

## ENTERTAINMENT

# Soft moments are highlights of Otterbein's 'Children'

By Michael Grossberg  
Dispatch Theater Critic

### REVIEW

*Children of a Lesser God* is more than a contemporary love story about a deaf woman and her hearing teacher.

Mark Medoff's Tony award-winning drama, which opened last night at Otterbein College, explores the difficulties of the deaf, yes. But *Children*, like all great dramas, has universal relevance.

Through its moving and compassionate tale, *Children* highlights the difficulties of communication that we all face. This is a beautifully written play about love, trust, the fear of getting hurt and the courage required to overcome that fear — in short, the human predicament.

Otterbein College's fluent production, the final show of its impressive 1988-89 season, revels in its quieter moments of connection and emotion. Guest director Teri Devlin, Gallery Players' ar-

tistic director, stages *Children* with delicacy on Christopher Clapp's abstract, fluid set.

I can't say enough good things about Tim Deak's robust performance as James Leeds, the unflappable speech therapist who breaks through the angry defenses of Sarah Norman (Zeke Avradopoulos).

An actor of immense charisma and confidence, Deak amply fills the dramatic center and highly reflective mirror of this student production. Deak gives James an appealing humor and resilience that makes us identify with his frustrations — and later, his joy and sorrow.

Deak also carries well the enormous burden that Medoff's script places on his character. As James, Deak must translate his

own sign language as well as Sarah's for the audience. His expansive body language makes this artificial but absolutely necessary stage device seem like a natural extension of James' ebullience.

Stoney Westmoreland and Lori Schubeler are also quite convincing as two deaf students vying for James' or Sarah's attention. As Orin, Westmoreland is wonderfully down-to-earth and forthright. As Lydia, Schubeler glows with a radiant innocence that belies her talent for manipulation.

Also quite good: Cathy Lee Collins, whose icy authority hides years of pain as Sarah's mother, and Cheryl Gaysunas, a well-meaning but clumsy social worker.

In her first major role at Otterbein, Avradopoulos lacks the angry intensity and soulfulness so vital to balance Sarah's withdrawn presence. She does make the most of some playful and

tender scenes with James, but falls short in what should be Sarah's most poignant silences.

Perhaps a deaf actress could have made this part more believable — a possibility stressed by the deaf picketers outside the Campus Center Theatre last night. (The Ohio Association of the Deaf, District 3 (Columbus), is boycotting this production because hearing actors were cast in deaf roles.)

Or perhaps not. Good acting

doesn't depend on the faculties an actor lacks, but the faculties and insights she can bring to a challenging role. If Avradopoulos lost her ability to speak and hear, would that alone make her a convincing Sarah? I think not.

What Avradopoulos, an Otterbein junior, needs is the opportunity to stretch and test her talent. In choosing to stage *Children of a Lesser God*, that's precisely the opportunity that Otterbein's

theater department is offering her — and the rest of its students.

Otterbein College will present *Children of a Lesser God* at 8 tonight through Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday, 8 p.m. May 31 and June 1-4 in the Campus Center Theatre on the Westerville campus. The show is sold out tonight, tomorrow and Saturday. For tickets, call 898-1109.



