

Which Way to Mecca?

The NoHo Arts District is striving to show that over the hill has never been more vital.

by Les Spindle

Deaf West Theatre

Deaf West is the newest kid on the NoHo block, having moved to Lankershim Blvd. earlier this year from their Heliotrope Drive facility in Los Angeles. In 1991, current artistic director Ed Waterstreet, along with his wife, Linda Bove, actress Phyllis Frelich and her husband Bob Steinberg, founded this nonprofit organization. According to Waterstreet: "There are several different kinds of deaf theatres in the country—from community theatre to touring companies, about 10 altogether. Deaf West is a residential theatre company, and the only one that is deaf-run."

The group has garnered continuing critical praise and awards over the years, but two productions this season were particularly well received: Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* and the Lionel Bart musical *Oliver!*, which Waterstreet said "is the first deaf musical to be done, as far as I know. There's so much I've learned from this experience, as a deaf person doing a musical, and I'm looking forward to doing more. Last night, we completely sold out. And it was mostly hearing audiences. There's a huge fascination with sign language in the hearing community. The deaf community is also growing. Our deaf audience started with five percent in 1991, and our audiences are now composed of about 75 percent hearing and 25 percent deaf patrons. We're training an entire generation of deaf audiences who have not been exposed to theatre before."

The theatre recently received a \$4 million grant from the Department of Education. Waterstreet continued, "Now we are hiring a huge staff. Part of our mandate from this grant is to establish a national tour, which we will do in 2001. We are also having a summer school conservatory program this year. It's a four-week intensive professional training, and includes deaf artists from around the country. We have both deaf and hearing instructors, including Mark Medoff, who is writing a new play for us for next season. Marlee Matlin will speak, and we've also invited several hearing actors and celebrities as guest lecturers. As for future expansion plans, our landlord has an additional 2,400 square feet that he is now occupying, but will let us use in a year and a half. We'll be able to expand beyond our little 60-seat theatre to 99 seats. Then we will add workshop space and probably even a little Starbucks coffeehouse."



Suanne Spoke (back), Terrylene, and Troy Kotsur in Deaf West's *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

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