Tracking Deaf Aesthetics in Deaf Spaces: Dramaturgical Decisions for Plays and Dance Theatre Works by Deaf-Led Teams

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Historical Context

Deaf theatre draws from stories of the deaf experience performed in sign language by deaf people. The tradition has several objectives: to entertain and enlighten deaf and hearing audiences, to model visually oriented theatre productions, and to provide a deaf theatre experience that resonates with the deaf theatre patrons (Miles and Fant 1967).[1] Beginning with the establishment of schools for the deaf in North America in the early 1880s, amateur theatre performances in deaf schools and deaf clubs were common, contributing to the development of a deaf theatre style (Peters 2013). This style often involves interpreting conventional theatre plays (written by hearing individuals) to reflect the deaf experience or theatrical presentations based on the lives of deaf people, including both historical and contemporary

[1] Footnote: In academic writing, deaf academics use *deaf* with a lowercase d—a convention established by Friedner and Kusters (2015). The lowercase convention aims to avoid the binarization of deaf individuals, many of whom straddle the hearing and the deaf worlds by using amplification and speech while also identifying as being culturally Deaf and using American Sign Language. This term is considered to be more inclusive. Usage of *Deaf* with an uppercase D is a strategy for the Deaf community to assert their unique cultural and linguistic position in the hearing world and serves as an identity marker.

persons. Gallaudet University's theatre tradition began in the 1880s, evolving into the establishment of the National Theatre of the Deaf in 1967 (Miles and Fant 1976). In Europe, national and regional deaf theatre companies emerged in the twentieth century, with the International Visual Theatre of the Deaf (IVT), founded in 1976. The IVT has been credited with the "bubbling of a Deaf art independent of the *hearing gaze*" (Schetrit 2013, 204; loose translation from the French). In North America, the proliferation of deaf clubs, where deaf people would congregate to tell stories, as well as the existence of deaf schools, where students and staff organized storytelling events and theatre productions in sign language, fostered a rich literary and deaf cultural tradition (Bauman et al. 2006). The tradition continues today in theatre productions by the National Theatre of the Deaf based in Washington, DC, and the DeafWest Theatre in Los Angeles, California (Head and Bradbury 2024). Deaf theatre and arts play a vital role in introducing deaf youth to their cultural heritage and integrating them into the deaf community.

In Canada, deaf theatre and performance had its beginnings with the Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf (CCSD) co-founded by Forest Nickerson and Angela Stratiy, director of the CCSD, in the early 1970s (Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf 2020). The CCSD is a deaf-led organization with provincial affiliations that supports the cultural activities of deaf people. With the support of the CCSD, Stratiy founded the Canadian Theatre of the Deaf in 1974. The Defty Awards were established in 1974 to celebrate the artistic achievements of Deaf Canadians. In 1975, a deaf mime troupe was established in British Columbia and later taken up by the Canadian Theatre of the Deaf in 1976, which disbanded that year due to financial hardships. The Deaf arts community then underwent a period of rapid change. Lewis Harland founded the Deaf Mime company of Toronto in 1977 and the Ontario Theatre of the Deaf in 1982. Christopher Welsh performed a one-man show in segments on the YTV's *Treehouse* program, TV Ontario, and Yuk Yuks. In 1989, Lewis Harland established the Canadian Deaf Theatre, which disbanded in 1994, in Whitehorse, Yukon. Angela Stratiy performed *Deaf Utopia*, a one-woman comedy show, across Canada and the United States. In 2006, the Deaf Culture Centre opened in Toronto with the purpose of celebrating Deaf performing and visual arts (Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf 2020).

Then a series of small Deaf performing groups and initiatives addressing mixed (deaf and hearing) audiences began to proliferate, including Spill Propagation in 2009; Seeing Voices Montreal in 2012; 100 Decibels Mime Troup in 2013; Deaf Crows Collective in 2016; SoundOff Deaf Theatre Festival in 2016; Stories from a Suitcase in 2018; and in 2018, Awakening Deaf Theatre in Canada, a gathering of Deaf performers and directors within Canada (Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf 2020; Deaf Crows Collective, n.d.). Initial performances within this period include *Deaf Crows* (at the Artesian Theatre in Regina in 2016); *Black Drum* (at the Soulpepper Theatre in Toronto in 2019), and *The Tempest,* featuring deaf and hearing performers (at the Citadel Theatre in Edmonton in 2019) (Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf 2020; Deaf Crows Collective 2016; Seeing Voices Montreal 2018). Whereas initial efforts of Deaf theatre involved performing in ASL for deaf theatre patrons only, this new spate of performances allowed for experimentation with accessibility, addressing the needs of mixed (deaf and hearing) audiences.

The recent emphasis on accessibility has spawned many opportunities for emerging deaf playwrights in Western Canada to showcase their work. Some new playwrights are newcomer deaf Canadians with multiple linguistic repertoires whose deaf identities intersect with their cultural and familial communities. This paper argues that these playwrights experiment with advanced forms of accessibility by employing innovative approaches and tools that incorporate deaf aesthetics into their productions, such as a heightened use of multimodality, interactivity, and an emphasis on visual storytelling. Their work often provides accessibility to diverse audiences, in contrast to earlier deaf theatre, which was primarily designed for deaf patrons. However, this shift has also introduced a range of dramaturgical dilemmas and decisions to accommodate the needs of mixed audiences (hearing and deaf).

Accessibility as Driver of Dramaturgical Decisions

Michael Richardson (2017) posits that accessibility must drive all dramaturgical decisions. This notion has contributed to the development of a deaf bilingual theatre aesthetics designed to address the needs of mixed audiences (hearing and deaf). At a basic level, accessibility typically includes sign language interpretation (Richardson 2018) and captioning, which may be provided on private handheld devices and or displayed publicly through

surtitled screens (Head and Bradbury 2024). However, these measures are frequently treated as an afterthought in theatre productions rather than integrated into the performance itself (Mandell 2013; Merrill 2022; Head and Bradbury 2024). Sign-language-interpreted performances are often inadequate for deaf audience members. Theatre spaces frequently struggle to integrate interpreters seamlessly into the performance, and their efforts often lead to "theatre ping pong." In this scenario, deaf audience members must shift their focus between the actors and the interpreter positioned elsewhere on the stage, causing them to miss significant portions of the production (Richardson 2018).

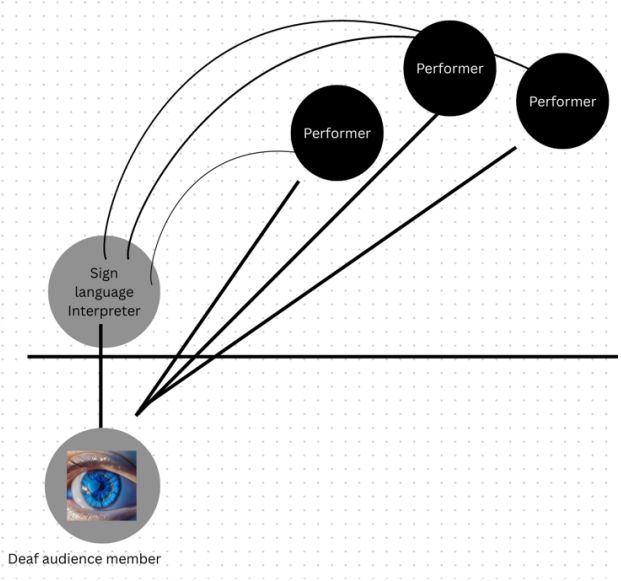


Figure 1. Ping pong effect arising from using a sole interpreter in front of theatre performers.