# Theatre department continues diversity with deaf production

Paul J. Erwin

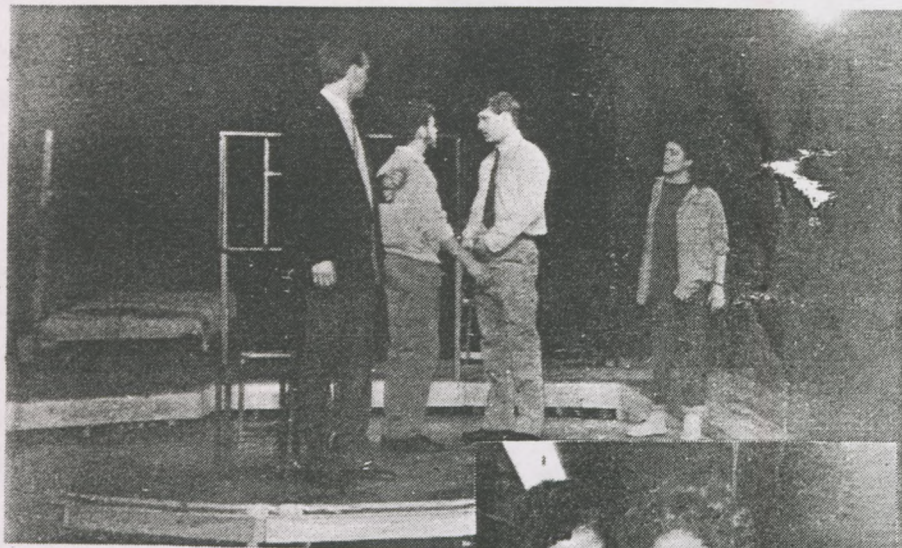
The Otterbein Theatre Department is widely known for its diverse range of productions that have included everything from the gory 'Sweeney Todd' to the compelling 'Quilters.'

'Children of a Lesser God' will continue this tradition as the production, which started yesterday, runs for the next two weeks in the Campus Center Theatre.

'Children' is the story of speech therapist, James Leeds (played by Timothy Deak) who falls in love with his deaf patient Sarah Norma (Zeke Avradopoulos). Their relationship flourishes until Leeds takes Norma away from the deaf school where he teaches. Upset with the change in surroundings, their relationship begins to fall apart.

What makes this production so interesting is that the whole storyline takes place in Leeds' mind. The fact that the cast uses sign language throughout the play also makes it unique.

It took the cast six weeks of three-hour sessions to learn sign language from Chuck Byron, a local deaf teacher. Byron translated the lines for the cast until signing became almost second nature to them.



**'Children of a Lesser God' opened last night and will run until June 4. (At right) Timothy Deak and Zeke Avradopoulos as teacher and student.**

Photos by Hillary Kline

Avradopoulos had no trouble learning sign language but Deak was not as lucky.

"At first I felt useless on the set," said Deak, "I didn't know my lines, so I had to hold my script, but then I couldn't sign because I was holding script and so on."

But that is not the only difficulty Deak had to overcome. Because the entire action and dialogue of the play occurs through the mind of his character, Deak does not leave

the set during the show and is the only one that speaks.

Not only does he have his own lines, but he also translates everything that Avradopoulos' character signs.

'Children of a Lesser God' will begin at 8 p.m. tonight, tomorrow and Saturday as well as June 1-3. On Sunday and June 4, the show will open at 2 p.m. Students receive tickets free with their I.D.





# Otterbein play brings protests, pickets from the deaf <sup>389</sup>

By Margaret Newkirk  
SNP Staff Writer

Ron Emrich was astounded. A woman, walking towards Otterbein College's opening night production of Mark Medoff's *Children of a Lesser God* last week, had taken a protest leaflet from his hand, handed him a note, then crumbled up his leaflet and pitched it.

"This is an educational program, not a professional production," the note read. The words were underlined darkly and punctuated with exclamation points.

Emrich shook his head.

Emrich was one of 10 members of the Ohio Association for the Deaf, on hand to protest Otterbein's decision to produce the play

without deaf actors. The organization is boycotting the production, which opened May 24.

The protesters, some of them with picket signs, lined up along the sidewalk in front of Otterbein's theater. They were not allowed off the sidewalks, representative Martha Sheridan said.

"This play was written for a deaf actress friend of Medoff's," Sheridan said, speaking quickly and signing to an interpreter. "It was a big breakthrough for the deaf community. We feel that doing this play with hearing actors is ineffective and hypocritical."

Medoff wrote *Children of a Lesser God* for a deaf friend, actress Phylis Frelich. In the play's copyright, Medoff stipulates that professional drama companies use deaf actors to play deaf roles. The Otterbein College production, as student theater, does not fall under the copyright stipulation.

Otterbein officials in a prepared statement said the production is educational, not professional, and that it is an opportunity for students to grow both professionally and personally.

