

# WE'RE OFF TO SEE THE *WIZARD OF AUSLAN*<sup>1</sup>: TRANSLATING DEAF EXPERIENCE THROUGH COMMUNITY PERFORMANCE

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'Somewhere over the rainbow, way up high, there's a land that I heard of once in a lullaby.'<sup>2</sup>

In the movie, *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy sings '(Somewhere) Over the Rainbow', in the hope that she may find a place where she can escape the bleak reality of her Kansas – a place where there won't be any trouble for her, or her faithful dog, Toto. Her subconscious desires transport her to Oz,<sup>3</sup> a land that is deemed to be an 'electrifying world of the imagination'.<sup>4</sup> In this article, I discuss *Wizard of Auslan*, a community circus and physical theatre performance inspired by the movie, *The Wizard of Oz*, and created by Vulcana Women's Circus together with a small group of both Deaf<sup>5</sup> and hearing women. I examine how the performance dealt with

the themes and experiences of being D/deaf in a mainstream hearing world, and investigate the tensions that arose from translating these experiences into performance.

## BACKGROUND

The idea for the collaborative performance project was initiated by one of the women from the Deaf community in Brisbane. She had seen a Deaf version of *The Wizard of Oz* – titled *Wizard of Ozlan* – performed by an amateur group in Sydney. Excited by the prospect of performing the show, she approached Vulcana Women's Circus with the idea of getting them to provide artistic direction and the training of circus skills to other Deaf women. The aim of this was not only to (re)stage *Wizard of Ozlan* in Brisbane, but also to revitalise Brisbane's Deaf theatre scene – one that had been absent for almost a decade.

Even with Vulcana's long history of working with Deaf women, tensions immediately emerged from this early proposal; the style and linear narrative of the Sydney version of *The Wizard of Oz* strayed too far from Vulcana's own aesthetic, that works largely in the abstracted mode of circus and physical theatre. In order to effectively stage the performance in Brisbane, there had to be a negotiation between the artist-facilitators on the one hand, and the participant-performers on the other. What were the meeting points in this project? How could the artists honour the ideas brought forward by the community yet still remain true to their own aesthetic?

Eventually, one of the meeting points was the movie, *The Wizard of Oz*, which was used as a frame for exploring Deaf issues and experiences. Creative workshops were run once a week over a period of three months; these workshops were led by Vulcana facilitators as well as three guest artists, two of whom were Deaf. In addition to the Deaf women, there was also involvement by a small group of hearing women (one of whom was the mother to a Deaf child), mainly as participants in the aerial routines

in the show. During this period, I was involved as an ethnographer in the project, documenting the workshop processes and interviewing participants and facilitators.<sup>6</sup> The observations that I have made in this article are thus drawn from my field notes.

The Brisbane-based performance, renamed *Wizard of Auslan*, had two afternoon showings during the National Week of Deaf People in October 2012. The showcase was held in the Stores Building of the Brisbane Powerhouse in New Farm, the space that Vulcana uses for its regular circus classes and workshops. The audience comprised mainly people from the Deaf community, as well as friends and family of the performers; entry to the performance was by way of a gold coin donation. The performance begins with a series of stylised scenes, symbolising feelings of isolation and invisibility experienced by Deaf people, and the lack of a common language. An aerial routine follows, in which one of the women is hoisted up onto a type of apparatus called ‘the web’ – a long, vertical rope with loops for the aerialist’s hands – and is spun around by another performer on the ground. This routine is accompanied by a soundtrack of loud winds and breaking glass, representing the cyclone that whisks Dorothy away to Oz.

