

# Letters to the editor

Westerville Beacon 5-29-8

## To the Editor:

"For why is all around us here as if some lesser God had made the world but had not force to shape it as he would?" (Tennyson)

The Ohio Association of the Deaf, District 3 (Columbus) is writing to express our opposition to and our anger towards the handling of the Otterbein College Theatre Production of Mark Medoff's "Children of a Lesser God" where hearing actors are cast in the roles of deaf characters. This play, written by Medoff for his deaf friend, actress Phylis Frelich was created to produce an opportunity for a wonderful actress who was deaf. "Children" has been hailed and cherished by the deaf community as a breakthrough giving deaf actors and actresses around the world a rare opportunity to use our talents and to speak out on

issues of great importance to us. OAD District 3 is boycotting this production. We believe that the use of hearing actors in any staging of this play (professional, amateur or for academic credit) perpetuates a cycle of oppression by giving a message to the general public and to the theatre and film community (via audience participation, credits in program books and on resumes and general public relations) that it is an acceptable and appropriate practice. The use of hearing actors for deaf characters in this play, which depicts deaf rights, relationships between deaf and hearing people and our experience renders the play a farce and its message ineffective.

Supporters of this production have argued that the copyright says the author insists deaf actors be used in professional pro-

ductions and this is not a professional production. OAD District 3's position is that in being deprived of amateur or academic experience deaf actors are deprived of the opportunity to reach professional status.

Beginning over a year ago, representatives from Otterbein began calling members of the deaf community and the theatre community seeking consultants on the cultural and linguistic aspects of the production. They were met time and time again with opposition to the casting of hearing actors in the roles of deaf characters and refusal to "consult" based on this opposition. Otterbein was given options for joint productions using deaf actors, but chose to ignore them. If Otterbein or any educational institution intends to only cast their students they should select

plays consistent with their student population and not exploit other minority groups.

Furthermore, OAD District 3 is opposed to and offended by "free tickets" to this production being given out to the deaf community. This puts deaf people in the position of passively accepting second class citizenship by patronizing a production which is perpetuating the cycle of oppression of people who are deaf.

Since 1986, this play has been staged 4 times in Columbus; by Players Theatre, Fort Hayes, Upper Arlington High School and now Otterbein. Only Players had the good sense to do it right. It is difficult to believe that even after the success of Marlee Matlin and Phylis Frelich whose professional performances in their roles as Sarah Norman brought

them an Academy Award and a Tony Award, even after the success of the Gallaudet University student protest resulting in the selection of a deaf university president, the recent selection of Dr. Robert Davila to serve as assistant secretary in the U.S. Office of Special Education and the sell out success of the Players Theatre Columbus Production of this play using local deaf actors, hearing people continue to turn deaf ears to us. There is simply no excuse for Otterbein to perpetuate the frustration which Medoff so eloquently expresses in Sarah's monologue. . .

"Well, I want to be joined to other people, but for all my life, other people have spoken to me. She says; she

means; she wants. As if there were no I. As if there were no one in here who could understand. Until you let me be an individual, an I, just as you are, you will never truly be able to come inside my silence and know me. And until you can do that, I will never let myself know you. Until that time we cannot be joined. We cannot share a relationship."

Let us speak for ourselves, we're tired of the "Lesser Gods."

**Charles Owen III**  
President  
Ohio Association of the Deaf District 3  
**Martha Sheridan**  
Senior Regional Delegate  
Ohio Association of the Deaf  
District 3



# Editorial

*Public opinion*

## OUR READERS WRITE

### Deaf organization expresses opposition to Otterbein's 'Children of a Lesser God'

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This play, written by Medoff for his deaf friend, actress Phyllis Frelich, was created to produce an opportunity for a wonderful actress who was deaf.

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The use of hearing actors for deaf characters in this play, which depicts deaf rights, and relationships between deaf and hearing people, in our experience renders the play a farce and its message ineffective.

Supporters of this production have argued that the copy-right says the author insists deaf actors be used in "professional" productions and this is not a professional production.

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We feel if Otterbein or any educational institution intends to cast only their students they should select plays consistent with their student population and not exploit other minority groups.

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of Special Education and the sell out success of the Players Theatre Columbus production of this play using local deaf actors — hearing people continue to turn deaf ears to us.

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Let us speak for ourselves; we're tired of the "Lesser Gods".

