Interaction in the Theater for the Deaf Through Body Language

التفاعل في مسرح الصم البكم من خلال لغة الجسد

Dr. LOUAFI Mourad [1]

[1] University of Mostaganem, Algeria, mourad.louafi.etu@univ-mosta.dz

Visual Aesthetics Laboratory, University of Mostaganem

Received: 26/07/2025 *Accepted: 18/09/2025* *Published: 18/12/2025*

Abstract:

This study delves into the pivotal role of the body in deaf theatre, highlighting its function as a primary medium of communication. It utilizes movement and action not only to generate meaning on stage but also to convey intricate messages. This exploration focuses on how mimetic acting, through its spectacle, enriches audience engagement and enjoyment in such theatrical forms. It further examines the connection between the performance and its viewers, particularly the deaf audience's ability to interact with diverse scenarios. The paper scrutinizes how audience members decode the actors' physical movements and actions into rich interpretations, acknowledging the body as a potent linguistic instrument that profoundly influences an audience deprived of verbal dialogue.

Keywords: Body Language, Deaf Theatre, Gesture, Movement, Silent Acting.

الملخص:

تهتم هذه الورقة بالحديث عن أهمية الجسد في مسرح الصم بوصفه شكلا من أشكال الاتصال الذي يعتمد أساسا على الحركة والفعل من أجل إنتاج المعنى على الرّكح لإيصال الدلالات، ومدى قدرة التمثيل الإيمائي على صناعة الفرجة وتحقيق المتعة في مثل هذا النوع من المسرح.

ولكون الأداء التمثيلي مرتبط بالمتلقي، يجعلنا نتساءل حول مدى قدرة المتلقي من فئة الصم على التفاعل مع مختلف المواقف، وترجمة الحركة والأفعال الفيزيائية للممثل إلى

قراءات وتأويلات باعتبار الجسد وسيلة لغوية قوية في التأثير على المتلقي الذي لا يحتاج إلى الحوار والفعل اللفظي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: لغة الجسد؛ مسرح الصم؛ الإيماءة؛ الحركة؛ التمثيل الصامت.

***Corresponding author**: LOUAFI Mourad, **e-mail**: mourad.louafi.etu@univ-mosta.dz*

INTRODUCTION:

Individuals with special needs constitute a fundamental part of society and play an active role within it. This recognition has spurred a growing interest in promoting their full integration into social life, especially through theatre. Theatrical arts are deemed one of the most powerful tools for enhancing communication, fostering social integration, and raising awareness.

The design of a theatrical performance typically relies on a complex interplay of auditory and visual elements, including spoken words, scenography, sign language, movements, and various gestures. For the deaf, communication pivots on what is visible, relying extensively on sign language, gestures, facial expressions, and movement. These elements are crucial in generating meaning and transmitting messages on stage.

In this landscape, theatre practitioners, albeit with varied extents of experience, are committed to devising theatrical performances that cater specifically to the needs of the deaf and mute. These performances are tailored to align with the distinctive requirements posed by their conditions.

Consequently, this paper poses the following critical inquiries:

- How do bodily expressions enhance the development of visual language in deaf theatre?
- To what extent are deaf audiences able to comprehend the visual language conveyed through silent, mimetic acting?

1. Definition of Terms and Concepts:

1.1. Deaf

The Executive Committee of the Conference of Administrators Serving the Deaf in the United States defines a deaf individual as someone who experiences a hearing impairment so severe (70 decibels or more) that it precludes auditory comprehension of speech, with or without the use of hearing aids (Ragheb, 2009, p. 87).

Alternatively, deafness may be characterized as a condition where the auditory capacity is insufficient for everyday life's auditory demands (Al-Qurashi, 1999, p. 16).

From a medical standpoint, a person is considered deaf if they were born without the ability to hear, or lost their hearing before or shortly after acquiring speech, to such an extent that any acquired linguistic skills are rapidly lost. This definition underscores the severity of deafness, considering it a more restrictive disability than blindness, as it significantly impedes social participation (Kamel, 2005, p. 5).

