While better versed in Yiddish work, he made greater analogical use of Black theatre, proceeding to identify the visibility of minoritarian difference and the politics of integration as criteria for promoting (ostensibly white) US deaf universality. On this basis, he asks if TMZh’s sign rendered deafness—like Blackness—“conspicuous to the audience,” or whether it could—like US sign-mime—“be assimilated as a valid art form” (a spurious distinction, to be certain). Collapsing racial, national, and hearing difference allowed him to introduce questions concerning integration. “Speaking actors” had appeared with NTD “since its inception,” but in Black theatre, Bragg suggested, “integrated casts [were] not desirable.” Would TMZh’s practice similarly embody “the true sense of integration” achieved by NTD or would they “dissimulate deafness”?⁸⁷

Repeatedly investing NTD’s sign-mime—generalizable, inconspicuous, integrated—with the universality of unmarked whiteness, Bragg seems to have prepared for Moscow with one fundamental question: Did TMZh match NTD’s aesthetic and linguistic universality, or was the Soviet company hampered by its signification of cultural (both deaf and Soviet) particularity? In posing this question through a facile comparison that necessarily disaggregated race and disability—rendering unimaginable the figure of the Black deaf actor, or the institution of Black deaf theatre—Bragg appears to have set out to evaluate not only the superiority of US deaf aesthetics to Soviet ones but also the relative political efficacy of deaf performance to Black performance as instruments for fighting the cultural Cold War. In proffering a discourse of race as the means by which to dismiss TMZh’s alleged particularity—and by extension, revive the specter of Black communism as a threat to US democracy—Bragg figures NTD’s deaf universalism as an affordance of whiteness.

Bragg’s desire to promote deaf universalism through the framework of racial difference undoubtedly derived from the context of racialized rehabilitation in which NTD emerged. In the postwar period, rehabilitation ideology had ascended through its propagation of normative whiteness. As Bess Williamson notes, “success in rehabilitation could be measured through a person’s ability to perform, seemingly at any cost, the familiar activities of middle-class, white, and gender-appropriate life.”⁸⁸ By the second half of the 1960s, vocational rehabilitation’s presumptive whiteness rendered it exceptional. Developments throughout the decade, including anxiety about Black women’s welfare dependency and the rise of welfare rights activism, increasingly “racialized welfare.”⁸⁹ The figure through which welfare became most spectacularly racialized and gendered, the so-called welfare queen, “became legible . . .” Jina B. Kim writes, “through ableist language and reasoning . . . [as] a social aberrance to be rehabilitated through workfare programs.”⁹⁰ NTD’s emergence, then, was inseparable from an increasingly racialized moral and ideological distinction between presumptively white vocational rehabilitation—an investment in

producing citizens whose taxes would reimburse the state—and presumptively Black forms of public assistance that purportedly drained the nation’s coffers.

The pathologization of welfare dependency occurred through VR’s institutional expansion. As NTD prepared for its first national tour in the summer of 1967, Switzer began her appointment as Administrator of HEW’s Social and Rehabilitation Service (SRS), which unified five previously discrete federal programs: “income support programs for needy Americans, rehabilitation services for the disabled, and specialized services for mothers and children, for youth, and for the aged.”⁹¹ As Switzer informed audiences at a conference that December, “The major purpose of the reorganization was to place the concept of rehabilitation at the very heart of the new agency.”⁹² By applying “the same techniques used in rehabilitating the physically and mentally disabled” to the “nation’s most impoverished people who depend on public assistance,” the SRS recalibrated who it imagined as a proper rehabilitative subject.⁹³ This included radically expanding disability as an administrative category by reframing recipients of public assistance as “the socially disabled.” While “they do not bear the obvious signs of physical impairment or mental disability,” the socially disabled, Switzer offered, “have been severely crippled by a lifetime of poverty, frustration, discrimination, and other barriers to opportunity, advancement, and human fulfillment.”⁹⁴

Rehabilitation expanded through the state’s mobilization of welfare consumption as a form of racialized disability. Both the press and Switzer’s own administration explicated moral imperatives to expand rehabilitation through the juxtaposition of the deserving VR client with the undeserving recipient of public assistance. The *Wall Street Journal* celebrated “success stories” of VR’s “afflicted clientele” on both affective and economic terms. The “aspiring young commercial artist, injured in an automobile accident and bedridden for two years” tugs “at the heartstrings” of his fellow citizens by “resum[ing] his career and then repay[ing] VRA for the cost of his care.” Yet “public welfare’s constituency, increasingly the Negro slum dwellers, has no appeal,” journalist Jonathan Spivak warned, because their “problems”—including “illegitimacy, unemployment and other social ills”—are “unpleasant.”⁹⁵ Switzer, asserting her staunch opposition to “the guaranteed annual income” campaigned for by Black women antipoverty activists, exemplified a moral triumph in which, as the *Journal* noted, “for the first time in decades, the nation’s public assistance program is headed by a diligent disciple of work.”⁹⁶

