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MISSOULA--

By Nick Baker  
UM Rural Institute on Disabilities

Kirk Hash’s fingers fly and his hands flutter about as he tells his friends—in American Sign Language—how much he enjoyed The University of Montana—Missoula’s production of "The Grapes of Wrath."

"The emotion tore at my heart," he signed after a recent performance in the Montana Theatre. "And the acting was wonderful. I couldn’t believe it when the actor dove into the ‘river’ on stage and splashed water all over."

Playgoing is a new experience for Kirk, a Drummond native and UM freshman who is profoundly deaf, and for many of the other 25 members of Montana’s deaf community who were in the audience that night. They were able to enjoy the play because a team of professional sign language interpreters from UM’s Disability Services for Students translated dialogue, sound effects and even music into American Sign Language, the language understood and preferred by the majority of Montanans who are deaf.

UM has provided American Sign Language interpreters for one performance of each play presented by the Department of Drama/Dance in its 1995-96 series. The opportunity to see and "hear" live theater has drawn Montanans who are deaf to Missoula from Great Falls, Helena and Kalispell--in
spite of nasty weather.

Interpreters Denise May and Debbie Howard were welcomed by the cast as fellow thespians. Throughout the performance, May and Howard stood before the audience under a spotlight at stage right. They were on stage longer than any of the play’s speaking cast.

The two interpreters studied the script, memorized cues, attended rehearsals, created "name signs" for the play’s characters, blocked out ways to effectively communicate lines spoken by five or six on-stage actors, and, of course, dressed for the performance—in basic black to provide a background against which their hands could be easily read.

"It’s some of the hardest interpreting I’ve done," said May, a nationally certified interpreter who has 15 years of American Sign Language experience. "Not only do we have to remember who we’re speaking for, and don’t forget we’re interpreting so we lag behind the spoken lines and most of the action takes place behind us, but we have to be ready for the unpredictable—the ad lib that covers a forgotten line, the missed cue or the prop that doesn’t work."

During The Grapes of Wrath performance, May and Howard had to cope with an on-stage campfire that wouldn’t go out on cue. ("Some fires just won’t go out," an actor improvised; rain that should have sprinkled on stage wouldn’t fall. May interpreted to cover the problems.)

Many theater companies throughout the United States provide sign interpreters for their performances, and the number is increasing steadily, said Mary Morrison, UM’s deaf/hard-of-hearing specialist. "That’s largely because the Americans with Disabilities Act guarantees access for people with disabilities to public performances," she said.

When the ADA was passed in 1988, the deaf community began requesting interpreters for live
performances and in some cases the "extra" person on stage made directors uncomfortable. "After all," Morrison said, "we were a new thread that the director had to weave into the play's fabric, and some were not as gracious about working with us as they might have been."

That has changed, and UM is leading Montana in providing cultural variety for students and others in the community with disabilities. "The drama/dance department has been wonderful," Morrison said, and "(UM President) George Dennison and UM's administration have been very supportive of our efforts to make all our cultural events accessible."

After the play, the audience--hearing and deaf--expressed their delight at having seen the play on stage and in American Sign Language. "I loved being able to look over and see how ideas look in sign," one hearing woman said. "It added tremendously to my enjoyment of the play."

Morrison, her interpreters and friends were gathered in the Montana Theatre lobby when Kirk came running out of the auditorium after the play. "It's raining, it's raining," he signed. "The stage crew pulled out a handkerchief that was plugging the rain pipe and made it rain."

"It's great to see Kirk this excited," Morrison said. "He's so bright, and every new experience is like a door opening to a new world for him."

Contact: Mary Morrison, 243-4584. The next interpreted performance in the UM theater series is "More Fun than Bowling" at 8 p.m. Friday, April 26.

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