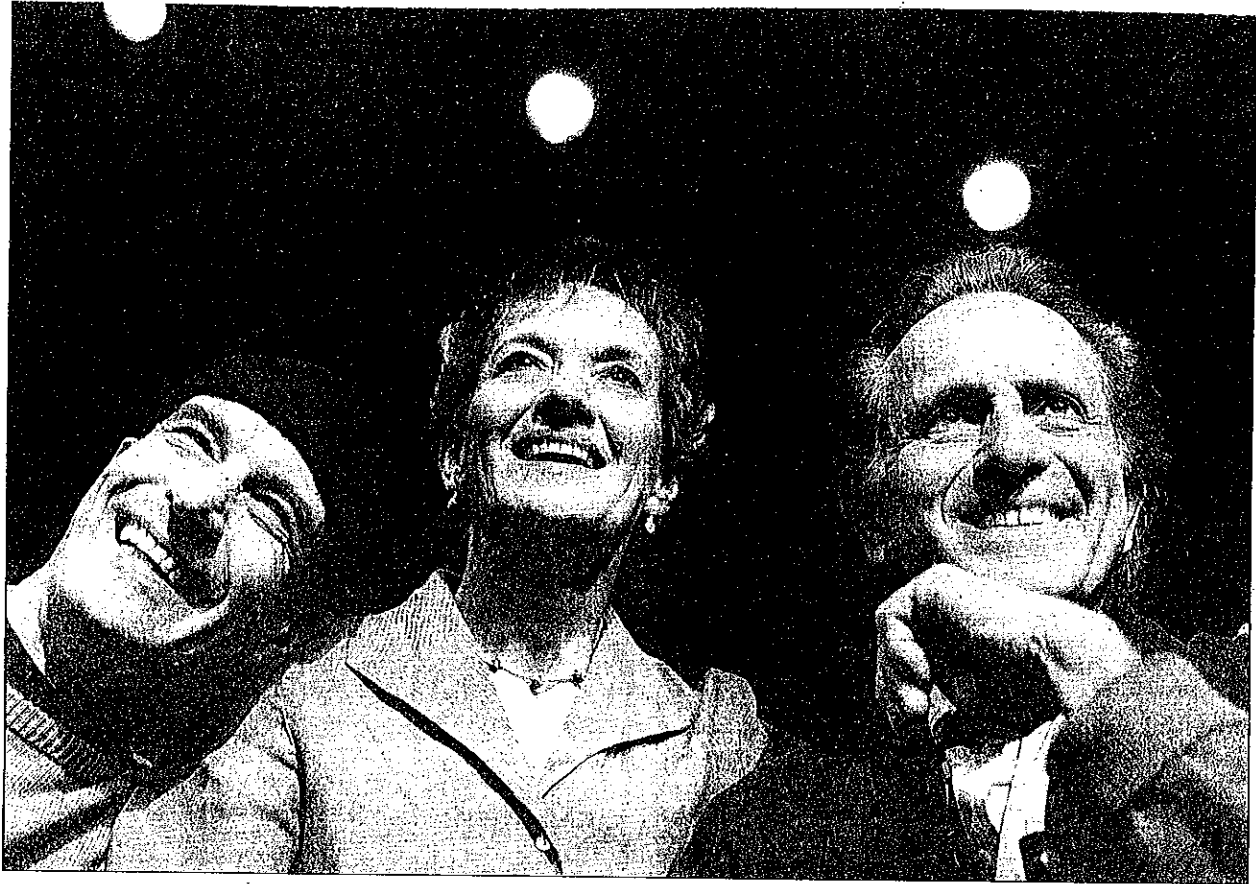


# Los Angeles Times

MONDAY, APRIL 23, 2001  
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WALLY SKALIJ / Los Angeles Times

"Road to a Revolution" playwright Mark Medoff, right, with Phyllis Frelich and her husband, Robert Steinberg, at Deaf West Theatre.

## A Revolution They Helped Inspire

Phyllis Frelich and Mark Medoff team again to document a key moment for deaf Americans.

