



StageFly: Audience development with the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community

THIS PROJECT STARTED OUT with a very straight forward objective and a straight forward premise: “Make the theatre more accessible for Deaf and Hard of Hearing community.”

And that’s where the straightforwardness ended.

“... accessibility after all, is about creating a new normal not creating exceptions.”

As someone who has a full range of hearing, working in a road house where unscripted one-offs were the norm, this posed a number of challenges. From a purely technical perspective, there were several established formats available (text-based projections, subtitles, captioning devices, etc.), but none of which were necessarily built to support unscripted dialogue. ASL (American Sign Language) interpreters have also long been a part of live theatre, especially for young audiences, however, it usually limited the seating options for those in need of those services and was not regularly available.

So, how to make the theatre more accessible for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community—for every performance—from every seat in the venue? This became the new focus of the project. Which is where it needed to be; accessibility after all, is about creating a new normal not creating exceptions.

It’s easy enough to write that kind of statement, but understanding what that meant took some time. Through many consultation sessions with advocacy groups and members of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community, it wasn’t until I spoke of *not* treating them as a special group and trying to create something that was always available for every production, as a matter of form, did I get the impression that I was making any headway in the consultation process.

With that basis of understanding achieved, the concept of StageFly started to take shape. ASL interpretation was the preferred/recommended method of content creation. Much like every language, it has the ability to create its own short form, creating a visual acronym that could take long phrases or sentences and turn it into a gesture thereby keeping pace with the dialogue as it’s spoken. With a little advance work with the performers, we could extract some of the key phrases or subject matter to assist the ASL interpreter be better prepared for how the performance would unfold.

Developing a method to deliver the content also had its challenges. But being 2012, we fully embraced the fact that virtually everyone, especially in the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community, owned a smartphone. It allowed the venue to focus its resources on capturing and broadcasting the content instead of managing the individual hardware that typically comes

with the assisted listening devices.

Partnering with a local app developer, StageFly emerged. We created an iPhone-based app that would connect to an internal and isolated Wi-Fi signal that was broadcasting a video feed of an ASL interpreter working from the backstage area. This meant that the delivery would be done in such a passive manner that neither the performance nor the audience need to know it was working in the background. And with latency under one second from capture to reception, we did not have to worry about a joke or punchline being lost in transmission.

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Working on the iOS platform has allowed us to expand what we broadcast over the same Wi-Fi channel. We could parallel the ASL Interpreter broadcast with a program audio feed or Descriptive Audio, for those who require an audio enhancement instead of the interpretation. It also allowed us to introduce a second video feed in which we could broadcast a text-based feed, program video feed (image magnification), or even work into a closed caption feed.

Much like everyone else, preferences on how to receive this type of content differ

from person to person, and being able to offer more options allow us to reach more people.

StageFly was successfully launched at the FirstOntario Arts Centre Milton in 2014 and has provided support to a variety of performances, including children's performances, illusionists, community theatre groups, and variety shows.

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While the StageFly technology is functioning, many in the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community do not view theatre and live performance as a viable form of entertainment for them. It has never been accessible for them, apart from the occasional special event or special performance or special seating section. The Deaf and Hard of Hearing community needs to be convinced they belong at the theatre, just like everyone else. And until it does, at the very least it will remain a highly untapped market.

We welcome you to check it out at www.stagefly.ca. StageFly was created by Bill Zeilstra, Technical Director, Theatre Sheridan / Sheridan College, and Sebastian Dwornik, Applied PDA Software. Thank you. ■



Bill Zeilstra is a graduate of Ryerson University and is currently the Technical Director and Head of Lighting with Theatre Sheridan at Sheridan College in Oakville, ON.