The four travellers in *The Wizard of Oz* – Dorothy, the Tin Man, the Scarecrow, and the Lion – are re-envisioned in this performance. Although Dorothy is never named, she is recognisable by her red-sequined slippers, pigtails, and an apron over her dress to match closely the blue-and-white gingham dress that Dorothy wears in the movie; the Tin Man is reintroduced to the audience as a lady unable to get her tin open; the Scarecrow is transformed into a floppy-limbed woman carrying a bag filled with straw; and the Lion is a lady in a fur coat which she refuses to take off. The characters in *Wizard of Auslan* – strangers to one another – all find themselves in this strange place, not quite sure how they have arrived. They seem to be aware of each other’s need for help, but lacking a shared language, there is no way for them to communicate. They are reduced to

sitting silently on a park bench, suspicious of one another's motives. Their 'salvation' arrives when they receive the gift of Auslan from the 'good witches', who appear on the aerial silks or tussus – long reams of strong yet lightweight fabric that hang from the ceiling. This gift allows the four characters to finally articulate the solution to each other's problems, and eventually to claim their Deaf identity.

## TRANSLATING THE THEMES OF BEING DEAF: PARALLEL IMAGES IN *THE WIZARD OF OZ*

Creating the show with Deaf women from the community was an attempt to explore the experiences of being Deaf in a mainstream hearing world, and to articulate these stories through physical theatre. One of the central themes that emerged from the creative workshops spoke of the isolation experienced by some of the Deaf women, and their feelings of being lost and invisible. In the workshops, the facilitators drew on these stories, devising a movement-based segment that became affectionately termed the 'Flocking scene'; in this opening scene, one woman would constantly be left behind while the rest of the group moved to a different part of the space, symbolising the struggles experienced by the Deaf women in negotiating their way in a hearing world that moves to a different rhythm. The world that the Deaf women describe parallels the aridity and harshness of Kansas, from which Dorothy escapes; Dorothy's experience of 'marginality in the real world'<sup>7</sup> – that is, her life in Kansas – reflects how Deaf people likewise 'exist on the margins of society'.<sup>8</sup>

If Kansas is representative of a destructive and joyless environment for Dorothy,<sup>9</sup> then the hearing world can sometimes be an equally destructive environment for the Deaf women. The participants in *Wizard of Auslan* shared stories of how Deaf people were viewed as being diseased, and often deemed to be broken and in need of being fixed. By describing such

attitudes towards the Deaf body, the women in effect spoke about how their bodies were pathologised, thus drawing a comparison to the unruly and strange bodies found in *The Wizard of Oz*, where the ‘driving force in the narrative [is] to make odd bodies whole’<sup>10</sup> – the Tin Man desires a heart, and the Scarecrow longs for some brains.

The performance translates these ideas of making odd bodies whole by retelling stories of the oralist education of Deaf children that focuses on the use of oral strategies such as lip-reading and speech. Sign language is usually not encouraged in oralist education. In a scene involving the use of shadow play, a large adult figure looms threateningly over the child figure, forcing her to practise her oral exercises. The child obediently holds up a strip of paper in front of her face, pressing her lips together and releasing the air from them in short, sharp bursts in an activity known to the workshop participants as ‘the dreaded P-P-P exercise’. Her breath causes the strip of paper to flap hopelessly between her fingers. When the grown-up leaves, the child throws her piece of paper away and is quickly joined by another child. Together, they communicate in signed language, but they are soon interrupted when the grown-up returns, forbidding them to continue signing in Auslan (see Figure 1). The shadow play reveals how Deaf children were often criminalised for signing, and how sign language had to be used in secret; by sharing the story of oralist education, the performance holds up for examination the desire to repair the ‘deficient’ Deaf body. For some of the Deaf women in *Wizard of Auslan*, the speech teachers who enforced an oralist education on them were like the wicked witches in the story. In the performance, the wicked witches are reimagined as two pompous aerialists who perform fantastic routines up on the aerial silks. The witches try to get the four travellers to notice them up in the air by yelling down at them; their cries, of course, go unheard, and in a huff, they descend from the aerial silks, and ungraciously sweep the four travellers off stage (see Figure 2). Although the performance juxtaposes this comic scene with the more sombre shadow



Figure 1: Shadow play portraying how Deaf children were forbidden to sign. Photo: courtesy Vulcana Women's Circus.  
Figure 2: The evil witches confront the travellers. Photo: courtesy Vulcana Women's Circus.

play, both scenes effectively highlight the incarceration of the Deaf body.