Bragg’s efforts to register the putative universality or specificity of TMZh through competing paradigms of deafness and Blackness cannot be understood outside of the racialized rehabilitation frameworks that coalesced as NTD emerged on the international scene. VR’s institutional reorganization signaled the expansion of disability as a category to include the formal recognition of poverty as a form of disability (thereby extending rehabilitation techniques to a broader range of welfare consumers) even as it simultaneously upheld racialized discourses of undeservingness that marked (putatively white) physically, mentally, and intellectually disabled rehabilitants as worthy of state investment over and above (putatively Black) rehabilitants on public assistance. Sign-mime would come to make meaning amid this confluence of race, disability, and support.

NTD’s own troubled history of race and casting confirms the internationalization of US rehabilitation as a racial project. Deaf African Americans were

underrepresented within NTD, if they were represented at all. Preliminary casting discussions in 1966 betrayed anxiety about the insularity of the (as yet unformed) company's hiring process, focusing not (ostensibly) on race but on educational background. All twelve actors Bragg and Hays planned to cast were alums of Gallaudet College. Hays wrote to Bragg asking whether their "conception of the company [was] turning into a sort of Gallaudet club," and "if so," whether this was a problem.⁹⁷ Bragg dismissed the matter as unavoidable, countering that "non-Gallaudetians are either orally oriented or products of combined-method schools." For a theatrical medium that demanded utmost facility with sign, the methods wars in deaf education made it such, Bragg insisted, that it was simply "inevitable" that the company be composed almost exclusively of Gallaudet graduates. "This does not necessarily mean that we are discriminat[ing] against non-Gallaudetians, or for that matter, Negroes," he offered.⁹⁸ Although many residential schools for the deaf had been racially integrated since before the Civil War, Gallaudet College did not begin admitting Black students until the 1950s. The impoverished learning conditions that many deaf African Americans experienced at segregated schools in the South effectively barred them from admission.⁹⁹ What's more, the untrained teachers who staffed Black deaf schools were largely uninterested in debates about oralism and manualism that fractured the field of deaf education, leading the students in these schools to "create [] their own signed language, which differed significantly from the codified sign language used in white schools" and that had become the basis for NTD's sign-mime.¹⁰⁰

Despite Bragg's protests to the contrary, this commitment to Gallaudet alums meant that NTD would be effectively all-white by design until the company began recruiting actors from elsewhere. NTD's first Black actor, Joe Sarpy, would not join the company until 1971.¹⁰¹ Sarpy was an alum of Delgado College in New Orleans, one of three regional programs for deaf postsecondary education SRS cosponsored to offer "more technical training of deaf persons in integrated educational settings."¹⁰² Sarpy would remain the company's only Black actor until 1976, when NTD hired Charles Jones, James Turner, and Sharon Wood for Hays's production of Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thomson's *Four Saints in Three Acts*. Wood was the company's first Black actor from Gallaudet, Jones an alum of the National Technical Institute for the Deaf at RIT, and Turner a gymnastics coach who had graduated from the Connecticut School for the Deaf in nearby Mystic.

Rather than oppose (US) deafness and Blackness as Bragg had in "The Iron Curtain Rises," this attempt at increasing the representation of Black actors in NTD promised to synthesize the company's rehabilitation internationalism within the grammar of Cold War racial liberalism: the US government's integration of Black performance with "Cold War foreign policy by projecting abroad an image of racial progress" that belied Jim Crow's persistence at home.¹⁰³ With lyrics by Gertrude Stein, music by Virgil Thomson, and an all-white production team, the opera's 1934 premiere had featured an all-Black cast.¹⁰⁴ Set in sixteenth-century Spain, Stein and Thomson's "popular sensation" featured a bewildering combination of "static tableaux . . . exuberant dance sequences . . . campy costumes," and a musical idiom that drew upon European modernism as well as "U.S. hymns and folk songs," creating a curious hybrid of baroque opera and Black musical theatre.¹⁰⁵ *Four Saints* featured "a dizzying set of equivalences and substitutions" not