Image description: This image features circles depicting the locations of individuals who are involved in the stage production. A seated deaf audience member is also represented as a circle with an image of an eye embedded inside the circle. The deaf audience member is located below a line depicting the stage boundary. A sign language interpreter is represented by a grey circle seated directly across the stage boundary line, denoting the edge of the stage. There are three black circles featured in various locations on the stage representing possible locations of performers. Two sets of visual sightlines denote the "ping pong" effect commonly experienced by deaf theatre patrons. A single sightline between the deaf theatre patron and the sign language interpreter is thick and bold. Three lighter sightlines emanate from the sign language interpreter to indicate that the interpreter must first relay all

actions, movements, and content before viewing the actors who are currently speaking, moving, and interacting with each other and the audience. If the deaf patron wishes to view the actors directly, then a set of three thick black sightlines links the deaf patron to the three actors depicted in this image. Moving back and forth between the two groups of sightlines results in a "ping pong" effect.

Accessibility Strategies Within Integrated Theatre

More advanced efforts to provide accessibility go beyond providing sign language interpretation to deaf theatre patrons in the audience. These efforts focus on how accessibility looks, feels, and shapes the narrative, featuring a mix of deaf and nondeaf actors playing to an audience composed of deaf and nondeaf patrons. These accessibility strategies are interwoven into the script itself, giving rise to integrated theatre, which incorporates deaf and hearing linguistic, cultural, material, and physical spaces and movements into the performance (Head and Bradbury 2024). Integrated productions must include deaf and hearing artists working together and foreground decision-making by the deaf cast member(s). Bilingualism (signed and spoken languages) is practised in all settings related to the theatre productions: meetings, rehearsals, fittings, onstage, backstage, and tech rehearsals. Signed language and spoken language script translators and a director of artistic sign language enable the artful inclusion of both languages (Head and Bradbury 2024; Richardson 2017). In Canada, two signed languages are used by deaf Canadians: American Sign Language (ASL) and Langue du Signe Quebecoise (LSQ). Deaf individuals in Canada predominantly use ASL, which may have regional variations. There is no single Canadian Sign Language (Canadian Association of the Deaf 2015).

Theoretical Framework: Deaf Aesthetics as the Driver of Dramaturgical Decisions in Integrated Theatre

In deaf-led integrated theatre productions, deaf aesthetics, rather than accessibility concerns, may drive dramaturgical decisions. Deaf aesthetics stems from a commitment to deaf axiology and deaf ontologies, which shape deaf ways of valuing, knowing, being, and doing (Skyer 2021). Deaf ontologies present deaf individuals as already embedded in the world—working, contributing, learning, and thriving in diverse ways—as opposed to ableist and audist views of deaf persons as in need of help and rehabilitation. Deaf

axiology is about valuing what deaf people know and their contributions to the world (Skyer 2021). Knowledge is gained through vision, and therefore the deaf world is shaped according to ocularcentric needs. This modality gives rise to behaviour, expectations, traditions, and knowledge that are unique to deaf people. Deaf axiology is often a site of contention between deaf and hearing persons, who are primarily audiocentric; they therefore value the ability to speak and listen and adopt behaviours that prioritize hearing and speaking, such as listening to ubiquitous audiocentric media like podcasts, radios, and announcements. Ocularcentrism, in contrast, recognizes that navigating the world primarily through sight necessitates a reorienting of behaviours and values. While sound can be accessed from any direction, sightlines are very important in the display of visual information (see figure 1). Because audiocentric environments are ubiquitous, ocularcentric access to the world is little understood by many hearing people (Weber 2024). For this reason, Jody H. Cripps, Anita Small, and Ely Lyonblum (2022) recommend that ownership by deaf individuals in theatre productions be shaped by deaf axiological commitments, that is, according to what deaf people value. For instance, deaf people value collectivity, therefore the importance of deaf community agency is paramount in determining (ocular) accessibility. Such agency foregrounds community-based production leadership, which draws from culturally appropriate and relevant material. The deaf cast and crew are drawn from members within the deaf community, and exploration of artistic practices are the outcome of community collaborations. This approach is not determined or influenced by imminent theatre and artistic styles but driven by the need to "see" and therefore value ways of knowing through vision (Cripps, Small, and Lyonblum 2022). For instance, theatre that features excessive verbal dialogue between nondeaf persons would not be emblematic of deaf axiology. Theatre that emphasizes the visual sphere as available through physical movement, multimodality (captions, projections, and props), and interactions with the audience does align with deaf axiology.

Deaf aesthetics as lived, produced, and shared by deaf actors and deaf directors is a positive contribution to the world of theatre. It may even shape integrated productions beyond the expected provision of accessibility. This is a form of deaf gain conceptualized by H-Dirksen L. Bauman and Joseph J. Murray (2014) as the contribution of deaf people toward the well-being of hearing persons in the world such as the now-ubiquitous captioning feature provided in all screen-based devices. In this context, deaf gain in the form of

deaf aesthetics highlights how the unique sensory experiences of deaf performers expand the sensory repertoires of hearing patrons who mostly rely on their hearing to shape their knowing, being, and doing. Deaf aesthetics provides deaf gain through increased opportunities for (1) ocularcentric and vibro-tactile experiences; (2) multimodality; and (3) interactivity (Skyer 2021). Dramaturgical decisions are, in turn, layered, complex, and shaped by deaf aesthetics.

Ocularcentricity

Dramaturgical decisions undertaken by deaf actors, deaf directors, and theatre researchers affirm the importance of ocularcentricity. Tools for heightening ocularcentric and vibro-tactile experiences include poetic forms of sign language, visual vernacular, the role of sign language interpreters on and off stage, vibro-tactile devices, creative captioning, and set design. The audience is invited to see the building of images and actions through camera-like techniques, enabling different points of view (for example, up close, far away, looking down, looking up). In addition, depictions of time may be compressed or dragged out, and ASL poetics such as personification and onomatopoeia are employed (Richardson 2017; Head and Bradbury 2024). Below is a screenshot of an ASL personification of the digestive system available as a video. Here, through ASL poetics, John Warren uses his head to represent a food morsel; his horizontal arms, moving in a chewing fashion as the mouth, encase his head, now a personified marshmallow (Warren 2020). John also conveys the "feelings" that the marshmallow experiences while traversing the digestive system. Furthermore, the camera-like technique allows the audience to see the marshmallow inside the mouth.

Figure 2. Still from the YouTube video "Digestive System (ASL Personification)" by John Warren (2020).

Image Description: This image is a still from a video called "Digestive System (ASL Personification)." It features John Warren's head from within a mouth. The teeth and the gums are visible behind John's head. John has one arm below his chin and the other arm above his head to mimic the movement of the lips and the grinding of the teeth. His head represents a marshmallow being chewed before it slides down the esophagus.

In the same performance, onomatopoeia is represented through handshapes that reference a beat or a rhythm. Here (figure 3), John continues to represent his head as a marshmallow being swallowed, and during his journey through the esophagus, he uses his fist at the side of his head to represent a heartbeat. His fist opens and closes rhythmically to mimic a heartbeat and slides up the side of his head to indicate the marshmallow's journey past the heart and down into the stomach.

Figure 3. Three stills presented together of John as a marshmallow going down the esophagus (Warren 2020).

Image Description: Three still images representing a sequence of actions are taken from a video called "Digestive System (ASL Personification)." The series of still photos features John Warren's head transposed against a realistic video of inner organs, including the heart, which is an orange entity marked with several yellow and red lines to depict veins. To portray his head as a marshmallow traversing down the esophagus, John holds his fist near his head, beginning at his neck. His fist represents a heart. The fist opens and closes to represent the pulsing movement of the heart as he slides down the esophagus near the heart. In the second image, John moves his fist up alongside his head near his cheek to show how his head, like the marshmallow, is sliding down the esophagus past the heart. The third image depicts John's fist now at the side of his forehead, to indicate that this marshmallow is nearly past the heart on its downward journey to the stomach.