If the speech/oralist teachers of the Deaf were translated into the witch figures in *Wizard of Auslan*, it is worth noting that the wizard him/herself never appears in the performance. In *The Wizard of Oz*, the wizard is initially cast as the supreme figure of authority; Dorothy and the other characters believe that he possesses the solutions to their problems. In a similar vein, early ideas in the creative workshops suggested including a wizard character who would run around in the performance, attempting to 'fix' the characters' deafness through the use of wacky contraptions such as

giant ear trumpets. Like the wizard of Oz, who is eventually revealed as a humbug shrouded by a technological facade,<sup>11</sup> the wizard figure in *Wizard of Auslan* was originally intended to represent the audiologists and other health professionals who sought to cure deafness in order to enforce

normalcy upon the Deaf; this character would try to ‘fix’ the other characters’ ‘deficient’ bodies, and thus make their ‘odd’ bodies ‘whole’. This idea never came to fruition in the performance, however, because of the strong reactions that emerged from one of the workshop participants. When the idea to include this wizard character was shared with the group, she became agitated and said that she did not want the focus to be placed on the ears; she argued that the focus should instead be reinstated to the hands. This exchange in the creative workshops stresses how the body can become a site for oppression as well as resistance. If we are to understand the body as the ‘primary site for the operation of ... power’,<sup>12</sup> then by resisting the emphasis on the ears, the Deaf body similarly rejects the notion of the ‘deviant body’ – one that represents ‘imperfection, failure to control the body, and [a] vulnerability to weakness’.<sup>13</sup>

In the original story of *Oz*, Dorothy’s house is the ‘ultimate symbol of female domesticity’,<sup>14</sup> and Dorothy’s red shoes in the movie become a symbol of the woman’s ability to challenge patriarchy; her shoes are thus her female inheritance.<sup>15</sup> In *Wizard of Auslan*, the Deaf body is portrayed as being domesticated when sign language is repressed; the symbolic power of the red shoes is translated in the performance to the hands, which are themselves powerful signifiers – through their signing, they can challenge the domesticity of the repressed and incarcerated Deaf body.

## NEGOTIATING TWO WORLDS: FINDING A BRIDGE BETWEEN DEAF AND HEARING WORLDS

Privileging and translating Deaf experience was a key aim of the performance; there needed to be a space where the Deaf women could author their own stories on stage. However, another aim was to make the performance accessible to both Deaf and hearing audiences, and the performance relied on the potential of visual images and metaphors to invite

various readings. In attempting to do this, tensions and difficulties arose in the stories that connected exclusively to the Deaf experience; one prime example is the retelling of the oralist education of Deaf children. The decision by the directors not to translate Auslan into English during the performance further served as a political act. There were some non-Auslan users in the audience, and one of the Deaf women shared after the performance that this lack of translation put the hearing people in a position of isolation. Her comments about the isolating effect on the hearing, non-Auslan users in the audience moved to subvert the traditional dichotomies of margin and centre.

Even so, certain concessions were made to find a way to bridge the Deaf and hearing experiences of the performance. In order to meet certain expectations of a hearing audience, the directors chose to include music and soundscape as part of *Wizard of Auslan*. Perhaps one of the strongest motifs in the movie, *The Wizard of Oz*, is the song '(Somewhere) Over the Rainbow', made popular by the actress Judy Garland. The inclusion of the song in *Wizard of Auslan*, however, served to further expose modalities of power and ethics that are inherent in the act of translation. During the workshops, one of the facilitators tried explaining the mood of the song to one of the Deaf women; the facilitator hummed the melody, swaying her hands gently in order to convey what she meant. The Deaf woman joked in response, 'I don't know, never heard it'.