Naji provides a further perspective, defining a deaf person as one who cannot hear due to a loss of hearing ability, and is consequently unable to acquire, comprehend, or produce spoken language (Naji, 2006, p. 121).
Afana expands on this by describing the deaf as individuals either born with complete hearing impairment or who have lost sufficient hearing that it obstructs the development of speech and language (Afana, 2008, p. 24).

1.2. Definition of Mime Theater (Silent or Gestural Acting)

Nassar articulates that mime theatre, or pantomime, represents *"acting devoid of speech, comprising a sequence of facial expressions, gestures, hand movements, body postures, and movements that are both observed in everyday life and creatively employed to reflect the character's traits, the situational context, and the atmospheric nuances of the play"* (Nassar, 2000, p.76).

Marie Elias describes it as silent or gestural acting. This term encompasses a theatrical style that primarily utilizes expression through movement, gesture, body posture, and facial expressions as alternatives to

verbal communication. It also refers to a specific genre of performance that predominantly employs this non-verbal form of acting. Within this art form, the rhythm of a performance is shaped by the specific trajectories of movement, each marked by a deliberate use of space that accentuates and draws attention to the action (Regagda, 2015, p. 76).

2. Utilizing Bodily Expressions to Form Visual Language in Deaf Theatre:

Bodily expressions are paramount in the visual communication strategies adeptly utilized by the deaf community, who engage with these gestures spontaneously and naturally. In theatrical settings, however, the employment of such gestures necessitates a high degree of sensitivity, expertise, and experience.

These gestures are considered an essential art form, embodying fundamental techniques that enable actors to communicate effectively without words. They allow for precision in movement, control over the performance, and direct communication with the audience through nuanced body language.

2.1. Sign Language

Sign language, as part of silent acting, relies on using signs as an alternative to spoken language, capable of expressing anything. However, these are abstract signs disconnected from the objects they represent, akin to the condensed language used in writing. These signs are conventional, mutually agreed upon by their users, and are an ability acquired through learning (Saleh, 2001).

Thus, sign language consists of organized, visual, gestural silent symbols. These symbols are formed by combining hand shapes and movements with other body parts that perform specific actions suitable for the situation. This communication method heavily depends on visual perception (Regagda, 2015, p. 177).

Signs can be categorized into two types:

- **Acquired signs:** These are learned by the actor through exercises, physical training, or their imagination.

- **Inherited signs**: These originate from the actor's inherent nature, such as laughing to indicate joy, and crying to indicate sadness. The actor can also use movements to indicate specific things; for example, stomping the foot indicates anger, clenching the teeth, or raising the eyebrows signifies surprise or astonishment. All these movements are inherent human actions (Ahmad, 2024).

Sometimes, signs are used to mimic the form of the object being indicated. For example, the sign for a bird or a butterfly when mimics the movement of the wings. Often, signs may simply be a generic gesture toward the discussed object or concept, such as when a miming actor points upwards to indicate the sky or a blue color. When referring to themselves or addressing people, they may point at their body with a finger indicating *"I"*, and when pointing at the person they are talking to, it means *"you"*.

Some signs used by the deaf are based fundamentally on mimicry. For instance, the sign for "walking" might involve displaying index and middle fingers spread apart and pointed downwards, mimicking legs, and then moving these fingers to simulate the way people walk and where they go (El-sabi, 2022).

2.2. Facial Expressions

Facial expressions, involving the eyes, eyebrows, nose, mouth, ears, forehead, and cheeks, are pivotal expressive tools that transcend vocal expressions due to their direct, suggestive capabilities. These features often collaborate with other body parts during performance, such as coordinating eye movements with head gestures, frequently supported by hand movements. For instance, the eyes are a significant indicator of a person's emotional state and thoughts; dilated pupils suggest pleasure, while constricted pupils may indicate displeasure. Further narrowing of the eyes could imply disbelief or scepticism.