Again, in this unique combination of personification and onomatopoeia, John indicates the emotional reaction of the marshmallow as being pummelled by the heart beating.

Multimodality

Multimodality is enacted when literary forms of sign language are included in the performance, such as ASL poetry, visual vernacular, and ensemble creations of physical objects and movements. Visual storytelling aided through creative captions and visual projections is also a multimodal strategy, often becoming a unique persona itself (Richardson 2017). Sound is often used in nonnormative ways; for example, by creating vibrations, also available through vibro-tactile devices, which can be felt as well as heard (Richardson 2017). Many modalities are used here. The use of the heart visual in the personification video as a visual mode is tightly correlated with the presentation of a kinetic mode, that is the ASL video of the personification and gestural mode, that is the onomatopoeia, results in a heightened use of multimodality in deaf performance (Warren 2020).

Figure 4. Still from YouTube Video, "Digestive System (ASL Personification)" by John Warren (2020) showing an open fist at the side of his cheek.

Image description: The still image transposes John's head at the side of a heart, which is a realistic orange-shaped organ surrounded by orange, yellow, and red veins. John's fist is open as he is stimulating a heartbeat, and the assumption is that he will close his fist in the next instance.

Perceptual Interactivity

Richardson (2017) highlights the emergence of deaf theatre aesthetics through interactions between hearing and deaf members of the cast in deaf-led productions. This mode of theatre aesthetics requires actors to explore how spoken and visual language interact with each other, going beyond the basic provision of accessibility to theatre patrons. Here, "language choices may also go beyond the accessible and become political"; they may become "a statement of how we communicate and what is missed, misunderstood, deliberately provocative or fractured, which can be shown with the use of voice, preventing voice, turning it off, using sign, preventing sign, captioning, blocking captioning, etc." (Richardson 2017, 5). For instance, silence in deaf-led productions does not always denote an empty space to be swiftly filled by spoken language. Deaf actors may continue signing after spoken language has ceased, presenting silence as an active and powerful act (Lim 2017). The deliberate presentation of these critical moments heightens opportunities for increased interactivity between actors and the audience. Interactivity requires that the audience work to construct meaning.

For instance, in the personification of the digestive system video, interactivity between deaf and hearing persons involves a quick switch between the person representing himself as a person and then as a food morsel. The audience must be able to clearly identify when and how this switch occurs. Understanding this switch is aided by the juxtaposition of close-up and faraway shots in the three images from John Warren's "Digestive System (ASL Personification)" video below (figure 5).

Figure 5a.

Image description: Here, John uses his index finger to represent a stick for roasting a marshmallow. Here the point of view represents a close-up shot of the marshmallow.

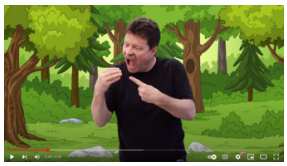


Figure 5b.

Image description: A few seconds later, John switches to himself using the same index finger to insert into the marshmallow as indicated by his cupped hand. The point of view lengthens to include the full person.

Figure 5c.

Image description: Then he quickly reverts to the personification of the marshmallow, indicating that the stick has penetrated the marshmallow and is protruding beyond it. Here the point of view represents a close-up shot of the marshmallow.

Interactivity in deaf performances often requires the audience to make careful observations (ocularcentrism), connect visuals and other physical movements (multimodality), and rapidly detect transitions between modes, frames, and points of view (interactivity). This way of engaging with the performance invites audiocentric audience members to widen their sensory repertoires.

Deaf Gain as Widening Sensory Repertoires to Realign Audience Perception of Deaf People

Deaf people often address the invisibility and unintelligibility of their lives within a primarily audiocentric world by creating situations designed to widen nondeaf people's sensory repertoires so that they might see in the way deaf people see (Graif 2018). The expansion of sensory repertoires informs nondeaf people of other worlds, other ways of seeing and being (Graif 2018; Weber and Snoddon 2020; Weber 2024). This realignment challenges audience perceptions of deaf people. In Western Canada, deaf playwrights and performance makers use several deaf aesthetics theatre practices characterized by heightened ocularcentrism, multimodality, and interactivity (as illustrated in the visual personification and onomatopoeia sequences performed by John Warren). These practices may incidentally address accessibility issues as well, but the focus is on engaging the nondeaf audience with ocularcentric and vibro-tactile ways of knowing, being, and doing, which serves to widen sensory repertoires. In the following section, deaf aesthetics theatre and dance theatre practices are documented in four recent productions that are deaf-led (deaf director, performers, and/or playwrights).

Deaf Aesthetics Theatre Practices in Western Canada Theatre Productions

Landon Krentz, a deaf playwright and performer, organized the conference Awakening Deaf Theatre in Montreal in 2018. A number of deaf writers, performers, and theatre directors met with DJ Kurs (director of DeafWest Theatre in Los Angeles) and Troy Kotsur (who later won an Academy Award for his role in CODA) (Seeing Voices Montreal 2018). Although some deaf theatre groups (Deaf Crows, 100 Decibels, Seeing Voices) had already been established prior to Krentz's event, this conference resulted in an outpouring of new deaf theatre performances for mixed audiences in professional theatre venues (Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf 2020; Deaf Crows Collective 2016).

Deafy (written by Chris Dodd, directed by Ashley Wright, premiered January 21, 2023, Citadel Theatre, Edmonton, Alberta)

In his monologue as an oral deaf man, Chris Dodd allows the audience to experience his own "deaf voice," which reflects the experience of many deaf individuals striving to perform "hearingness" (Dodd 2022). His character's performance of hearingness is contrasted with other deaf characters (described within the monologue) who grapple with societal demands to perform hearingness and deafness. The resulting solutions, both humorous and poignant, underscore the absurdity of these imposed performances. Through *Deafy*, Dodd invites both the character and the audience to reflect on the possibility that deaf people are ocularcentric, collective oriented, and culturally diverse. As a playwright, Dodd expands the audience's sensory repertoires by presenting a nonnormative deaf voice supported by subtitling that is, at times, intentionally unpredictable but entirely necessary. The deliberate unpredictability of the subtitling creates gaps that suggest it functions as a character itself, engaging in a dynamic argument with Dodd to ensure the intelligibility of his monologue.

100 Years of Darkness (written by Landon Krentz, directed by Jules Dameron and Karen Johnson Diamond, March 18, 2023, Inside Out Theatre, Calgary, Alberta)

While many Canadians celebrate the achievements of a famous compatriot, this same figure has condemned deaf people to a century of darkness through a linguistic ideology that elevates spoken language as the sole means of acquiring social, cultural, and linguistic capital. True to the form and history of schools for the deaf, the captives find solace and connection through playful and poignant imagery in sign language. Together, they create ASL poetry that depicts a kinetic sculpture of sunflowers, beginning with a seed taking root in the darkness of the soil. The joy, delight, and care with which the captives return to this motif throughout the play is a testimony to the power of sign language to give comfort, strength, and resilience in their most challenging moments. Any conflict or tension between the captives dissolves as they unite in this tender and uplifting moment. ASL imagery also plays a central role in a terrifying dream sequence, where the most recent captive arrival learns of his impending doom. Through ASL poetry, one of the captives invokes the spirits of animals connected to Indigenous traditions, drawing upon her sign language to summon the strength needed to survive. The widening of sensory repertoires is vividly apparent in the multimodal

elements of the production, including physical actions, kinetic sculptures, ASL poetry, and signing, all supported by voiceovers. These elements create a rich and immersive experience, showcasing the transformative power of ASL in storytelling.