Deaf humour aside, Paige argues that Dorothy's singing '(Somewhere) Over the Rainbow' hints at her rebellious nature.<sup>16</sup> For the Deaf women, the inclusion of the song unveiled other elements of tension. For instance, some of the lyrics held no meaning for the Deaf women. Ann,<sup>17</sup> one of the Deaf participants, was asked to lead the group (consisting of both Deaf and hearing women) in the signing of the song, which was to be performed at the close of the performance. During one of the workshops, Ann was given a sheet of paper containing the lyrics, which she then

tried translating into Auslan. After the first few lines, she paused, telling the group that she would have to go home and ‘deconstruct’ the song so that it would make sense to her, and to the other Deaf women. The line, ‘Somewhere over the rainbow, way up high, there’s a land that I heard of once in a lullaby’ became translated into ‘Somewhere rainbow beyond far far, land I vision grow up’. This translation not only reflects the difference in structure between English and Auslan, but it also brings the focus again away from the ears, particularly since the concept of ‘lullaby’ was deemed to be insignificant.

The translation of the song from English to Auslan was not the only issue that raised tensions. Whereas Judy Garland sings the song with a wistful sense of yearning, not having heard the song, Ann’s initial signed interpretation of the lyrics was very impassioned. When she signed ‘Why? Why me not there?’,<sup>18</sup> her movements seemed to communicate feelings of frustration, perhaps even of defiance and resentment. She later shared with the group, ‘This song was made by [a] hearing person, but for Deaf people, it’s angry. We want that.’ The potential act of rebellion that Paige writes about was eventually subsumed in the performance. At the close of *Wizard of Auslan*, an instrumental version of ‘(Somewhere) Over the Rainbow’ was played, and one of the facilitators stood in the back of the audience space, conducting the performers who were on stage. In the end, the original intensity that Ann had brought to the signing of the lyrics – the ‘anger’ that she described – was toned down to evoke a much gentler feel, matching the wistful melody of the soundtrack played during the performance.

Issues such as this draw attention to the ethics of storytelling. In his article, ‘Digging Up Stories’, James Thompson points to the necessity of examining how stories are told and retold, specifically in the context of creating theatre with vulnerable or marginalised communities.<sup>19</sup> In (re) telling ‘(Somewhere) Over the Rainbow’ through signing, whose story

is actually being told in the performance? Even though concerns were raised during the workshops that no particular way should be imposed on Ann to sign the song, the final version told a very different story. It seemed to cater more to a hearing audience, for whom the melody of the song would sit in harmony with the tone of the signing.

The complexities surrounding Ann's interpretation of '(Somewhere) Over the Rainbow' reflect just one of many issues that can emerge in creating community performance. Rea Dennis argues that translation in performance, or an 'aesthetic rendering of the teller's account',<sup>20</sup> needs to 'integrate the complexities of what is told, of what is unsaid, and of what might be deliberately omitted'.<sup>21</sup> There were some extremely powerful stories shared by the Deaf women during the creative workshops; one of the hearing women in the project described these stories as being horrifying and confronting.<sup>22</sup> The audience (both hearing and Deaf), however, never got to see these stories told on stage; even though part of the 'agenda' of *Wizard of Auslan* was to describe the (Deaf) community to itself;<sup>23</sup> the overarching idea of using *The Wizard of Oz* to frame Deaf experience meant that not all stories could be shared with an audience.

I have already suggested that rejecting the idea to include a wizard figure, who attempts to 'fix' the other characters in the performance, spoke of how the body can be a site for both oppression and resistance. Interestingly, the same issue arises in trying to negotiate between hearing and Deaf worlds. Audrey, one of the hearing participants, spoke about this contention over having the wizard character and the giant ear trumpets in the performance:

My ideas were, you make fun of things, you over-exaggerate how ridiculous some of those things were, but they just weren't at a point where they could laugh, make laughter out of the craziness of what people used to do. It just seemed too raw for them to make a humorous scene in the performance, to highlight how

absurd were some of the activities that had been undertaken in the past, to try to teach deaf children to speak ... there was a series of things that we thought of, that could be interesting prop-wise ... they didn't get that it's having a stab at hearing people for being so stupid and thinking that that was a good solution ... they didn't want to focus on it ... so they formed this opinion, that it's highlighting the deafness, as opposed to highlighting the stupidity of the hearing (community), and they just couldn't shift where they saw that going.<sup>24</sup>