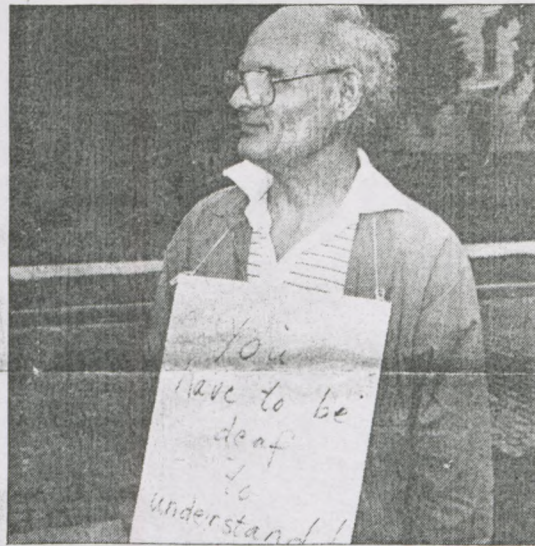
To Sheridan, the difference is splitting hairs.

"Our objection is not a legal one," she said. "It's an ethical one."

"Without educational opportunities, or opportunities in community theater, deaf actors don't have a chance for professional opportunities," Sheridan said.

"What they're doing goes against everything we've worked for for so many years," Sheridan said.

The controversy's political issues are complex. Even Sheridan admits the play broadens hearing people's perceptions of the deaf world, that the play alone is socially relevant.



Robert Braid holds his picket sign reading, "You have to be deaf to understand" at the May 24 protest.



Martha Sheridan and Ron Emrich pass out pamphlets protesting the production of *Children of a Lesser God*.

But creating broader understanding among hearing people is only part of the

play's point, Sheridan said. It may be less important than allowing the deaf to

play themselves in one of the few scripts where that is possible.

"We feel that in many ways this play is about deaf rights and that doing it this way is hypocritical," Sheridan said.

"They have argued that this is an artistic piece of work, that students should get the experience of the world of the deaf," she said. "There is no better way to do that than to use deaf actors."

"There is a monologue at the end of the play where the deaf woman wants to be joined to people, where she says she doesn't want people speaking for her," she said.

"That is exactly what Otterbein is doing," she said. "They're speaking for us."

"Mark Medoff wrote this for his deaf friends," protester Emrich said. "He didn't write it for his hearing friends. He wrote it for deaf people and it's wrong to be doing it this way, whether it's a professional production or not."

Though OAD is boycotting the production, the organization is not necessarily encouraging patrons to avoid it, Sheridan said.

"We're not here to tell people not to come," she said. "We're not trying to censor anybody."

"We just feel we need to counter what this represents, make sure it doesn't happen again," Sheridan said.



# Student: 'Lesser God' opens understanding

By Margaret Newkirk  
SNP Staff Writer

Otterbein College officials answer to criticism of their *Children of a Lesser God* production is that Mark Medoff's script does not require educational productions of the play to use deaf actors and that the play is especially educational for hearing actors.

"We believe the production is important for our students academically," college theater and dance department members said in a prepared statement.

The play allows hearing students to experience a world they would otherwise never know, the statement continues.

Student Tim Deak, cast as speech therapist James

Leeds in the play, would be the first to agree.

Working on the production, he said, "was just incredible. I can't explain it.

"The obvious thing is that I did learn sign language," he said. "And I learned about a style of life that I was ignorant about before."

Deak learned sign language in six weeks. It opened up a new world to him, he said.

"Before this play, I had never come in contact with a deaf person in my life," he said. "I was virtually afraid of deaf people.

"Now, because of this play, I happen to have a very good deaf friend," Deak said.

Deak's new friend is one of three deaf students who

helped Otterbein actors learn sign language. The three watched deaf protesters picket the play opening night, and the two groups debated the play briefly in sign language.

"I spent an evening with him recently and translated a television show," Deak said. "It was the first time I ever translated a show to a deaf person.

"To think that if this play hadn't happened, I would never have had a chance to know this human being."