By DON SHIRLEY

As Phyllis Frelich grew up in the small town of Devils Lake, N.D., going to Gallaudet College in Washington was one of life's greatest aspirations—just as it was for many other young, deaf Americans.

"The dream was to get out of wherever you were and to meet and mingle with the cream of the deaf world, all together in one place," Frelich recalled—and that place was Gallaudet, the most important school for deaf students in America, known as "the castle on the hill."

Frelich achieved her goal,

graduating from Gallaudet in 1967. She went on to become one of the college's most famous alumni, thanks to her role in Mark Medoff's "Children of a Lesser God," for which she won the Tony Award for best Broadway actress in 1980.

The subject of Frelich and Medoff's latest collaboration is closely related to Gallaudet itself. In "Road to a Revolution," currently playing at Deaf West Theatre in North Hollywood, a transformative event in the history of Gallaudet makes waves many miles from Washington, D.C., as well.

When Frelich was a student at Gallaudet, little notice was taken of the fact that the president of

the college was not deaf. That's the way it had always been. But several years later, people started to notice. When Gallaudet began looking for a new president in the late '80s, pressure mounted to name someone who was deaf.

Nonetheless, in March 1988, the school's board, presented with two finalists for the job who were deaf and one who was hearing, picked the one who could hear.

In one of the most audible protests ever by deaf Americans, the Gallaudet students and faculty rose up and blocked the gates to the school, shutting it down and preventing the newly appointed president from set-

ting foot on the campus. After several tense days, the president resigned and the board reversed course, selecting I. King Jordan as the first deaf president in the school's 124-year history. The non-deaf chairwoman of the board also resigned and was replaced by a deaf man.

"We joke that this revolution was the deaf civil rights movement compressed into one week," said Robert Steinberg, Frelich's non-deaf husband, interpreter and noted set designer.

The 1988 uprising at Gallaudet looked like possible movie material to Medoff, whose "Children of a Lesser God" had already been made into a Hollywood film. **Please see 'Revolution,' Page 87**

**"ROAD TO A REVOLUTION,"** Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood. **Dates:** Thursdays-Saturdays, 8 p.m.; Saturdays, 2 p.m.; Sundays, 3 p.m. **Ends May 27. Price:** \$20. **Phone:** (818) 762-2773; (818) 762-2782 (TTY).

# The Toluca Times

and Canyon Crier

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• By Pat Taylor •

I've got a lot to tell you about this week, so grab a coffee... and settle in!

**ROAD TO A REVOLUTION**

For years, I've encouraged you to catch the unique and powerful, artistic work at Deaf West.

Always high quality, innovative, deeply moving, the performances of deaf actors and their translators, are a wonder to behold! This play is no exception

to my strong feelings for their brilliance in presenting works that equally touch both deaf and

hearing audiences. However this time, I found the style and format of the play to be a bit more confusing to follow than usual. Their choice for what-



Photo by Ed Kreiger  
Deanne Bray, Phyllis Frelich, Samantha Schwartz, in Mark Medoff's new play, "Road to a Revolution."

ever reason, to have multi-translators for each deaf actor, and often not even gender alike, made our job to comprehend, more difficult. Still...though laborious, it is a wonderful true story, with strong, heartfelt performances throughout. Written and cleverly directed by Mark

Medoff, (who also wrote "Children of a Lesser God") it tells of a "happening" in 1988, involving the revolt of 2,000 deaf students at Gallaudet University. Time to elect

yet another hearing President, at the 124 year old deaf college, the students came together in

protest, chanting "Deaf President...NOW!" Our journey involves 8 such people, on the road to Gallaudet, to "speak" their minds. A heavy subject, handled

• Nite Lights •

here with great compassion and plenty of humor, all of the performances were awesome! Three inspiring actresses held the lead roles...three generations in a family with personal issues to deal with. World renowned deaf actress Phyllis Frelich, FLAWLESSLY depicts Edna, a grandmother who takes over, and drives 7 others on their emotional trip to the college. As her daughter, (a journalist who has turned her back on the deaf community) Deanne Bray (partially hearing) gave a powerful, dynamic performance, and Samantha Schwartz (hearing) as Edna's Granddaughter was also wonderful! A Burbank High School student, this is her stage debut, and we just loved her! Starkly interesting set, by Robert Steinberg, and onstage cellist, Corey Saldana, both added greatly to the mood of the piece. Running thru May 27<sup>th</sup>. Deaf West, 5112 Lankershim in NoHo. For seats and showtimes call (818) 762-2773 or (818) 762-2782 (TTY) "

