

RE:/AWAKENINGS/ KIND OF ALASKA  
NY Live Arts/Live Ideas  
Director's Note

In 1989 Oliver Sacks published *Seeing Voices* which stirred another kind of awakening. In his preface Sacks opens by saying: "Three years ago I knew nothing of the situation of the deaf, and never imagined that it could cast light on so many realms, above all, on the realm of language".

Divided into three parts: The Deaf World, Thinking in Sign and The Revolution of the Deaf, Sacks gives us a glimpse into the history of SIGN, how it has developed and the devastating affects of the Milan Conference of 1880 in which Alexander Graham Bell out of ignorant prejudice vociferously argued for and won the removal of sign language education for the Deaf in schools, affectively wiping out a language that had been in development for a hundred years;

In part two, Sacks explores the nature of language by referencing Noam Chomsky's paradigm-shifting studies, "Syntactic Structures", "Cartesian Linguistics" and *Language of Mind*, in which Chomsky proposes his theory that language is innate, lying dormant until it is made active through human interaction and culture, connecting it to the pre-lingual deaf. Sacks goes on to confirm that language comes before thought and that sign language is indeed a unique language, complete with its own spatial grammatical rules and syntax revealing an extremely articulate language capable of expressing the most complex ideas and abstract thoughts. In the third and final part, "The Revolution of the Deaf", Sacks discusses the historical and cultural breakthrough at Gallaudet in 1988 that led to the "Deaf President Now" uprising which was, a major turning point not only for Deaf culture in America but around the world.

What you are seeing here tonight is in itself historic. It is the first time *A Kind of Alaska*, written by a man famous for his use of language and silence, has ever been translated into sign language and it is a rarity, even in Deaf theatre, for an ASL production to stand alone, in

the fullness of its language, with no simultaneous translation either voiced or captioned.

And there is something else. Building upon Sacks' quote: "I had now to see them in a new, 'ethnic light,' as people with a distinctive language, sensibility, and culture of their own." we have decided in our version that all three characters are deaf. For some of you reading this, you may think this to be an obvious choice - I assure you it is not but in doing so we are attempting to parallel the complexities of the politics of Deaf culture and sign language since the Milan Conference.

Deborah has been asleep for thirty years. Those thirty years in the history of the development and ownership of sign language are monumental. In our translation, we have chosen to weave into our translation three forms of sign language: home sign, ASL and poetic/expressive (ASLAN). In doing so, you are also seeing/reading the embodiment of the historical development of a language and hopefully understanding that deafness is not simply a condition or human deficit, but another way of being in the world. As Dr. Sacks says, "...the Deaf have something to teach us."

-Kim Weild, Director