Connor's Road (written by Connor Yuzwenko-Martin, March 5, 2024, SoundOff Festival of Deaf Theatre, Edmonton, Alberta)

Connor Yuzwenko-Martin presented a workshopped reading of his script-in-progress, *Connor's Road*, incorporating creative captioning and imagery as integral elements of the storyline. The narrative whimsically explores his experience as the sole deaf employee at a major computer company's retail store. It used the metaphor of a squirrel—depicted as an image in brief dialogues—to symbolize the frenetic pace of the workplace and the mindless tasks imposed on employees. Collaborating with a deaf graphic designer and a projectionist, Connor narrates his story through a blend of visual vernacular, sign language, and interactions with projected captions and imagery. These projected elements take on the role of characters, engaging in short dialogues with Connor throughout the performance. Designed as an integrated theatre production, the reading achieved a balance between text, sign language, physical movement, and ASL poetics, such as the use of the visual vernacular. Visual vernacular is a highly condensed form of ASL poetics combining signing, gesture and movement while standing in the same space throughout (Sutton-Spence and Kaneko 2016). Audience sensory repertoires were expanded through the interplay between signing, text, and imagery, with little extraneous material distracting from the narrative.

Carbon Movements (creative collaboration by Connor Yuzwenko-Martin and Ainsley Hillyard, March 28, 2023, SoundOff Festival of Deaf Theatre, Edmonton, Alberta)

Deaf performer Connor Yuzwenko-Martin, with the support of Ainsley Hillyard, redefines sound in a performance centred in a large sandbox filled with black rice, which resembles coal from a distance. Strategically placed throughout the audience are small tables with miniature replicas of the sandbox, echoing the vibrations emitted during the performance. Audience members are invited to wear vibro-tactile belts that emit vibrations in parallel to the vibrations occurring through the large sandbox and small tables. The performance features a dance-like sequence of movements as Yuzwenko-Martin rearranges mounds of "carbon" into different shapes within the

sandbox. His sensuous, sinuous movements articulate his relationship with sound—not as an external phenomenon but as a partner, a source of guidance, comfort, and insight. The rhythm of his body as it interacts with the sound and carbon defies conventional patterns, offering an experience that is uniquely deaf. Through this performance, sound is redefined, legitimized, embraced, and celebrated within a deaf context. Yuzwenko-Martin's work pushes the boundaries of what is traditionally considered sound, challenging hearing audience members to expand their understanding of sound, movement, and meaning. Deaf sound transcends traditional auditory boundaries, inviting a broader sensory repertoire that bridges physical vibrations and conceptual interpretations.

Table 1. Summary of deaf aesthetics theatre and dance theatre practices serving to widen sensory repertoires and to realign audience perceptions of deaf people

	Languages	**Deaf Aesthetics Theatre Practices**	**Technology**	**Deaf Themes**
Deafy	English	Nonnormative deaf voice Surtitling as character	Surtitling	Lateral violence between deaf persons
100 Years of Darkness	English ASL	Visual vernacular Kinetic sculpture ASL poetry	Interpreting	Oppression of sign language and deaf community
Carbon Move-ments	ASL	Vibro-tactile Performer and audience	Vibro-tactile devices	No ability to control environment
Connor's Road	English ASL	Creative Captioning Images as character	Creative captioning	Need for deaf space within the audiocentric workplace

Research Question

How do deaf axiological and ontological commitments arising from a deaf space comprising a deaf director, a deaf playwright, and deaf actors lead to deaf aesthetics theatre practices in script development? Additionally, how do the dramaturgical decisions informed by these practices address accessibility issues, either intentionally or incidentally?

Methodology: Performance Ethnography

This paper presents a performance ethnography of *The Door Project*, led by a deaf-led research team consisting of a director (Thurga Kanagasekarampillai), playwright (Connor Yuzwenko-Martin), actor (Chris Dodd), principal investigator (Joanne Weber), and research assistant (Crystal Jones). All team members are deaf, fluent in American Sign Language (ASL), deeply rooted in deaf culture, and experienced in developing and producing plays centred on deaf actors, deaf themes, and deaf aesthetics theatre practices in Western Canada (See table 1 for a partial list). All members of the research team (except Crystal Jones) are artistic directors of deaf theatre collectives and festivals. The project participants included three deaf youth and two deaf adults, each with varying linguistic repertoires and representing marginalized groups within the deaf community, including BIPOC and newcomer Canadians. Under Thurga's direction and with contributions from the playwright, researcher, and research assistant, professional deaf actor Chris Dodd collaborated directly with the participants to develop the script. This collaboration was designed as part of the research project, which is grounded in Vygotskian social-interactionist theory, and in particular, the concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD). The ZPD highlights the importance of mentored learning where the more skilled and experienced person gradually releases responsibility and actions to the person who is being introduced to the concepts, knowledge, and skills to be learned (Vygotsky 1993). In this framework, lesser-skilled participants worked closely with skilled, professional deaf actors (Chris Dodd, Thurga Kanagasekarampillai) to build competencies in acting, performance, theatre arts, and script development (Vygotsky 1993).

In this study, the fieldwork with the deaf participants includes a modified playbuilding model developed by Joe Norris (2009). This approach also included imagination-based activities designed to elicit data about the inner preoccupations of the deaf participants, exploration of findings related to artwork produced by the deaf participants, developing a script using the artwork (findings) as prompts, and a staged reading.

The research team used ASL to communicate with the participants, taking time to clarify signs, vocabulary, and concepts and to explore ideas conveyed in English print, images, and videos. The performance itself was designed for an integrated audience and, at the same time, reflected the lived experience of all members of the deaf-led research team. The fieldwork attempts to document how deaf aesthetics arose from the centring of the deaf body in theatre and its influence on dramaturgical decision making, which incidentally addressed accessibility concerns.

Methods

The project consisted of two six-hour workshops and five four-hour rehearsals, culminating in a staged reading. Data collected included artwork generated by participants, photographs, video recordings of workshops and rehearsals, the script, a video recording of the staged reading performance at the Sound Off Festival: A Deaf Theatre Festival (hereafter referred to as Sound Off Festival), interviews with the research team and participants, and the researcher's notes. This article analyzes the artwork, the video recordings of workshops and rehearsals, the script, and the recording of the staged reading. Due to publication limitations, findings from interviews with the deaf-led team and participants are not included. The primary methodological approach to the data was participant observation, emphasizing processes of script development and the incorporation of deaf aesthetics theatre practices as an outcome of working with a deaf-led team and within a deaf space. Additionally, a multimodal semiotic analysis (Bezemer and Kress 2016) was applied to artifacts from the script development process—including artwork, the script, photographs, and videos—to explore the relationships between the languages used, deaf aesthetics theatre practices, technology, and themes concerning the deaf experience. These relationships demonstrate how deaf aesthetics theatre practices guide dramaturgical decisions in integrated theatre productions led by deaf playwrights, directors,

and actors. The examination of modalities used in the script development, including artwork, videos, and photographs indicate ways in which the relationships between the modes enhanced meaning. The translation of concepts across multiple modalities reinforces meaning within the script development process (Bezemer and Kress 2016). Deaf persons are more likely to be multilingual, multimodal, and interactive in their communication and are often able to communicate effectively across modalities (Skyer 2023). Such resourcefulness emerges over time in a community and through engagement with social, cultural, and material realities (Bezemer and Kress 2016). This analysis sheds light on how the deaf-led team employed semiotic resourcefulness, which not only shaped deaf aesthetics theatre practices but also addressed accessibility concerns and requirements.