# REVIEWS

## ROAD TO A REVOLUTION at Deaf West Theatre

Reviewed by Les Spindle

No playwright has done more to dramatize the deaf experience than Mark Medoff, whose previous collaborations with the brilliant deaf actress Phyllis Frelich have provided us with sensitive and powerful portraits of this often misunderstood culture. Among the four prior efforts emerging from this duo's fortuitous alliance, this critic has viewed two: the Tony- and Oscar-winning *Children of a Lesser God* and the Odyssey Theatre's eloquent 1998 mounting of *Gila*. In the world premiere production of Medoff's ambitious new work, *Road to a Revolution*, the

results seem less cogent than in past efforts, though the piece evokes indelible moments of humor and lyricism. The strongest suit of the diffuse narrative, set against a watershed event in deaf history, is its sweet spirit of optimism and dignity, enhanced by joyous performances.

The aforementioned historical event is the 1988 student uprising at the then-124-year-old Gallaudet University, a higher-learning facility for the deaf. The students organized en masse to successfully protest the appointment of a hearing president, feeling that it was high time a deaf leader held the post. Centered around three generations of a dysfunctional family, Medoff's fictionalized tale tells of a spiritual journey of family and friends as they travel from their Santa Fe home to the Washington, D.C., university to support the revolt. They encounter culture-clash issues along the way, as well as various challenges of dignity, honesty, family loyalty, and broken dreams. While the sundry conflicts of the eight primary characters are interesting, most are too sketchily developed; thus, the cumulative effect is less cohesive than intended.

Thanks to Medoff's graceful direction and the warmhearted, full-bodied characterizations, this is nonetheless an enjoyable road trip. A mix of hearing and deaf actors brings aural and visual poetry to the proceedings, with vocal line readings interpreted to sign language, and vice versa. The ever-astonishing Frelich delivers an expressive, moving performance as the strong-willed deaf matriarch, Edna, long ago deserted by her abusive hearing husband. She is in bitter conflict with her hard-of-hearing journalist daughter Gerri (empathetically played by Deanne Bray). Though the source of their antagonism is less clearly delineated than it could be, the



photo by Ed Krueger

Quiet riot: Phyllis Frelich, Samantha Schwartz, Deanne Bray in *Road to a Revolution*.

controlling Edna appears to be proud of her daughter's accomplishments while being somewhat jealous of her independence and easy assimilation into the hearing culture. Caught between mother and daughter is Gerri's hearing daughter, Tina (the delightful Samantha Schwartz), a talented cellist, straddling the fence between different cultures.

Other characters, all superbly portrayed, include angry activists such as Hayes (Jevon Whetter), a chip-on-the-shoulder deaf basketball coach, and Joshua (Alex Vasquez), the deaf youth whose parents abandoned him, as well as middle-of-the-road personalities such as the interpreter Carla (Jennifer Snipstad) and the photographer Felix (Alejandro Furth), both hearing. Rounding out the main characters is the deaf Nathaniel (C.J. Jones), a longtime family friend who joins the journey midway. Jones' exuberant, animated performance is at its best displaying amazing mimicry in a hilarious one-man parody of Western films. Another highlight in the often amusing script is the sequence when Edna and her van-full of travelers outsmart a cop who pulls them over to issue a traffic ticket.

Design credits are first-rate, including Robert Steinberg's stark but versatile set, Stephen W. Wallace's ambient lighting, Brad Ellis' sound effects, and Christal Weatherly's costumes. Medoff's new work is uplifting and fun. With some judicious beefing-up, it could be much, much more.

