

“Look, the reason we didn’t learn sign wasn’t because we couldn’t be bothered, it was out of principle. Out of principle, we didn’t want to make you part of a minority world.”

— Christopher in *Tribes* to his deaf adult son, Billy.

THE DEBATE over whether deaf children are better off learning oralism — speaking and reading lips — or American Sign Language is one of many threads woven into the evocative tapestry of Nina Raine’s *Tribes*, winner of the 2012 Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Play.

It is an argument that heated up in earnest in the latter part of the 19th century, with Alexander Graham Bell as one of the most active proponents of enforced oralism for children. Edward Miner Gallaudet, founder of the country’s groundbreaking Gallaudet University for deaf and hard of hearing students in 1864, was equally firm in his opposing view.

Today, although many deaf people use combined methods of communication, the debate continues, fueled in recent years by the advent of cochlear implants (surgically implanted electronic devices that can stimulate partial hearing) and by other technology on the horizon viewed by some as a threat to the hard-won acceptance of minority deaf culture and the language that has shaped it.

Deaf actor Russell Harvard, who both speaks and signs, earned a Drama League Award for his performance as Billy in *Tribes*. When he was 4, Harvard said in an email interview, his mother enrolled him at an “oral school,” where he was so miserable that he was transferred to a school for deaf children a few days later. “And I was suddenly a happy kid,” Harvard said.

The actor can relate to Billy’s frustration at being left out of conversations and having to ask “what,” “what,” “what” when hearing family members or people “in

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everyday life” speak, he said. “My mother and father are both deaf. However, my mother’s side of the family is hearing,” Harvard said, “and I have a hard time following [their] conversations. I’ve become accustomed to the ASL mode of communication with my father’s side of the family, because they’re all deaf.”

Yet Harvard also understands when Billy’s new girlfriend Sylvia, who is fluent in ASL, describes the deaf community as “hierarchical” and, in its own way, exclusionary. As a student at Gallaudet, Harvard said, he felt the need to “hide” when making voice phone calls to his agent “because some students, even friends, would look down on you and even feel offended” by those who didn’t use ASL on campus. But that happened in 2006, he noted. “Since then, I believe things have changed for the better.”

David Kurs, Artistic Director of North Hollywood-based Deaf West Theatre since the retirement last year of the company’s respected founder, Ed Waterstreet, views the issue through the prism of the arts.

Kurs, another Gallaudet graduate whose parents are deaf, didn’t experience “enforced normalcy as most people do,” although it wasn’t easy growing up as the only deaf kid in a “hearing” school, he said. As a writer, producer and director, Kurs believes that “the art of sign language theatre made accessible” to a broad audience is the “ultimate form of activism.”

Deaf West, known for adapting familiar musicals and plays with a pioneering blend of signed, spoken and sung text, gained national and international recognition through its co-production of the Huck Finn-based musical *Big River* with Roundabout Theatre in association with CTG, that won a 2004 Tony Honor for Excellence.

“For me, the single most important thing about Deaf West Theatre,” Kurs said via email, “is the power to change the minds and hearts of audience members who come to see our shows. They leave the theatre with the understanding that the deaf community has a specific culture and a language that is to be cherished.”

Tribes’ position in the “ASL or oralism” debate is nuanced; it does, however, in a memorably visual way, demonstrate that ASL is not simply “signed English” — although that does exist — but a rich and complex whole language with its own grammatical structure, vocabulary and infinitely versatile physical dimension.

(ASL is not a universal language. Like spoken languages, signed languages are specific to their country of origin.)

Harvard, who had to learn a British accent to play Billy, told the *Wall Street Journal* in 2012 that when he is required in the play to speak out loud while signing, it is like “trying to speak English and Spanish at the very same time.”

The viability of ASL is recognized in an increasing number of mainstream schools in the U.S. that offer it as a foreign language option. “It is the fourth most popular language in the country,” said Benjamin Lewis, who joined the Department of Linguistics at UCLA in 2012 to teach the first ASL classes there.

Lewis, who holds a master’s degree in sign language and bachelor’s degrees in communications and graphic design from Gallaudet, is UCLA’s first deaf faculty member. His other courses include “Deaf History,” focusing on the birth and early evolution of America’s deaf community and culture, and “Enforcing Normalcy: Deaf and Disability Studies.” A recent addition to the curriculum, the latter explores the historical, medical, social, cultural and other influences that have determined what constitutes “normalcy, disability and deafness.”

Such institutional acceptance of deaf culture and language seems light years away from a past where Lewis’ grandmother was forbidden to use ASL at her school for the deaf and was taught lip-reading and speaking instead, in the belief that it would increase her chances of acceptance in the society at large.

“Enforced normalcy” overlooks the fact that there is “a real Deaf community and that “many of us are very successful sign language users,” said Lewis, who in his emailed responses used an upper-case “D” to denote those who share a cultural identity with ASL as their common language.

The Deaf community, Lewis explained, encompasses those deaf from birth or early childhood, “late-deafened adults” and supportive hearing parents and relatives, friends, families and spouses, advocates, teachers, administrators and professionals. It “ideally” includes the “culturally or native Deaf and longtime ASL users,” Lewis said, “as well as those who are deaf but are oriented towards oral means of communications.

“Many culturally Deaf people wear hearing aids; some don’t. There are radical differences between the needs of the culturally Deaf and the needs of the late-deafened, the progressively deaf, and the hard-of-hearing.” Yet all, Lewis said, share the same concerns, the need for support services, fair treatment and accessible communication.



Susan Pourfar and Russell Harvard in the off-Broadway production of *Tribes*. PHOTO BY GREGORY COSTANZO

It is when deaf children with cochlear implants are “denied their right to their language — sign language,” he said, that the devices are viewed as controversial. “Some deaf people feel it’s a decision that *only* they can make for themselves, not doctors or parents.”

Kurs has a similar point of view. The controversy over cochlear implants is not that most people who are deaf are opposed to them, he said. It’s that discouraging implanted children from learning sign language, “harkens back to the days of oral education, where so many people of my parents’ generation did not learn language in the optimal language acquisition period of their lives because their schools (and their parents) felt they should learn how to talk before they learned language.”

The two divergent views in the deaf community, Kurs pointed out, are the medical/pathological view — which sees deafness as a medical condition that needs to be corrected — and the cultural view, which considers the deaf community as one with a distinct culture and language.

“I am firmly in the second camp,” he said. “But I also know that technology is an overwhelming force.” “I believe that the medical industry should work hand in hand with members of the deaf community to implement new technologies. Unfor-

tunately, there is no economical incentive for them to do so.”

“I think in *Tribes*, as in real life, it is hearing people’s perception of deafness that is the issue,” Kurs added.

“So many deaf people are perceived as needing to be corrected, and as stubborn for not wanting to be changed. A cab driver chided me the other day for not getting a cochlear implant, even though I am not an ideal candidate for one.”

Nina Raine’s lively play has a great deal to say about how we listen and fail to listen — deaf and hearing alike — about the tyranny of words, about hierarchies that oppress and exclude, and most fundamentally, about the driving human need for recognition and acceptance.

Or, as Harvard said, quoting a line in *Tribes* spoken by Billy’s mother Beth: “‘It’s a scary universe out there. If you’re part of a group it’s easier.’”

By Lynne Heffley, a writer and editor who covers the arts in Los Angeles.