Fieldwork

Geoffrey Walford (2009) advocates for a rigorous approach to performance ethnography, emphasizing that fieldwork is foundational and necessitates the immersive presence of the research team during workshopping, script development, rehearsals, and the stage reading. For this project, the fieldwork involved playbuilding and a participatory action arts-based research process (Norris 2009) combined with an imagination-based method (Edgar 2004). These methods were specifically designed to elicit ideas for the script from participants who may have experienced language deprivation, disrupted schooling, or challenges in adjusting to a new life in Canada. Ethnographic fieldwork in this context is informed by deaf axiological commitments inherent in the theatrical practices of the director and scriptwriting team. These commitments guided the collaborative process between the research team and participants, shaping a performance that emerged from the dynamic interplay between their inner and outer worlds.

As part of the participatory action research design, the researcher introduced the steps of playbuilding as established by Norris (2009). Playbuilding—a method of collaboratively creating a performance—was employed to elicit qualitative data from diverse deaf youth struggling with language deprivation. Playbuilding is a participatory action research methodology and is designed to engage a group of people—research team members and study participants—in exploring their problems, issues, preoccupations, and life circumstances. The researcher also

assumed the role of observer and, at times, contributed to the dramaturgical function of the team by posing questions about the content being developed and the contributions of the participants. Norris (2009) outlines a series of steps through which a group collectively develops a dramatic script on a topic of shared concern. For this project, the deaf-led research team revised Norris's playbuilding steps to align with the specific needs of the participants and the script development process (see table 2).

Table 2. Adaptation of the playbuilding model

DEVELOPING PARTNERSHIPS; BUILDING ENSEMBLE THROUGH DEAF SPACES; INTRODUCTION TO PLAYBUILDING
Step 1: IMAGINATION-BASED ACTIVITY—DOWN THE DEAF STAIRCASE: Participants create imagery pertaining to their inner perceptions of the door, landscape, and gift, during the meditation exercises. • Presentation of artwork and group discussions. • Warm-ups. • Participants learn how to build an ensemble through physical warm-up activities.
Step 2: TOPIC SELECTION • Synthesizing motifs and ideas into a group dreamscape using artwork as visual prompts. • Note: the emphasis is on idea generation rather than on creating a clear narrative at this point. • Ideas for scenes are selected.
Step 3: REFINING • Individual scene development using physical theatre, gesture, and props. • Scriptwriting begins in the same theatre space, watching and critiquing the development as it happens. • A deaf actor models the requests of the deaf director and works closely with the ensemble to build the scenes. • Note: the acting skills of the participants increased substantially because of the immediate interaction with the deaf actor while building the scenes.

Step 4: SCRIPTING • Script development undergoes many iterations as changes are added and deleted as the scene develops. • Quick meetings with the research team and research participants occur after an attempt at shaping a scene is completed.
Step 5: REHEARSING • Two thirds of the script was developed in time for a stage reading at the SOUND OFF Festival in March 2024.

Imagination-Based Methods

Storytelling to identify issues, dilemmas, and pressing concerns can be challenging for deaf youth affected by language deprivation. Language deprivation results from a lack of consistent and quality exposure to language—whether signed or spoken—and can lead to incomplete neurodevelopmental outcomes (Glickman and Hall 2018). Incomplete neurodevelopment is often characterized by language dysfluency (often characterized by incorrect signs, grammar, and overreliance on isolated signs or phrases), difficulties with abstract thinking, and challenges in relaying information or constructing comprehensible narratives (Glickman and Hall 2018). To elicit ideas for a script with the deaf youth in the study, an alternative approach was required—one that would circumvent the limitations imposed by language deprivation while yielding rich material to inform the script. To address this need, the researcher collaborated with artist Chrystene Ells to develop an imagination-based method. This approach falls within the framework of imagination-based methods described by Edgar (2004) and was previously employed with other groups of deaf youth to facilitate the development of plays.

A meditation activity, guided by a series of drumbeats, invited study participants to imagine descending a staircase consisting of ten steps, with each step marked by a drumbeat. For one minute, they were asked to carefully observe the door, noting any unique features. Following this observation, the participants ascended the staircase, guided once again by ten drumbeats signalling each step. After completing the activity,

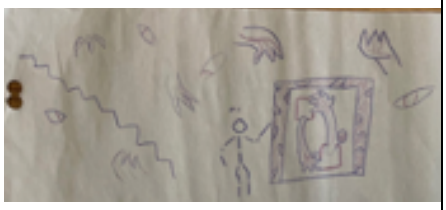
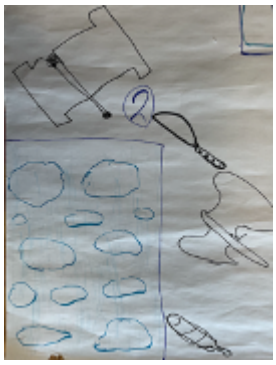
participants, without speaking to their peers or commenting on their experience, were provided with art supplies and instructed to draw a picture of the door they had visualized. Based on their comfort level and interest, participants had the option to repeat the activity, that is, to open the door and peer beyond, observing whatever lay on the other side. A third iteration of the activity involved descending the staircase again and discovering a gift left for them in the landscape beyond the door. These exercises were designed to stimulate imagination and creativity while circumventing potential linguistic limitations.

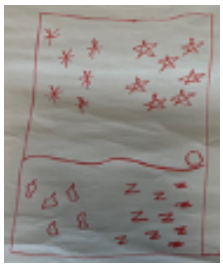
Care was taken to ensure that participants were not pressured into engaging with the meditation activities. The researcher emphasized that participants should stop immediately if they experienced discomfort, confusion, or anxiety. For those opting out, alternative activities were provided, such as drawing a door, illustrating the landscape beyond the door, or depicting the gift without entering a deep meditative state. Following the activities, the youth participants were invited to share their drawings with the group and explain their interpretations using sign language. These short presentations were video recorded, and their signing was transcribed by sign language interpreters assigned to the research team. To ensure accuracy, the deaf research team reviewed the interpreters' transcripts, verifying that the intended messages were faithfully captured.

Findings of the Imagination-Based Artwork

Through their drawings, the participants expressed feelings, intuitions, and thoughts concerning surveillance, danger, the exploration of a new world, feelings of incomprehension, and the presence of inner personas that question, demand, and guide. A selection of their artwork, along with their personal explanations, is presented in the table 3.

Table 3. Presentation of artwork derived through imagination-based research methods

Workshop participant	Image and description of image	Selections from transcripts (provided by ASL interpreters)
Evan	 Image description: The image of the door has arms and hands that are joined together, with eyes around the door frame, arms and hands that are joined together. Hands and eyes are also placed around the door.	"I'm feeling watched, definitely feeling watched, and the hands that were joined together, I could feel come out and touch and tap me."
Ibrahim	 Image description: The door has opened onto an inner landscape. The door reveals clouds and there are weapons: a baseball bat, a knife, and an axe head.	"I opened the door and looked inside; the space seemed to be like white clouds or orbs; white clouds, there it is, so I was looking around at all the clouds and sort of looked around the corner and it was almost like this metal weapon and a baseball bat."

Catriona	 Image description: The door opens onto a landscape showing stars in a variety of shapes, and a sun.	"I went into the space, and I saw the sun, but it was a different shape and strange. The stars were there too but [there were] different shapes and they were all gold colored."
Daniel	 Image description: The door opens onto a landscape featuring a cloud-like shape that seems comprised of gold, flickering lights.	"Opening the door and there was like flickering lights that I could see through the door, and it was the universe as well; there was stars there was I was feeling very inspired by what I saw; it was beautiful and ghostly, at the same time, there was no understanding between me."
Carlos	 Image description: The door opens onto a landscape where a person in a tall hat appears. Words are	"Something was coming towards me; seemed to have a tall hat on its head and walking towards me [with] a long nose. I was a little bit scared, it was a little bit creepy, searching for something; [the stranger asked], why are you in this dark space?"

	printed above his head: "I am Dark Seer. Can you dark here? This is why in the room."	