Martha Sheridan

Senior Regional Delegate

Ohio Association of the Deaf  
District 3

Charles Owen II

President

Ohio Association for the Deaf  
District 3

# \* Letters to the Editor

*Westerville Beacon 6-12-89*

## To the Editor:

Otterbein College should be complimented for asking their students to perform Children of a Lesser God. The drama requires the students to learn what it means to be deaf or hard of hearing. They should also be praised for asking several deaf people to be consultants for them. The students in the drama de-

partment play elderly people, crippled people, homeless people, blind people and all other sorts of individuals in which they are required to re-

search the character. It is a tremendous awareness for them to learn about the hidden handicap of deafness. The Sertoma Club of Westerville should be praised for their great in-

terest in helping the deaf community by providing free tickets to elderly residents of Columbus Colony, students at the Comprehensive Program for the Deaf and Ohio School for the Deaf, and to members of Holy Cross Lutheran Church of the Deaf so that many deaf can enjoy the rich culture of a theatrical performance. The community should be proud of

Otterbein for taking up such a challenging play and of the Sertoma Club for the tremendous job they are doing to support projects for the deaf that would go unfunded. Our hats are off to you.

Sincerely,  
Rev. Donald E. Leber  
for the Church Council  
Holy Cross Lutheran  
Church of the Deaf

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## Deaf reporter might help 'Dispatch' expand coverage

*The Dispatch* has printed two articles by theater critic Michael Grossberg regarding the Ohio Association of the Deaf's protest of Otterbein College's production of the play *Children of a Lesser God*. One article contained a defense of Otterbein's student performers. Yet, the deaf protesters were not criticizing the actors' abilities; they were expressing their desire that deaf people have the opportunity to speak for themselves.

Playwright Mark Medoff made his casting preferences clear; members of the local deaf community have expressed their feelings as well.

I am concerned that using people who have a few lessons in sign vocabulary perpetuates the misconception that learning a few signs is the equivalent of learning the language. Mastering a language requires years of practice.

I regret the scarcity of media coverage of this and other issues raised by the deaf community. Early in May, deaf people from all over Ohio came to the Statehouse to support House Bill 216, the sign language omnibus bill. There was no media coverage of that event.

*The Dispatch* has employed deaf workers and has provided teletype phone access. The next step is equal coverage of events that affect the deaf community. Perhaps it is time to hire a deaf reporter.

Jean Stuntz  
Columbus



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**Hearing people can learn  
from playing roles of deaf**

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I am deaf. I have two hearing-impaired sisters. They can hear some and speak. I was raised in the deaf community and have lived there all of my life.

I read "Deaf group protests casting" (*Dispatch*, May 23). Hearing actors at Otterbein College have opportunities to learn different things from deafness. Also they probably can become interpreters or drama teachers in deaf schools in the future.

Martha Sheridan and Charles Owen III grew up in the hearing community. They probably know little about the deaf community. I disagree with their protest of the casting at Otterbein. Terri Devlin, Otterbein Theatre artistic director, asked me to work with and help teach the actors American sign language. I feel really interested and motivated to teach them how to sign. I know the actors are excited to be learning sign language.

It doesn't matter if actors or actresses are deaf or hearing in the play of any high school or college production; there is a whole group of hearing people who understand much more about deafness, deaf culture and language. Isn't that a better way to effect change? Education works better than protesting.

If the Ohio Association of the Deaf, District 3 (Columbus), thinks only deaf actors should be used, what about other plays? Should *Miracle Worker* have used a deaf-blind actress? Should Dustin Hoffman give back his Oscar because he is not autistic? Can deaf actors do hearing roles?

If high schools and colleges can't use their own actors to play other roles, how can the actors learn? Are they expected to only play teen-agers?

If the deaf community wants to protest, let these people protest the movie *See No Evil, Hear No Evil*, which is an insult to deaf and blind people.

Ronald Harmount Jr.  
Columbus

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**Production offensive because  
hearing actors cast as deaf**

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Charles Owen III, president  
OAD District III  
Martha Sheridan  
Senior regional director  
Ohio Association of the Deaf  
Columbus

## Struggles of the hearing-impaired go unnoticed, unappreciated

To the Editor:

I join the hearing-impaired community in its boycott of "Children of a Lesser God." This play is about and for the hearing-impaired population, who have been excluded from this presentation.

No one knows the struggles of the hearing-impaired until one has lived in their world. They are discriminated against, ignored, and mainly forgotten.

I spent six months working on a congressional campaign in Rochester, New York, which has the highest [percentage] per capita of hearing-impaired population. Our campaign had a hearing-impaired coordinator, with whom I worked closely, and

who taught me sign language. I also met the president of Gallaudet at a hearing-impaired convention and learned about the struggles associated with being hearing-impaired.

While I understand that Otterbein presents plays as a learning experience for the students, the bigger issue of the struggles of the hearing-impaired needs to be addressed. By refusing to cast a hearing-impaired performer, the play suffers and the students lose out on a wondrous opportunity to learn about the hearing-impaired community.

Patricia A. Fott  
Class of 1987