*"Road to a Revolution," presented by and at Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., N. Hollywood. Thurs.-Sat. 8 p.m., Sat. 2 p.m., Sun. 3 p.m. Apr. 20-May 27. \$15-20. (818) 762-2773, (818) 762-2782 (TTY).*

**BACKSTAGE**  
 THE ACTORS  
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Los Angeles Times



FRIDAY  
APRIL 27, 2001  
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# Calendar

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

FRIDAY, APRIL 27, 2001

## 'Revolution' Mixes Family's Story With Deaf Activism

### Theater Beat

By F. KATHLEEN FOLEY  
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Mark Medoff's "Road to a Revolution" at Deaf West Theatre dramatizes a milestone in deaf activism, the 1988 student uprising at Gallaudet University, the nation's preeminent school for the deaf in Washington, D.C. When a hearing president was chosen over a qualified deaf candidate, deaf students arose in indignation—a headline-grabbing protest that resulted in a historic victory for deaf rights.

More an emotional grail than an actual setting, Gallaudet is the political backdrop against which Medoff's on-the-road drama unfolds. The characters—a contingent from the New Mexico School for the Deaf in Santa Fe—don't actually arrive in Washington until the play ends. The real focus is the intergenerational conflict that plays out en route among the deaf Edna (Phyllis Frelich), her hearing-impaired daughter Gerri (Deanne Bray), and Gerri's 13-year-old

hearing daughter, Tina (Samantha Schwartz).

Gerri is at odds with Edna for playing the passive victim with her domineering husband, Gerri's father. Edna is upset with Gerri for turning her back on the deaf cause. And Tina blames Gerri for their family's recent breakup, which has so painfully dislocated both their lives.

Not to worry. Once on the road—ingeniously evoked by Robert Steinberg's multileveled switchback set—the battling women settle comfortably into couples with strictly appropriate men. And, of course, like any good sitcom, their prickly issues have been neatly resolved before the final fade-out.

Medoff, who also directs, sets the most obvious course for his lumbering vehicle. An amiable cast struggles, often successfully, to lighten the load of stilted language and unwieldy exposition. As in all Deaf West productions, the actors sign, or speak, or sometimes do both. Standouts include Jevon Whetter, who plays a deaf athletics

coach aboil with rage at the hearing world, and C.J. Jones as a jocular clown who has adored Edna since childhood. But it is the vibrant Frelich, whose association with Medoff goes back to her 1980 Tony turn in "Children of a Lesser God," who brings direction to this desultory excursion.

• "Road to a Revolution," Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood. Thursdays-Fridays, 8 p.m.; Saturdays, 2 and 8 p.m.; Sundays, 3 p.m. Ends May 27. \$20. (818) 762-2773, (818) 762-2782 (TTY). Running time: 2 hours, 20 minutes.



ED KREIGER

Phyllis Frelich, left, Samantha Schwartz and Deanne Bray in "Road to a Revolution." Family conflict is set against a backdrop of deaf activism.

L.A. LIFE

# WEEKEND

DAILY NEWS • FRIDAY • APRIL 27, 2001

## Rhetoric aside, 'Road' strikes a successful tone

By **Evan Henerson**  
Theater Critic

As students at the nation's foremost university for the deaf effectively shut down the school in an act of protest over the appointment of a hearing president, a delegation from New Mexico packs up a rickety bus and heads east. Each passenger has his or her own journey to complete. Each has a connection — symbolic or otherwise — to the revolution

**REVIEW** taking place at Gallaudet University.

Whether they actually arrive in Washington, D.C., in time to be part of the Gallaudet uprising is beyond the point. The road trip is a journey of understanding — between hearing and deaf, between mothers and daughters, between a generation of activists and their role models. "Road to a Revolution," the new play by Mark Medoff premiering at Deaf West Theater in NoHo, is a

bumpy ride. To a certain extent, it's supposed to be.

Medoff, who also directs the production, has driven this road before, most notably in his Tony Award-winning play (later a movie) "Children of a Lesser God." It's no accident that Phyllis Frelich, for whom he wrote "Children," is "Road's" stabilizing force. She's the bus driver, the character who spans different deaf perspectives, but who can benefit from wisdom herself.

Frelich is hardly alone on stage. Eight characters have stories to tell, points to make. That's quite a bit for a playwright and an audience to juggle, and "Road to a Revolution" doesn't have the breadth to accommodate all of them. The play occasionally feels messy and unwieldy.