Note: The images appearing in table 3 are all drawings produced by participants who engaged in the imagination-based activity described above.

Many of the images generated during the imagination-based activity, including those featured in table 3, were incorporated into the script during the devising process. The deaf-led research team envisioned this integration as constructing a "dreamscape" from which the script could be discovered, molded, and shaped. Incorporating these images served to honour the participants' contributions while engaging them in the exploration of expanded meanings, layered connections, and relationships between their own work and that of others.

Adapted Playbuilding Model

Topic Selection

After the presentations of the images were completed, little emphasis was placed on analyzing the images. The director avoided initiating lengthy discussions about meanings, themes, metaphors, or interpretations. Instead, the willingness to suspend analysis or judgment transitioned naturally into script development. To begin, the research team devised activities aimed at expanding upon the drawings shared by the workshop participants. Initially, the focus was not on constructing a cohesive narrative, but rather deeply exploring the imagery. The dramatic exercises were developed directly from the imagery presented by the participants. Recognizing the participants' varied linguistic repertoires, the first activity involved developing a sign language vocabulary to serve as shorthand descriptors for the imagery in their drawings. The director, Thurga Kanagasekarampillai, then introduced a series of movement-based activities to explore how individuals might navigate the landscapes beyond the door. These activities included walking through rivers, traversing oil slicks, bumping into invisible trees, and rolling on the floor. Participants were subsequently asked to select one element from

their individual landscapes and perform it with support from their peers, including professional actor Chris Dodd. This collaborative approach fostered a sense of shared exploration and creativity while deepening engagement with the imagery.

Refining

Using the artwork as visual prompts, the participants engaged in merging their individual selections into a collective "dreamscape" through improvisation activities. Thurga, the director, facilitated this process with care, pausing frequently to engage in discussions with the actors and modifying activities to align with the participants' levels of understanding.

Scripting

During the improvisational activities, the playwright documented the script based on what was signed and enacted by the participants under the director's guidance. The researcher adopted a dramaturgical role, posing questions to the playwrights, director, and participants to clarify meanings, intentions, actions, and development of sequences. The physicality of working out scenes prompted by participant-generated artwork evolved into a cohesive narrative, emphasizing the interface between inner and outer worlds, with the door serving as a hinge between the two. The resulting narrative focused on a father's journey with his son to find an abducted wife and mother. The performance intricately weaves together preoccupations from two worlds: outer world concerns, as explained by the participants via video recordings following the imagination-based activities, such as alcoholism, forced displacement, ruptured familial relationships, and the search for safety; and inner world concerns, including confronting personal demons, finding inner refuge, and discovering inner landscapes that threaten, comfort, and guide (as shown through their artwork). These elements are further enriched by unexpected encounters with inner guides and loved ones, blending the personal and universal in a powerful theatrical exploration. The cast and the director used a devised theatre approach, attempting to honour the real-life stories and imagery arising from the participants' artwork.

Rehearsing

Approximately two-thirds of the script was developed in time for a staged reading at the Sound Off Festival in March 2024. The participants engaged in five four-hour rehearsal sessions, during which time the script underwent further refinement.

Performance: Staged Reading of *The Door Project*

A staged reading of *The Door Project* was performed (by Abdullah Amaia, Chris Dodd, Jester Ferranol, Francesca Paghubacon, Manual Pascua, and Joshua Majaducon) and recorded at the Sound Off Festival on March 7, 2024. The performance incorporated deaf aesthetics theatre practices to expand sensory repertoires, including the use of captions, kinetic sculptures, and props, such as a keffiyeh scarf and a sari. The script has three distinct phases, each dominated by specific deaf aesthetics theatre practices. Throughout these phases, characters morphed into other characters using gesture, props, and signing, creating a fluid and dynamic narrative. All subsequent images presented in this section are taken from the staged reading at the Sound Off Festival and were recorded and captioned by the research team. The workshopped reading was predominantly executed through physical movements and with props. Captioning is used sparingly throughout.

Figure 6a.

Image description:
The performer looks down at the floor and signs "dark" when the captions appear.

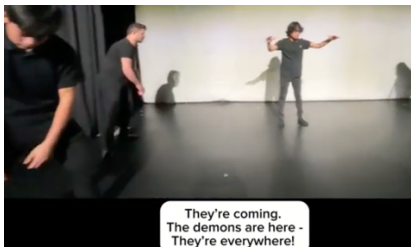


Figure 6b.

Image description:
The performer has his arms outspread to defend himself against the demons as they approach him. The caption announces their coming.

Figure 6c.

Image description:
The deaf ancestors suddenly appear to ward off the demons. They are represented by scarves that indicate their "deaf ethnicity."

This scene ends with the expression of gratitude for the deaf ancestors who have successfully protected him. He makes the sign for “awesome” or “cool” (thumb against the chest, fingers waving) and is smiling.

Figure 7.

Image description: The performer makes the sign for “awesome” or “cool” (thumb against the chest, fingers waving) and is smiling.

Phase 1: Younger Father Is Beset by Inner Demons

In the first phase, the audience is introduced to evolving circumstances through the strategic use of captions. These captions serve as an orienting device, particularly for theatre patrons who do not know sign language. They provide accessibility and context, as deaf theatre patrons who are conversant in sign language would understand the performers when they signed.

Captions

During the thirteen-minute performance, thirteen lines of captions accompanied the signing of the primary character, who is portrayed as struggling with inner demons in the first part of the narrative. These captions served multiple purposes: they informed the audience of the initial narrative context, they provided direct commentary or explanations of the character’s physical gestures, and they briefly assumed the role of an alternative narrator.

Table 4. Captions (appear in the first phase only)

Narrator (Father/Son character)	
 Image description: The narrator is surrounded by the demons who torment him. He recoils in fear.	The narrator in the image is a younger version of the father who is struggling with addiction. He travels with his son to look for his abducted wife and encounters the threshold, which he initially does not see or recognize.
Caption	**Role of caption**
I am alone in this room. It's so dark.	Reference to emotional state Statement directed to the audience
They are coming. The demons are here. They are everywhere! [Demons enter the stage]	Commentary on action Statement directed to the audience
The deaf ancestors fight the demons!	Commentary on action Statement directed to the audience
The Deaf ancestors are amazing! 	Commentary on past action Statement directed to the audience

Image description: The image shows the narrator being encircled by the deaf ancestors who are exchanging meaningful looks to indicate that they will protect him.	
The Deaf ancestors are building something piece by piece. . .	Observation of physical and kinetic sculpture being built by other actors in the cast Statement directed to the audience
It's a door! The door is breathing!  Image description: One person stands with his fists raised to his chin. He represents a lower section of the door. Two people stand on either side of this person. These two people face each other over the person who represents the lower part of the door. They represent the door frame.	Observation of the actions of the door Statement directed to the audience
They're entering the dreamworld. . . They're getting tired. . . falling asleep one by one. . .	Observation of the father and son going through the door and entering the inner world Statement directed to the audience

But the demons are back! The Deaf ancestors protected me and kept me safe!  Image description: The narrator (as the younger version of the father) is surrounded by the deaf ancestors who circle him and face outward, watching for the impending attack of the demons.	Observation of deaf ancestors protecting the narrator from the demons
Captions as narrator	
A black storm shows up. . . and three demons appeared. . .	Narrative function

Note: The images appearing in table 4 are all photographs of actors engaged in various scenes in the script. Descriptions provide details of the photographs.