entirely dissimilar from Bragg's own "transitive" efforts to interpret US and Soviet sign language theatres along an axis of white-Black racial difference.¹⁰⁶ The "confounding prose" that made the opera so "widely celebrated" also inspired NTD's interest.¹⁰⁷ Hays was drawn to the piece because of the sculptural qualities and "exuberant freedom" of the language, as well as Stein's interest in how "some hear more pleasantly with the eyes than with the ears."¹⁰⁸ NTD's production departed from the all-Black casting conceit of the opera's premiere. In addition to the four Black cast members, *Four Saints* included at least four white actors: Bernard Bragg, Raymond Fleming, Ray Parks, and Peggy Schoditsch.¹⁰⁹ In the wake of their cultural exchange with TMZh, NTD mounted a modernist opera renowned for its Black cast and promulgation of racial substitutions with a new operative casting and substitutive conceit: a racially (Black-white) and audiologically (hearing-deaf) integrated cast.

Four Saints played a transformative role in NTD's history, albeit not for the reasons company leadership anticipated. In his memoir, Bragg describes the production as a "breaking-point" before detailing opening night, which "neither the actors nor the audiences were happy with."¹¹⁰ This failure brought out the worst in Hays. After the curtain call, he launched a verbal assault on the ensemble that was primarily deaf and, for the first time in NTD history, largely Black. For Bragg, the incident not only brought Hays's volatile temperament and history of verbally abusing NTD actors into high relief, it also amplified Bragg's long-standing concern about the hearing-deaf power dynamics within the company, as well as his frustration that NTD continued to privilege hearing audiences. Early correspondence and press materials show the two men in nearly uniform agreement about form, repertoire, and audience, with Bragg frequently defending Hays's choices. But in the wake of *Four Saints*, the audism of NTD leadership, compounded by institutional racism, produced the conditions in which Bragg recognized how vehemently he disagreed with the company's ethos. The verbal altercation was so severe that Hays requested Bragg take a yearlong sabbatical, which eventuated him leaving the company permanently.¹¹¹ NTD records suggest that Hays's violent outburst aligns with the rest of the *Four Saints* cast, including all four Black actors, departing the company. Wood and Jones, both recent additions to NTD, left the company after just a year, with Turner leaving before the end of the season. That Joe Sarpy also took a fifteen-year hiatus from the company at this time suggests that the Black cast members may have shared Bragg's critique of NTD's power dynamics and mission.

Deaf Theatre after Rehabilitation?

In the wake of NTD's retreat from synthesizing Cold War racial liberalism and rehabilitation internationalism, Bragg embarked upon a twenty-five-city tour sponsored by the US State Department, the Ford Foundation, the National Association of the Deaf, and the International Theatre Institute (ITI). The tour both shaped and was shaped by Bragg's evolving political consciousness. Through this tour, he served as both a representative of NTD and a "goodwill ambassador" of the US government, in which role he would spread "the idea of deaf theater abroad and inform others about the achievements of the American deaf," showing "that the deaf people could stand on their own feet."¹¹² Performance proved integral to Bragg's

diplomatic work. Each stop included Bragg conducting a lecture demonstration concerning sign language theatre, and he sometimes collaborated with local deaf theatre groups. Accounts of the tour in both the deaf and hearing press rendered Bragg's ambassadorial work indistinguishable from the internationalization of sign-mime. NAD President Mervin Garretson framed "[s]har[ing] a highly developed art in sign-mime" and "[s]timulat[ing] increased activity and experimentation on the theatrical front" as central to Bragg's mission of promoting "international good will" for the United States.¹¹³ *The Daily Texan* described Bragg's trip as an effort to "encourage the development of deaf theatre activities abroad, to share with foreign deaf and hearing peoples the richness of American deaf culture, and to research both national and international sign language."¹¹⁴

Deaf employment recurs as Bragg's primary political concern throughout his travels. When "asked about the jobs available to the deaf in the United States," Bragg was proud to report that "the deaf in America included lawyers, school administrators, editors, and even government officials," before learning that "in Ireland only vocational training was provided to the deaf."¹¹⁵ Brno proved worst of all. Here, Bragg asserted, "the rehabilitation and employment of the handicapped . . . meant devising mostly make-believe jobs such as basket weaving" (173). For Bragg, these limited job opportunities stemmed from state paternalism. In Ireland, he learned that the deaf can't communicate "with the hearing people who administered [their] programs," which differed, he told his hosts, from the United States, where "deaf people had their own deaf leaders" in rehabilitation and education, in addition to having "a thriving and rich artistic culture of their own" (155). In both Minsk and Brno, Bragg was dismayed to find that physically disabled veterans were honored with government posts overseeing deaf policy even if they lacked facility with sign (166, 173). As a result, he estimated that "deaf people in the socialist bloc were in these respects where the American deaf had stood some forty years ago" (171).