Eyebrow movements also communicate a wide range of emotions: a single raised eyebrow may suggest scepticism or disbelief, while both eyebrows raised can denote surprise. Additional gestures, such as scratching the nose or pulling on the ears, might signal confusion or uncertainty

regarding the conversation. A furrowed brow paired with a downward gaze typically conveys confusion, discomfort, or disapproval of the discussed subject. Conversely, a furrowed brow with an upward lift can denote astonishment (Al-Qasim, Understanding Body Language, 2024).

2.3. Analogous Signaling or Gesturing

"Gesturing is one of the kinetic essentials that humans emit as pauses, directives, or sometimes to abbreviate speech, such as nodding in agreement instead of saying 'yes.' Thus, it represents one of the stable and distinctive expressive forms unique to each individual" (Saleh, 2001, p.120). In the realm of theatre, a gesture is the movement through which an actor presents his body to the audience, carrying a specific idea. "In a theatrical performance, a gesture is any movement made by the actor or performer, whether it originates from the head, hands, fingers, or any other body part, serving as a meaningful and expressive tool" (Saleh, 2001, p.120).

Therefore, it can be stated that a gesture is a movement with a specific meaning or professional significance, characterized by its ability to indicate, impact, and persuade. It must be motivated by an intention: *"the best gestures are the least obvious"* (Shepard, 2000, p.189). To understand the purpose of a gesture on stage, one must consider both the overall body postures and the specific gestures of particular body parts.

In silent acting, no gesture exists without a purpose, as the actor uses numerous signs to convey the intended expression. *"A gesture replaces the need for signs; for example, in a silent scene, if an actor needs to express that he feels stomach pain, he cannot simply point to it; he must use multiple kinetic gestures to effectively communicate the pain. Every gesture should be large, clear, and executed only once unless the situation demands repetition"* (Sami, 1999, p.43).

2.4. Body Movement and Formations

"The philosophy behind silent acting (mime or gestural) centres on the actor's ability to depict a dramatic scenario through the physical movements of the entire body without the use of speech. This approach

necessitates not only the selection of expressive movements but also a profound understanding of the depicted scenarios" (Regagda, 2015, p.99).

For example, slow movements may depict an actor's exhaustion and fatigue, whereas an unsteady, swaying walk might suggest intoxication. Conversely, walking with deliberate steps and a stooped posture often portrays the social status or age of a character, such as that of an elderly individual. The emphasis on movement is crucial in theatre, as the movements in mime theatre represent the life an actor embodies on stage, stemming directly from their physicality, which must be adeptly controlled to express particular states or emotions. Henrik Tomashevsky asserts, *"Everything in pantomime begins with a flow"* (Bazi, 2001, p.451).

The posture and movements of an actor hold immense potential to convey a variety of expressions and meanings. A communicative gesture could be used to express emotions such as sadness, anger, or joy. For instance, an actor's sitting posture can convey multiple meanings; sitting with both hands on the cheeks might suggest boredom or sadness, while resting one hand on the cheek could indicate contemplation or decision-making (Youssef, 2003, p.63).

Sometimes, even the mere act of standing still can portray a specific emotional or contextual state. Jiri Veltrusky, in his article *'Man and Object in Theatre'*, explores how actors can transform into mere accessories or elements of the decor. He cites examples of soldiers stationed at an entrance to suggest that a location is a military barrack, noting that these actors could be considered 'non-active' due to their minimal involvement in the scene—limited only to their posture, rank, attire, and makeup, to the extent that they could potentially be replaced by statues. Veltrusky refers to this as '*action at degree zero'*, a transition from being perceived as persons to being parts of the set or objects within the theatrical space (Walid, 2011).