Phase 2: Older Father and Son Pass Through the Door Threshold to the Inner World

Keffiyeh Scarf

The keffiyeh scarf takes on multiple symbolic roles and functions throughout the performance. Selected during rehearsals, the scarf was chosen to signal solidarity with refugees fleeing their homes amid the Israel-Hamas war, which broke out earlier that year. It is the only prop consistently used throughout the performance, serving as a powerful visual and narrative anchor. Initially, the mother wears the keffiyeh scarf. After her abduction, the son inherits it, treasuring it as a token of mourning and loss. Later, the threshold door symbolically snatches the scarf from the son (see table 5). For the deaf actors—most of whom are refugees or immigrants with the exception of Chris

Dodd, who is a local, professional deaf actor of white European ancestry—the scarf represented the perilous journey to safety and the loss of loved ones taken away. The keffiyeh scarf reappears in the third phase of the performance, further deepening its symbolic significance.

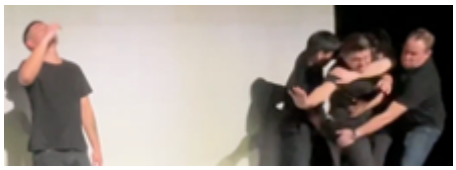
Door as Kinetic Sculpture and Keffiyeh Scarf
In collaboration, the participants constructed a group kinetic sculpture that visually depicted a striking and symbolic door. This door featured a panoptic eye, hands reaching outward, and flickering movements, symbolizing a menacing threshold between the inner and outer worlds.

Table 5: The door as threshold and the keffiyeh scarf

 Image description: The son holds the keffiyeh scarf and gazes at it sadly.	The son journeys with his abducted mother's scarf, mourning her loss.
 Image description: One person stands with his fists raised to his chin. He represents a lower section of the door.	The initial kinetic sculpture was introduced earlier in the play at key moments. The father remains oblivious to the door while the son is curious about it, seeking reunion with his mother who has been abducted.

Another person stands to the right of this person, and another person stands to the left. These two persons face each other over the person who represents the lower part of the door. They represent the door frame through a gesture of raising their arms over the head of the person representing the lower structure of the door.	
 Image description: The son approaches and the door becomes a threatening entity, indicating an open mouth and an eye (placed in the middle) of the sculpture, which roves around the stage. The hands flutter to indicate eyelids and eyelashes.	The door becomes a character, indicating a gatekeeper role, which allures and menaces those who approach it.
 Image description: The roving eye is most prominent in this movement, which shows the iris in the eye pulsating as it looks at the son. Meanwhile the son recoils in fear of the eye.	The eye serves a panoptic function as it moves to take in the world beyond the door.

 Image description: The eye then morphs into hands reaching out in a menacing manner toward the audience. Meanwhile the son recoils in fear of the hands.	The hands are grasping to indicate a strength that protrudes from the door itself.
 Image description: The son, being curious, approaches the door, which takes his mother's keffiyeh scarf. He awakens his father from his drunken stupor and gestures to the father about the loss of the scarf.	The scarf represents a link with the mother. Originally residing in the outer world, the scarf is now within the inner world.
 Image description: The son attempts to explain what has happened to the scarf. As the son recoils in fear, the mouth opens. From it, hands reach out toward the son while the father indicates that he doesn't even see this door.	The levels of seeing and non-seeing are explicit here. Inner worlds are not seen by those who do not seek and who may be addicted to a substance. The son's desire for his mother enables him to "see" the door.

 Image description: While the father gestures to drink his alcohol, the son is abducted by the door.	Coping with another person's addiction may require entrance into an inner world Crossing a threshold does not guarantee safe entry or a safe inner world.

Note: The images appearing in table 5 are all photographs of actors engaged in various scenes in the script. Descriptions provide details of the photographs.

In summary, the relationship between the door and the scarf is complex. The threshold door becomes another character that represents the threshold between the inner and outer world. It uses the keffiyeh scarf to lure the son, who is unsuspecting yet curious, propelling him and eventually his father into an inner landscape.

Phase 3: The Inner World Reveals Its Secrets

Sari

The son is "abducted by the door" and propelled into the inner landscape. Realizing what has occurred, the father breaks through the door to join his son, who is unable to find the keffiyeh scarf in this new and unfamiliar environment. Together, the father and son explore the inner landscape, encountering strange and wondrous sights and characters. Their reactions range from awe to moments of recoil at what feels unfamiliar and bizarre. The inner landscape features a river with a rowing figure, a dragon, a caterpillar, a butterfly, and a monarch, all contributing to the surreal and symbolic nature of their journey.

Table 6. Sari as characters in the inner world beyond the door

	
(1) River and rowing figure Image description: The son and his father discover a river (indicated by a thirty-foot-long sari that is blue with orange borders). A figure is seen miming the action of rowing in the river.	(2) A dragon Image description: The sari is transformed into a dragon under which three actors shimmy and shake before the son and father who are afraid.
	
(3) Caterpillar preparing to go into a cocoon Image description: The sari is wrapped around the torso of an actor who is crouching.	(4) Cocoon Image description: The sari is completely wrapped around the torso and head of an actor who is kneeling.
	
(5) The butterfly leaves the cocoon Image description: The head and torso emerge from the sari, which is wrapped as a cocoon around the actor's body. The look on his face is stern and forbidding.	(6) It morphs into a monarch figure Image description: The monarch actor stands in a regal pose, while another actor arranges the sari on their body. The look on the monarch actor's face is stern and forbidding. The son points to the monarch as a potential source of information.

	
(7) The monarch is the ruler of this inner world and is a kingly character Image description: The Monarch holds out his hand, seeming to usher someone else onto the stage.	(8) The monarch observes while the abducted mother appears Image description: The abducted mother appears, dancing in a trance-like state. She is wearing the keffiyeh scarf. Note that this scene is where the staged reading ends (the rest of the script is to be further developed).

Note: The images appearing in table 6 are all photographs of actors engaged in various scenes in the script. Descriptions provide details of the photographs.

Discussion

Process Shaped by Deaf Ontology

A deaf ontological framework promotes a moral orientation toward ensuring mutual understanding among collective members (Green 2014; Friedner 2016). This focus on collective understanding allows for the time needed to develop shared comprehension of signs, processes, and the numerous dramaturgical decisions that arise during scene development. Therefore, dramaturgy was a collective effort. The deaf-led research team, which included the principal investigator, director, scriptwriter, and professional actor, collaborated with participants during workshops and rehearsals to shape the play. Cathy Turner and Synne Behrndt (2016) describe this approach as *production dramaturgy*, characterized by a dramaturgical dialogue among the director, scriptwriter, professional actor, and participants throughout the play's development. The scriptwriter, Connor Yuzwenko-Martin, developed drafts between workshops and rehearsals, returning to revise them collaboratively during subsequent sessions. The cohesion within this dramaturgical process stemmed from deaf axiological commitments, which unified the group and fostered collective creativity.

Connor Yuzwenko-Martin, an emerging playwright, reflected on how the collaborative nature of the process expanded his understanding of scriptwriting within a collective environment. Chris Dodd, an accomplished actor and published playwright, noted significant improvements in the participants' acting skills as they worked alongside him during staged interactions. Director Thurga Kanagasekarampillai emphasized that the unique process of script creation was enabled by establishing a *deaf space*, where deaf individuals could create without interference or control from hearing individuals. Crystal Jones, a research assistant, observed that participants increasingly engaged with the deaf community as a result of their involvement in the project. One participant joined the board of a deaf association, and all participants demonstrated increased confidence.