Audrey communicated her frustration at the difficulty in bridging this gap. Jonathan Neelands points out:

[T]he work is not just about recognition of a group's identity and challenges to the norms by which they are recognised by others, but also about issues of power within the group and between the group and other collective identities and who has ownership and the means and processes of social and artistic representation.<sup>25</sup>

It seemed, in this instance, that trying to challenge the normalising view of D/deaf people as being in need of fixing resulted in a struggle for power – who decides what is explored or shown on stage? Richard Schechner reminds us, '[s]ecurity is needed at the outset of play more than later on ... performance workshops need to commence in an atmosphere of "safety and trust" but, once underway, are places where very risky business can be explored'.<sup>26</sup> It was important that the space of the creative workshops for *Wizard of Auslan* was a safe one; but when some tried to imbue the performance with an element of 'laughter', they inadvertently opened the way for participants to become vulnerable. So when such sensitive issues – or 'risky business' – do arise, what exploratory processes need to be taken? In *Wizard of Auslan*, the idea was dropped as quickly as it was raised; the wizard character was immediately removed from the perfor-

mance to respect the feelings of the participant. Such negotiations reveal how storytelling often 'walks a tightrope between ... different possibilities ... Without extreme care theatre projects that dig up narratives, experiences, and remembrances can blame, enact revenge, and foster animosity as much as they can develop dialogue, respect, or comfort.'<sup>27</sup>

Yet, storytelling is essential to meaning-making, and 'human beings basically create meanings that engage in understandings of themselves and others through metaphors and narratives'.<sup>28</sup> Thompson argues that theatre has 'powerful potential for challenging and deconstructing dominant narratives, narratives that are more often created by others'.<sup>29</sup> The opportunity for the Deaf women to tell their stories through performance was particularly important for them, because it offered the possibility of using performance as a site of resistance, to set out relationships between Deaf culture and the hearing mainstream, and to rewrite dominant narratives of D/deafness as disease and deficiency. As one of the Deaf participants shared during the post-performance meeting, the performance also provided the Deaf women with a space for self-actualisation.

## CONCLUSION: TRANSLATING THE JOURNEY

Just as Dorothy's journey through Oz is a quest for self-realisation,<sup>30</sup> so the creation of *Wizard of Auslan* was a journey undertaken on various levels. For the characters in *Wizard of Auslan*, their journey is realised when they finally have a shared language and can thus claim their Deaf identity. The collaborative process was a journey undertaken by groups of both hearing and Deaf women to constantly negotiate between two worlds, where an Auslan to English translation, and vice versa, could offer only one way of finding a middle ground between the two cultures.

For the Deaf women in the project, their journey emerged through having their stories told and seeing them eventually translated on stage. Lydia, one of the Deaf participants, explained how

the story really reminded me of back when I was growing up, and having to really struggle with education, and sort of almost not being accepted, and constantly finding barriers, and there was a real inequality. And you know, life progressed, and I survived, but I really wanted to share that kind of story of having to learn speech therapy, and not being able to sign. There was real background information that we wanted to show hearing people how Deaf people feel, about that every day, like finding those barriers.<sup>31</sup>