Theatre informed Bragg's efforts to assess the status of deaf employment and governmental representation. When the hearing leaders of the Irish deaf canceled his itinerary due to his criticism of their approach to deaf education, Bragg collaborated with a deaf club's mime group in the hope that his presence might "be a catalyst for the Irish deaf to help them move toward representation in the Irish Association for the Deaf and more control of their lives" (159). In Minsk, Bragg worked to "inspire" Rukh Mime Theatre's amateur ensemble "to develop indigenous theatrical forms of their own" (165). And at the mime festival in Brno, where he was "the only professional," Bragg assessed that the derivative, "illusionist style" of mime used by performers from the "socialist bloc," save Russians and the Czechs, was "something less than extraordinary" (170–2). While at times reserving ire for Soviet countries in particular, Bragg ultimately casts Ireland, Russia, and Czechoslovakia on a spectrum of suppressed deaf leadership, opportunity, and culture (162).

One stop on Bragg's goodwill tour represents an alternative trajectory for both rehabilitation internationalism and the transformations incited by NTD's production of *Four Saints in Three Acts*. In preparation for his appearance in Hong Kong, Bragg received a letter from Hays requesting that he emphasize the importance of sign language theatre "be[ing] seen as something that is presented by hearing people," which was requisite, Hays argued, to representing the form as "professional

entertainment,” rather than a charitable offering. “You must say,” Hays instructed, “that for the ultimate benefit of deaf people, they must play a large role, but if they want the full benefit, they must be modest and defer to the concept of the fully professional international company.” Such audist paternalism was precisely what had led to tensions between Bragg and Hays prior to the goodwill tour. Bragg’s memoir recounts his contradictory responses to Hays’s letter. Initially, he suggests that he had fundamentally misunderstood NTD’s purpose as being two men, one deaf, one hearing, “jointly mak[ing] deaf theater popular in the world,” and that he was only now realizing that “the world was not ready to accept a deaf professional theater on its own unless it were led by a hearing person.” But upon further reflection, Bragg realized they had “a fundamental disagreement about the potential for deaf theater,” leading him to leave NTD for an artist-in-residence position at Gallaudet (177–8). NTD had privileged hearing at every turn, performing “plays by hearing playwrights” for “mainly hearing audiences,” and only occasionally “deal[ing] with deaf culture, with the lives, joys, and miseries of the deaf” (184).

Read in the context of the goodwill tours through which he critiqued state paternalism, deaf underemployment, and the suppression of deaf culture in liberal democracies and communist countries alike, Bragg’s rejection of NTD’s model of deaf theatre is also a rejection of the rehabilitation internationalism he had been tasked with promoting. Indeed, his critique of deaf policy in the countries he visited accompanied his intensifying sense of the possibilities of deaf internationalism, as both enabled by and realized through international sign. “While discrete signs varied from country to country,” he remembers, “our facial expressions and body language were so similar that we could understand each other. This confirmed my observation that whatever the country and whatever its sign language, deaf people all over the world share the same love for sign language and the same experience of apartness from the hearing majority” (171). Deaf internationalism would and could succeed even amid the state paternalism that stifled it. In pursuit of this flourishing, Bragg realized his goal was to “fulfill the dream of my father, Professor Hughes, and Bob Panara, the dream of theater of and by the deaf” (184). In envisioning a deaf theatre that emerged from a patrilineal legacy of deaf cultural institutions rather than the state, Bragg imagined a deaf theatre without disability policy’s rehabilitation exceptionalism as its guiding ethos. This is not to say that theatre as a form of deaf labor would altogether recede from his political itinerary—far from it. But following the goodwill tour, Bragg could no longer bring himself to dream of a theatrical practice that privileged hearing audiences, regarded deafness as problem to be overcome, or staged the rehabilitative benevolence of a paternalistic state. At this historical juncture, he conceived internationalist deaf theatre aesthetics, institutions, and labor as projects of self-determination. As VR increasingly came under fire from disability rights activists, Bragg joined a chorus of other artists in dreaming of an infrastructure for disability theatre that was not only after, but beyond, rehabilitation.

