

**THE UNIVERSAL DRUM**

- a dramatic, visual poem with drum accompaniment

by

Willy Conley

The Bethesda Academy of Performing Arts' Imagination Stage commissioned this performance piece for the Deaf Access Company in 2002. The goal was to offer something quick and simple to set up on tour to perform before deaf and hearing audiences that would express the essence of the company. It was first performed at Imagination Stage's 24<sup>th</sup> Annual Benefit held at the Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School on November 23, 2002. It was directed by Lisa Agogliati; the sign master/visual dramaturge was Donna Salamoff; and the music composers were Rachel and Henry Cross. Members of the Deaf Access Company were:

Alexis Beveridge  
Anna Bittencourt  
Annie Dillon  
Sarah Gumpert  
Aaron Fields  
Julie Miller

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An actor comes on stage rolling a short barrel, tube, and/or a large bowl. A few people come on with a flexible drum head and use it like a mini-trampoline, flinging up some object that's easy to bounce. Another person can bring on the fasteners or whatever is needed to secure the drum head over the barrel. Some could come in with bongos and tambourines. Others could use their own bodies as drumming instruments (slapping the thighs or chests, clapping hands, stomping the feet, or popping the hand against the open mouth). All of this could be done in a fun, entertaining way. One by one, the ensemble develops an entrancing beat which leads to a funky dance.

As the dance dies down, members of the ensemble narrate this poem in American Sign Language while others voice in English, perhaps all choreographed to a background drumbeat. Specific percussive beats can be used to underscore or punctuate parts of the poem.

Drum.  
*(fingerspell)*  
 D-R-U-M.

Musical instrument  
 of two membranes,  
 called "heads"  
 stretched over a frame  
 lacing binds tightly  
 over the frame

Drums  
 found all over the world  
 since 6000 B.C.  
 in almost every culture  
 the most precious of  
 all musical instruments

In Africa and Europe  
 certain drums symbolize royalty

In Asia, Russia, and  
 Native American tribes  
 drums are used for ceremonial dances

In Deaf culture, a drum  
is the one musical instrument  
that reaches the heart  
of a deaf person

Drums are universal  
creating strength and solidarity  
reflecting the rhythms of life:  
the dawning of a new day  
the setting of night

Trees swaying in the breeze  
The rumble of thunderstorms  
A door slamming  
People walking  
Hearts beating  
Rhythms of life

Strike the instrument  
with the hands  
and we can create

*(ensemble acts out each of the following creations)*

Music  
    Rhythms  
        Signals  
            Marches  
                Dances  
                    Conversations

A drum can express  
who you are  
and who we are

I'm deaf and I live  
in a Deaf world

I'm hearing and I live  
in a hearing world

*(Deaf and hearing actor, simultaneously)*

I'm Deaf and I live  
in both worlds

I'm hearing and I live  
in both worlds

Like the drum  
we are  
woven together  
in one place –

Like the two drum heads fastened  
to the frame  
tight  
our hands reach out  
to both deaf and hearing worlds

Using our drum to communicate  
we sent our message to you...

*(Deaf and hearing actor, simultaneously)*

Look

Listen

to the rhythm of our family

Deaf...

hearing

equal  
connected  
united