3. The Importance of Body Language in Deaf Theatre:

Numerous studies, including those examining anthropological and religious rituals, underscore that humans initially engaged in thought processes that were sensory, visual, and material. They translated their

sensory experiences primarily into images, with spoken language playing a secondary role. "Movement and gesture hold substantial significance in both ancient and contemporary human expression, as evidenced by our instinctive use of hands while speaking. This occurs despite the clear conveyance of ideas and meanings through words alone. Nonetheless, we find ourselves invariably driven to augment verbal communication with corresponding physical movements, encompassing facial movements, hand gestures, and overall body dynamics" (Ghneim, s.d.). Moreover, physical expressions generate "a visible state that can leave a more enduring impact than sound, since it is a movement comprehended through a different sense. In theatre, movements are neither random nor spontaneous but are meticulously orchestrated to convey specific meanings. These movements work in tandem with scenography, decor, and lighting to enhance the comprehensive delivery of the narrative. Often, these movements communicate a spectrum of meanings that extend beyond the spoken elements" (Ghneim, s.d.).

The mechanisms through which movement is expressed, or what may be termed body language, constitute a universally understood language. Common gestures such as waving goodbye, shaking hands, smiling, or frowning are recognized across most cultures. As such, physical gesturing as a form of communication has the potential to transcend the confines of language, geography, and culture. "Body language on stage can encapsulate a vast array of verbal expressions and evoke profound emotional responses, reaching deep within the audience’s feelings and lodging in their memories. This is because an image can often convey what a thousand words cannot" (Belhaj, 2020).

Therefore, the body, with its rich history, symbols, and gestures, forms a distinct realm of knowledge. It stands as an independent entity and offers a fertile ground for the deaf and mute to explore and experiment within the realm of gestural theatre. This exploration not only capitalizes on the physicality of the body but also harnesses the latent energy within, opening new horizons for expressive potential in the theatre.

4. Visual Reception and Perception of Bodily Expressions Among the Deaf:

Gesturing, in its essence, depends on the complete utilization of physical movements to articulate the nuances of specific ideas, particularly those related to internal states. In such forms of expression, the relationship between the signifier and the signified, as defined in linguistic terms, is either direct or analogous and is typically learned only through firsthand experience. Consequently, anyone observing a gesture or movement can discern its intended significance based on their personal life experiences, without the need for any arbitrary symbolic system.

It is crucial to acknowledge, however, that while gesturing effectively bridges the concept and its physical expression, it inherently struggles to convey abstract concepts. Questions arise, such as how one might gesturally represent ideas like chaos, misery, deduction, democracy, and other abstract notions that permeate our linguistic and interactive experiences with simplicity and clarity.

The feasible approach involves devising specific movements or gestures and establishing a mutual understanding of their meanings with the audience, either through early education or by explicit definition at the time of performance. Yet, this method of prior instruction diverges from the spontaneous nature traditionally attributed to gesturing, aligning it more with the arbitrary connections between signifier and signified found in conventional human languages.

Moreover, gesturing also encompasses significant cultural and social dimensions that must not be overlooked. An actor's use of certain body movements and gestures may resonate well with an audience familiar with similar cultural references, while it may fail to communicate the intended message to an audience lacking those specific cultural experiences.

For instance, if an actor attempts to depict driving a car or using a typewriter in front of an audience that has never encountered these objects, the gestures will likely not convey the intended ideas. This underscores the cultural and social layers embedded in gesturing, emphasizing that such

aspects are integral to its effectiveness and comprehension (Romanos, 1993, pp.123-124).

The concept of iconic signalling in deaf theatre also demonstrates the complexity of gestural communication. For example, consider the gesture used to signify *"Milk"*, typically mimed by the action of milking a cow. This gesture is originally iconic because it visually connects the concept of milk with the manual action used to extract it from a cow. However, for a young deaf child living in an urban environment, who may never have witnessed the act of milking, this gesture loses its iconicity. For such a child, milk is primarily associated with the white liquid found in bottles or cartons available in grocery stores (Romanos, 1993, pp.124-125).

In deaf theatre, the efficacy of communication hinges on employing gestures and movements that are intuitively understandable, drawing upon simple, everyday experiences. This approach allows actors from the deaf and mute community to vividly portray their characters' emotions, thoughts, and needs, facilitating dynamic interactions among themselves and with the audience.