Endnotes

- 1 Lewis Funke, “New Theater of Deaf Prepares a Sampler for TV,” *New York Times*, 9 March 1967, 79.
- 2 For consistency and clarity, I use Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) to refer to the entirety of the operations of the federal–state rehabilitation program—and its attendant discourses, practices, and institutions—across

its changing names and organizational structures: Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR), 1951–63; Vocational Rehabilitation Administration (VRA), 1963–7; Social Rehabilitation Service (SRS), 1967–77).

3 I borrow the term “rehabilitationists” from Edward D. Berkowitz’s *Disabled Policy: America’s Programs for the Handicapped* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). For an account of the struggle between rehabilitationists and organized labor in the making of disability employment policy, see Audra Jennings’s remarkable *Out of the Horrors of War: Disability Politics in World War II America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

4 In keeping with VR’s construction of deafness as a medical problem to be solved, rather than a cultural identity, most of the company’s early records refer to “deafness,” not “Deafness,” and I follow that convention here. While many NTD members identified with and made their way to the company via Deaf culture, NTD’s relationship with cultural Deafness is hardly straightforward. On the impossibility of a deaf–Deaf distinction resolving these complexities, see Brenda Jo Brueggemann, *Deaf Subjects: Between Identities and Places* (New York: NYU Press, 2009).

5 For an account of deaf Americans’ pursuit of citizenship through work in the preceding decades, see Octavian Elijah Robinson, “The Deaf Do Not Beg: Making the Case for Citizenship, 1880–1956” (Ph.D. diss., Graduate Program in History, Ohio State University, 2012), <URL><https://etd.ohiolink.edu><EN>, accessed 11 November 2021.

6 Bernard Bragg to David Hays, 28 October 1966, Box 1, Folder 3, Bernard Bragg Collection, 1951–2008 (hereinafter BBC), Deaf Studies Archive, Rochester Institute of Technology/National Technical Institute of the Deaf (hereinafter RIT/NTID), Rochester, NY.

7 Jack R. Gannon, *Deaf Heritage: A Narrative History of Deaf America* (1981; Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2012), 222; Jennings, *Out of the Horrors of War*.

8 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey,” <URL><https://data.bls.gov><EN>, accessed 15 December 2021; Tip Sheet for Mary E. Switzer, 6 July 1966, NAD Workshop to Activate Interpreting Services for the Deaf, 9–11 July 1966, San Francisco, CA, Box 35, Folder 320, Mary Elizabeth Switzer Papers, 1922–1973 (hereinafter MES), Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

9 Gannon, *Deaf Heritage*, 255–9.

10 “U.S. Office of Vocational Rehabilitation Publishes Survey of Deaf Peddlers,” *The Companion* 91.8 (1966), School for the Deaf, Faribault, MN, Box 5, Folder 2, BBC.

11 Tip Sheet for Switzer, NAD Workshop.

12 Douglas C. Baynton, *Forbidden Signs: American Culture and the Campaign against Sign Language* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

13 Aimi Hamraie, *Building Access: Universal Design and the Politics of Disability* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 10.

14 Max Polyanovksy, “The Moscow Theater of the Deaf,” *American Annals of the Deaf* 83.4 (1938): 320–2.

15 Claire L. Shaw, *Deaf in the USSR: Marginality, Community, and Soviet Identity, 1917–1991* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017), 132.

16 Mary E. Switzer, “Address.” In “President’s Committee on Employment of the Physically Handicapped: Minutes of the Annual Meeting” (1960): 110–14, at 112, Box 68, Folder 713, MES.

17 Bernard Bragg, as signed to Eugene Bergman, *Lessons in Laughter: An Autobiography of a Deaf Actor* (1989; Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2002), 152.

18 Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York and London: New Press, 1999).

19 “A Tribute to Bernard Bragg,” *Deaf Life* (February 1989), Box 6, Folder 2, BBC.

20 Bernard Bragg, “Analysis: The Anatomy of Sign-Mime (A Search for Artform),” in “Three-Week Course in Sign-Mime Acting (Externals)” (ca. 1967), 1–4, at 1–2, Box 10, Folder 2, BBC.

21 Bernard Bragg to David Hays, 17 August 1966, Box 1, Folder 2, BBC.

22 David Hays to Bernard Bragg, 10 June 1966, Box 1, Folder 2, BBC; “Growth of Deaf Theatres Here and Abroad,” *Spotlight* (1979–80 Tour), Box 2, Folder 7, BBC.