The devising process deliberately avoided abstract discussions about themes, metaphors, or character motivations. Instead, the team's semiotic resourcefulness enabled analysis of participant-created artwork and experimentation with deaf aesthetics theatre practices. By maintaining a close connection to these visual prompts, the process positioned the work as a collective effort, avoiding reliance on a singular authority figure who "knew" what the play should be. Dodd modelled desired movements, characterizations, and the ethos necessary for the participants to develop their performances in an immediate and visceral manner. As rehearsals progressed, the director, Kanagasekarampillai, assumed an increasingly authoritative role, fine-tuning aspects of the script and the staged reading performance.

Content Shaped by Deaf Ontology

The interconnections between the revised playbuilding model (Norris 2009) and the use of imagination-based methods resulted in a devised theatre script that emerged from the inner and outer world preoccupations of deaf participants. These participants, who are newcomer Canadians with varying linguistic repertoires and diverse cultural backgrounds, contributed a rich tapestry of experiences to the script. The script reflects their intersectional ontological stance: as deaf individuals, as immigrants or refugees, and as persons of colour striving to learn English, American Sign Language, and adapt to Canadian cultural norms. The imagination-based data employed metaphorical language often associated with dreams, fantasy, and the collective unconscious (Edgar 2004). This data also captured harrowing

accounts of fleeing armed conflict, including the abduction of a loved family member. The door, depicted as a panoptic trio of an eye, hands, and mouth, symbolizes the pervasive scrutiny experienced by the participants from health professionals, teachers, parents, and communities regarding their perceived ability to "perform hearingness." Approaching and traversing this threshold represents an ontological shift: a departure from external scrutiny toward the deaf inner world, where these same feelings and preoccupations become magnified. It is in this inner world, presented during the first third of the script, that the characters begin their battle with the real demons they face.

Deaf Aesthetics Theatre Practices

The script presented complex transitions, such as spanning generations (for example, earlier and later versions of the father and his son), shifts between inner and outer worlds, and the multiple transformations of props like the sari, as well as the morphing of characters through movement and prop transformations within varied landscapes. As a result, several deaf aesthetics theatre practices were explored. These practices were alternately tried, abandoned, adopted, and eventually solidified throughout the creative process. The deaf aesthetics theatre practices employed in the production can be categorized into three groups: those supporting ocularcentrism, which emphasize physical movement as in the approach of the demons to the father, ASL poetics as in the creation of the mysterious door, and the prominence of visual movements incorporating signs, miming, and gestures; those supporting multimodality, which integrate multiple modes of communication such as signing, captioning, and the sari transformations to enrich the narrative; and those supporting interactivity, which encourage dynamic exchanges between performers and the audience to foster engagement and connection (particularly in the first part where the younger father alerts the audience to the approaching demons and later expresses gratitude to the deaf ancestors for saving him).

Ocularcentrism

As in deaf storytelling and deaf theatre, visual perception serves as the primary mode of communication. American Sign Language (ASL) possesses unique properties related to visual storytelling, contributing to a sign language poetics that includes visual vernacular which is a highly specific storytelling technique, characterized by gestures, iconic signing movement,

miming and role shifting, use of cinematic effects mimicking camera techniques (Sutton-Spence & Kaneko, 2016). In addition, group-created kinetic sculptures (for instance, the mysterious door), and diverse language modes such as signing or captions support heightened ocularcentrism. The captions can include creative elements that convey emotive qualities or personify human traits. In this script, captions appear in only the first of the three parts of the staged reading, along with minimal signing. Both the signing and captions serve primarily descriptive functions, directing attention to the physical actions that establish the setting and supporting the ocularcentrism that dominates the play. Unlike traditional theatre, where long monologues or dialogues between characters shape and deepen the plot through spoken interactions, ocularcentrism—a deaf aesthetics theatre practice—focuses on presenting salient and vital information through ASL poetics; for example, the kinetic sculpture which furthers the plot through its abduction of the mother, and later, the son. The kinetic sculpture also functions as a portal into an inner landscape where all family members eventually meet. This approach enhances audience engagement and facilitates comprehension of the plot.

Multimodality

As in deaf storytelling, the script incorporates layers of multimodal interactions, blending various forms of communication and expression. These include choreographed sequences depicting demons approaching, protective actions by Deaf ancestors, the kinetic sculpture of the door as a threshold to the inner world, and the use of the sari to embody multiple characters within the dreamscape. The script also features instances of *multimodal transductions*, which involve presenting an idea, concept, or incident across multiple modalities (Skyer 2023). In the first third of the performance, the captions, signing, and choreographed movements of demons and Deaf ancestors collectively convey a single concept: the imminent attack by demons, which is warded off by the protective actions of the Deaf ancestors. In the second third of the performance, the interplay of the eye, hands, and mouth symbolizes both challenges and strengths in a deaf person's life. The panoptic eye represents the experience of being watched and scrutinized, while simultaneously reflecting the reliance on ocularcentrism and hypervigilance required for navigating the world. The hands, though menacing in appearance, also signify the central role of visual-spatial modality in sign language. The final third of the performance highlights the transformative use of the sari to denote multiple characters within the

inner world, symbolizing the metamorphoses necessary to "see" the abducted mother. Rather than providing one-to-one correlations between modes and concepts, these multimodal presentations create layers of meaning. This layering enriches the audience's understanding by offering diverse perspectives through different modes.

Perceptual Interactivity
In the first part of the script, interactivity between the audience and the character is established through the younger father's narration as he struggles with his demons and is rescued by his Deaf ancestors. The father directly conveys his fears, anxiety, and gratitude to the audience using a combination of signing, captions, and choreographed movements. This multimodal approach ensures that his internal experiences are both visually and emotionally accessible.

In the second part of the script, interactivity demands more from the audience, requiring them to actively engage with and fill in the gaps deliberately left by the absence of full spoken or signed language. The silent presentation of the kinetic sculpture of the door and its behaviour challenges conventional notions of what a door represents. Instead of serving as a mere passageway, the door emerges as a gatekeeper, a seductive force, and a symbolic threshold. While these interpretations are not made explicit through language, the physicality of the door's movements provides enough information for the audience to form their own perceptions about its nature. The deliberate use of silence in this section challenges the audience to interpret the unfolding events, enhancing the interplay between actors and between the actors and the audience. This deaf aesthetics practice of heightening interactivity through silence not only deepens the audience's engagement but also increases accessibility by emphasizing visual and physical storytelling.

Conclusion

The documented processes in the creation of *The Door Project* highlight how commitments to deaf axiologies and ontologies facilitated the establishment of a deaf space. This space enabled the deaf-led team to develop and adopt deaf aesthetics theatre practices without access supports or ally facilitation during script development and the performance itself. The result is a truly

accessible performance for deaf and hearing (that is, mixed) theatre audiences. The relationships between the languages, deaf aesthetics theatre practices, material resources, choreographed movements, technology, and themes concerning the deaf experience can be characterized as taut, direct, and economical, with ocularcentrism—that is, the dominance of salient features accessed visually—taking precedence. Dramaturgical decisions informed by deaf axiological and ontological commitments naturally gave rise to deaf aesthetics theatre practices, which in turn provided a seamless segue into accessibility strategies. These dramaturgical decisions reflect *semiotic resourcefulness*, demonstrated through the deliberate relationships between languages, deaf aesthetics theatre practices, material resources, choreographed movements, technology, and themes.

In The *Door Project,* accessibility emerged as an organic outcome of the deaf aesthetics theatre practices chosen during the dramaturgical process of developing a devised theatre script. Practices such as captioning, kinetic sculpture, and the symbolic use of props like the scarf and sari heightened accessibility by enhancing the audience's understanding of actions, choreographed movements, and transformations in characters, roles, and functions. Accessibility, in this context, was a byproduct of creating a deaf space where deaf axiologies, ontologies, and aesthetics could flourish. The result is a multilayered performance shaped by dramaturgical decisions that prioritize deaf aesthetics theatre practices.

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