CONCLUSION

Body language in deaf theatre transcends mere symbolic gestures or kinetic signs; it involves a nuanced performance by professional actors skilled in translating text into visual kinetic narratives that engage and entertain the audience.

The success of such performances largely depends on the audience's ability to interpret the bodily signals conveyed by the actors. These signals must align with the viewers' cultural and social experiences to be effective. Clear and coherent gestures are likely to resonate deeply and be memorable to the deaf and mute audience, while ambiguous signals might lead to misunderstandings.

Furthermore, the unique requirements of a deaf theatre audience necessitate specific considerations, including:

- Encouraging the audience to enhance their visual perception and interpretative skills, given that the performance inherently includes

multiple visual elements designed to captivate a distinctly aware viewer.

- The use of expressive and clear lighting is crucial, as sign language and other gestural communications depend entirely on visual clarity and cannot be effectively conveyed in poorly lit environments.

By addressing these aspects, deaf theatre can provide a rich, accessible, and emotionally resonant experience for its audience, ensuring that the visual language of the performance is as impactful and engaging as possible.

Bibliography List:

Books:

- Abdel Hamid Sami, W. S. (1999). *Silent Acting (Thirty Lessons in Silent Acting), , University of Baghdad.* Baghdad, Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, College of Fine Arts. (In Arabic)
- Azou Ismail Afana, A. H.-L. (2008). *Theatrical Teaching* (1st ed.), Amman, Dar Al-Masirah for Publishing and Distribution. (In Arabic)
- Bazi, R. (2001). *Writings on Mime Acting.* (S. Salah, Trad.) Cairo, Supreme Council of Culture. (In Arabic)
- Kamel, M. A. (2005). *Academic Learning Difficulties: Between Understanding and Confrontation*, Vol. 1, 1st ed., Egypt, Alexandria Book Center. (In Arabic)
- Marshad, N. A. (2006). *Modifying Aggressive Behavior for Normal and Special Needs Children*,1st ed., Cairo, Zahraa Al-Sharq Library. (In Arabic)
- Mohamed Youssef Nassar, M. S. (2000). *Educational Drama: Theory and Practice*,1st ed., Jordan, National Publishing Center. (In Arabic)
- Ragheb, R. A. (2009). *Cognitive Operations and the Hearing Impaired.* Alexandria: Dar Wafa for Printing and Publishing. (In Arabic)
- Saleh, S. (2001). *The Self - The Other.* Kuwait, Politics Printing House. (In Arabic)
- Shepard, L. M. (2000). *Everything About Mime Acting,* Translated by S. Salah, Cairo, Supreme Council of Culture. (In Arabic)
- Youssef, I. R. (2003). Employing the Actor's Body in the Iraqi Theatrical Performance, Baghdad. (In Arabic)

Thesis:

- Ragagda, Messaouda (2015). *Proposal for a Program Based on Mime Theater Aimed at Modifying Aggressive Behavior in Deaf Children - A Field Study at Some Deaf Schools in the Algerian Environment*, Supervised by Pr. Ben Zahi

Mansour, PhD. Thesis, University Kasdi Merbah Ouargla, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Ouargla. (In Arabic)

Websites:

- Ahmad, T. (2024, 10 11). (In Arabic)

http://www.sabahalanbari.com

- Al-Qasim, A. M. (s.d.). Consulted on 10 11, 2024. (In Arabic)

https://www.sabahalanbari.com

- Belhaj, A. (2020, 11 12). Comment on the Physics of the Body. from the Virtual Platform of the National Theater. (In Arabic)
- El-sabi, A.-e. M. (01, 04 2022). (J. o. Supervision, Éd.) Consulted on 10 11, 2024. (In Arabic)

  http://www.gulfkids.com

- Ghneim, G. (s.d.). Consulted on 10 11, 2024. (In Arabic)

http://www.shataranj.com

- Romanos, A. (1993). Consulted on 10 11, 2024. (In Arabic)

https://www.researchgate.net

- Walid. (2011, 09 19). Consulted on 10 11, 2024. (In Arabic)

www.magra.ahlamontada.net