23 Hays to Bragg, 10 June 1966; Bernard Bragg to David Hays, 21 June 1966, Box 1, Folder 2, BBC.

24 Stephen C. Baldwin, *Pictures in the Air: The Story of the National Theatre of the Deaf* (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press), 17.

25 “Suggestions for the Questionnaire,” Box 1, Folder 2, BBC; emphasis original.

26 David Hays to Bernard Bragg and Gene Lasko, 26 November 1966, Box 1, Folder 3, BBC.

- 27 Bragg to Hays, 21 June 1966, Box 1, Folder 2, BBC.
- 28 Douglas Burke to David Hays, 7 September 1966, Box 1, Folder 2, BBC.
- 29 Christopher Krentz, *Writing Deafness: The Hearing Line in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).
- 30 Mike Gulliver, "The Emergence of International Deaf Spaces in France from Desloges 1779 to the Paris Congress of 1900," in *It's a Small World: International Deaf Spaces and Encounters*, ed. Michele Friedner and Annelies Kusters (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2015), 3–14, at 4.
- 31 Bernard Bragg, "A Word on Universal Non-Verbal Communication," July 1966, Box 1, Folder 2, BBC.
- 32 Onno Crasborn and Anja Hiddinga, "The Paradox of International Sign: The Importance of Deaf-Hearing Encounters for Deaf-Deaf Communication across Sign Language Borders," in *It's a Small World*, ed. Friedner and Kusters, 59–69, at 63 (where they quote Green, "Building the Tower of Babel," 460; see note 35 below).
- 33 *Ibid.*, 60.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 61.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 65; Bill Moody (1989) qtd. in E. Mara Green, "Building the Tower of Babel: International Sign, Linguistic Commensuration, and Moral Orientation," *Language in Society* 43.4 (2014): 445–65, at 450.
- 36 *Proceedings of the Second World Congress of the Deaf*, qtd. in Jack R. Gannon, *World Federation of the Deaf: A History* (Silver Spring, MD: National Association of the Deaf, 2011), 23.
- 37 Bill Moody (1989) qtd. in Green, "Building the Tower of Babel," 451.
- 38 Gannon, *World Federation of the Deaf*, 121.
- 39 Bill Moody (1989) qtd. in Green, "Building the Tower of Babel," 450.
- 40 Mary E. Switzer, "Role We Should Play in the Forthcoming World Federation of the Deaf Meeting in Wiesbaden, to Which Mr. [Boyce] Williams Is Going," 2 June 1959, Box 66, Folder 692, MES.
- 41 Bragg to Hays, 17 August 1966, Box 1, Folder 2, BBC.
- 42 Bragg, "Thoughts for Sign-Mime Theatre of the Deaf," 22 August 1966, Box 1, Folder 2, BBC.
- 43 *Deaf Gain: Raising the Stakes for Human Diversity*, ed. H.-Dirksen L. Bauman and Joseph J. Murray (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).
- 44 Bragg, "Introduction," in "Three-Week Course," n.p.
- 45 Bragg, "Thoughts for Sign-Mime Theatre."
- 46 David Hays to Bernard Bragg, 31 August 1966, Box 1, Folder 2, BBC.
- 47 Switzer qtd. in "The National Theatre of the Deaf," *Rehabilitation Record*, July–August 1969, 20, Box 5, Folder 2, BBC.
- 48 Mary E. Switzer, "Rehabilitation as a Force in International Relations," Remarks at President's Committee on Employment of the Physically Handicapped Annual Meeting, 6 May 1960, Box 24, Folder 239, MES.
- 49 Switzer, "Rehabilitation as a Force in International Relations"; Mary E. Switzer, "International Research and Activities on Behalf of Blind Persons," Remarks at the Second Asian Conference on Work for the Blind, Kuala Lumpur, Federation of Malaya, 20–31 May 1963, Box 69, Folder 717, MES.
- 50 Mary E. Switzer, "Commissioner's Letter 66-2," 23 July 1965, Box 3, Folder 27, MES; Mary E. Switzer, "Assessment: Capacity for Useful Living," May 1962, Box 68, Folder 714, MES.
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Cite this article: Patrick McKelvey, "The Race for Rehabilitation: Sign-Mime, the National Theatre of the Deaf, and Cold War Internationalism," *Theatre Survey* 64.1 (2023): 49–70. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040557422000540>.