It is important to remember, however, that there is always a play of politics in the act of translation, just as there are politics of ownership and authorship inherent in much community and applied theatre practice. In trying to give 'voice' to other people's experience, be it Deaf or otherwise, facilitators need to continuously engage in a critical reflection of their own practice. It can be easy to fall into the trap of discursive coercion. Michael Etherton and Tim Prentki caution that facilitators often try to allow the community to set its own agenda, but only until the point where that agenda clashes with the ideology of the facilitators.<sup>32</sup> Despite this tricky relationship, by translating and staging the experiences of the participants, the journey becomes one of moving from invisibility to visibility. Deafness is often considered an invisible 'disability', and the repression of sign language attempts to further render it 'invisible'.<sup>33</sup> The visibility of the women signing on stage thereby works to 'rearticulate the presence of the [Deaf] body, its silences, and the ways in which visibility can speak to us'.<sup>34</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 'Auslan' refers to Australian Sign Language.
- 2 E.Y. Harburg, 'Over the Rainbow', performed by Judy Garland, *The Wizard of Oz*, 1953.
- 3 Jerry Griswold, 'There's No Place But Home: *The Wizard of Oz*', *The Antioch Review* 45.4 (1987): 473.
- 4 Linda Rohrer Paige, 'Wearing the Red Shoes: Dorothy and the Power of the Female Imagination in *The Wizard of Oz*', *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 23.4 (1996): 147.
- 5 In keeping with conventions in the field of Deaf Studies, I use Deaf with a capital 'D' to signify Deafness as a mark of culture, of which a unique signed language is part of the identity.
- 6 Pseudonyms are used in place of the real names of the participants. I have, however, used the real names of the facilitators in the workshop.
- 7 Sydney Duncan, 'Lost Girl: Diminishing Dorothy of Oz', *Studies in Popular Culture* 31.1 (2008): 65.
- 8 Heidi M. Rose, 'Juliana Fjeld's *The Journey*: Identity Production in an ASL Performance', *Text and Performance Quarterly* 17.4 (1997): 337.
- 9 Joel D. Chaston, 'If I Ever Go Looking for My Heart's Desire: "Home" in Baum's "Oz" Books', *The Lion and the Unicorn* 18.2 (1994): 211.
- 10 Vivian Wagner, 'Unsettling Oz: Technological Anxieties in the Novels of L. Frank Baum', *The Lion and the Unicorn* 30.1 (2006): 27–33.
- 11 David Payne, 'The Wizard of Oz: Therapeutic Rhetoric in a Contemporary Media Ritual', *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 75.1 (1989): 34.
- 12 Kathy Davis, 'Embodiment Theory', in *Embodied Practices: Feminist Perspectives on the Body*, edited by Kathy Davis (London: SAGE Publications, 1997) 3.
- 13 Susan Wendell, *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability* (New York: Routledge, 1996) 60.
- 14 Duncan 57.
- 15 Paige 151.
- 16 *Ibid* 150.
- 17 Pseudonym.
- 18 This line is a translation of the original lyrics, 'Why, oh why can't I?'
- 19 James Thompson, *The Drama Review* 48.3 (2004): 150–64.
- 20 'Refugee Performance: Aesthetic Representation and Accountability in Playback Theatre', *RiDE: The Journal of Applied Theatre* 13.2 (2008): 213.
- 21 *Ibid*.
- 22 Robyn, personal interview, 28 February 2013. 'Robyn' is a pseudonym.
- 23 Celia White, personal interview, 6 March 2013. Celia was one of the workshop facilitators in the *Wizard of Auslan* project.
- 24 Audrey, personal interview, 14 March 2013. 'Audrey' is a pseudonym.
- 25 Jonathan Neelands, 'Taming the Political: The Struggle over Recognition in the Politics of Applied Theatre', *RiDE: The Journal of Applied Theatre* 12.3 (2007): 310.
- 26 Cited in Gerri Moriarty, 'The Wedding Community Play Project: A Cross-Community Production in Northern Ireland', in *Theatre and Empowerment: Community Drama on the World Stage*, edited by Richard Boon and Jane Plastow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 17.
- 27 Thompson 151.
- 28 Jan-Kåre Breivik, 'Vulnerable but Strong: Deaf People Challenge Established Understandings of Deafness', *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health* 33 (2005): 19.
- 29 Thompson 26.
- 30 Paige 147.
- 31 Lydia, personal interview, 20 October 2012. 'Lydia' is a pseudonym.
- 32 Michael Etherton and Tim Prentki, 'Drama for Change? Prove It! Impact Assessment in Applied Theatre', *RiDE: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* 11.2 (2006): 150.
- 33 Jennifer Harris, *The Cultural Meaning of Deafness: Language, Identity and Power Relations* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1995) 16.
- 34 Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren, 'Hearing Difference Across Theatres: Experimental, Disability, and Deaf Performance', *Theatre Journal* 58.3 (2006): 442.