Deak's interpretation of *Children of a Lesser God* is somewhat different than protester Martha Sheridan's. The play is about deaf rights, "but it's also about how we should work together as a team," he said.

"The protesters have a good point," he said. "But I think they're missing something, like how much I, and people like me, have learned about deaf society. What I've learned is overwhelming.

"It's an experience I will never forget," he said.

# Deaf group protests casting

## Hearing students present 'Children of Lesser God'

By Michael Grossberg  
*Dispatch Theater Critic*

Otterbein College's *Children of a Lesser God* has sparked a controversy.

The Ohio Association of the Deaf, District 3 (Columbus), plans to boycott and picket the student production, which opens Wednesday, because hearing actors have been cast in the roles of deaf characters.

"Let us speak for ourselves," said Martha Sheridan, District 3 representative, in a prepared association statement. "We believe the use of hearing actors in any staging of this play perpetuates a cycle of oppression. (It) renders the play a farce and its message ineffective."

**PLAYWRIGHT MARK** Medoff wrote *Children* for his deaf friend, actress Phyllis Frelich, who won a Tony award for best actress in the 1980 Broadway play. Marlee Matlin won an Oscar for best actress in the 1986 film version. In the script, Medoff asks professional productions to cast deaf or hearing-impaired actors in three pivotal roles.

In Otterbein's non-professional production, Sarah is played by Zele Avradopoulou, who hears.

"The play was written as an artistic work — a beautiful love story," said Ed Vaughan, Otterbein Theater artistic director.

All other roles in the all-student college production are also portrayed by hearing actors: Cathy Lee Collins, Stoney Westmoreland, Lori Schubeler, Matt Bartholomew, Cheryl Gaysunas and Timothy Ryan Deak, as the hearing teacher who falls in love with Sarah.

"We believe the production is important for our

students academically," Otterbein's department of theater and dance said in a prepared statement.

"Students are encouraged to move away from themselves and experience the world of the character," Vaughan said. "*Children of a Lesser God*, written for a hearing audience, brings students to the examination of a world with which they are unfamiliar — that of the hearing impaired."

**ALTHOUGH OTTERBEIN** sought out members of the deaf community as production consultants last year, the association said it declined to help unless Otterbein cast deaf or hearing impaired actors. Otterbein refused.

At Wednesday night's opening and again on May 31, the association's 120-member Columbus chapter plans to picket the performance. A group representing the deaf has bought a block of tickets for the May 31 performance, which will be signed for the hearing impaired.

"We will hold signs on the sidewalk and walk back and forth, but we're not going to block the way," said Charles Owens III, District 3 president.

"Why can't we have deaf actors in deaf roles?" Owens asked. Owens spoke to *The Dispatch* in a telephone conversation signed and translated by his 7-year-old daughter.

Since 1986, *Children* has been staged four times in Columbus, including productions at Players Theatre Columbus, Fort Hayes, Upper Arlington High School and Otterbein's current show.

Players, which staged its central Ohio premiere in 1986, was the only group to cast deaf actors. Sheridan starred as Sarah in the acclaimed production, which sold out.

For Otterbein performance times and ticket information, call 898-1109.

"I support the Ohio Association's right to take a stand, but I would hope they would respect our right to produce an important play without censorship," Vaughan said.



# 'Children' provokes protests

By Hillary Kline

Otterbein's production of "Children of a Lesser God" has been riddled with controversy concerning cast selection.

The Ohio Association of the Deaf, Dis-

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trict 3 (Columbus), plans to picket two performances because the character of Sarah is not played by a deaf actress. The author, Mark Medoff, requested that the part be played by a deaf actress during professional performances.

District 3 representative, Martha Sheridan, said in a prepared statement: "We believe the use of hearing actors in any staging of this play perpetuates a cycle of oppression. (It) renders the play a farce and its message ineffective."

The association is also protesting because they feel that the distribution of free tickets to the deaf community is patronizing as it puts them in a position of passive acceptance by attending a performance where hearing actors "speak" for them.