Using the 1988 protest over the appointment of Elisabeth Ann Zinser as its backdrop, Medoff and associate director Robert Steinberg have crafted a

story of three generations of women who don't share common ground. Edna Basker (Frelich) is cautious, an "old school" deaf person, afraid of making waves. Her partially deaf daughter Gerri (Deanne Bray), who shares Edna's home, is a journalist who doesn't want preferential treatment and openly resents those who do. Gerri's 13-year-old daughter Tina (Samantha Schwartz), nursing bitterness over her parents' split and her mom's frequent inattentiveness, doesn't entirely understand either of the women in her life.

The Gallaudet developments bring every type of feeling out into the open. Spurred by an angry basketball coach (Jevon Whetter), New Mexico School for the Deaf sends an unofficial delegation to Gallaudet to join the revolution, and Edna is the only one insured to drive the bus. With Gerri taking a vacation, Edna takes Tina with her, along with Coach Hayes, one of

his players (Alex Vasquez), the school's interpreter Carla (Jennifer Snipstad) and Nathaniel (C.J. Jones), an old friend of Edna's.

Meanwhile, Gerri, who initially turned down her editor's assignment to cover Gallaudet — making her a journalist with truly rotten instincts — changes her mind and hitches a ride on Edna's bus, her photographer and potential love interest Felix (Alejandro Furth) in tow.

Medoff makes very efficient use of what could have been an over-crowded stage. Once you get into the rhythm, there should be no difficulty figuring out who is speaking. "Revolution" circles back to Edna, making us see why this is a character worth understanding. When this happens, Frelich, who can do more with her hands and face than most actors can with their entire package, takes over, and "Road to a Revolution" feels like it's headed somewhere after all.

### "ROAD TO A REVOLUTION"

**Where:** Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood.

**When:** 8 p.m. Thursday and Friday, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturday, 3 p.m. Sunday; through May 27.

**Tickets:** \$15 to \$20. Call (818) 762-2773 or (818) 762-2782.

**Our rating:** ★★★

# Making their voices heard

## Theater artists interpret the deaf experience

By Evan Henerson  
Staff Writer

When he first met Phyllis Frelich, playwright Mark Medoff learned there wasn't exactly a plethora of roles for deaf actors or actresses, no matter what their range or abilities.

That was back in the mid-1970s. Medoff, who had never seen Frelich's act, nor, in his words "had anything remotely resembling a conversation with a deaf person," decided to write a role for Frelich, already an established actor with the National Theater for the Deaf.

The play was "Children of a Lesser God," which ended up taking Frelich to Broadway and earned her a Tony award. The partnership between Medoff, Frelich and Robert Steinberg — the director and set designer who is also Frelich's husband — has since continued and flourished.

And while her career has been busy, more than two decades later, ask Frelich the same question and she'll give you much the same answer she gave Medoff.

Good roles for deaf actors? "I'd have to say that there are still not many," says Frelich during an interview with Steinberg at Deaf West Theater in North Hollywood, where Medoff's new play, "Road to a Revolution," recently opened starring Frelich. "The plays that Mark has written for me I can count on the fingers of one hand. I don't know of anyone else who is writing deaf characters. All these years later, it's still a struggle."

Agrees Medoff: "Sadly, there are not a lot of opportunities, and Phyllis is as talented and as brilliant as anyone I've ever had the privilege to work with. Marlee Matlin (who starred in the film version of 'Children of a Lesser God') has become sort of the de facto deaf actress, and there is no de facto male deaf actor."



Phyllis Frelich, left, Samantha Schwartz and Deanne Bray confront family troubles on their way to a famous protest at Gallaudet University in "Road to a Revolution," at Deaf West Theater.

"Road to a Revolution" is the fifth collaboration for Frelich, Steinberg and Medoff, who has pretty much guaranteed Frelich a role in any project — stage, film or TV — he takes part in. (She'll have a part in the film "Children of Their Birthdays," which Medoff is currently directing in Chicago.)

In a way, then, it's fitting that the play is about a momentous event in the history of deaf civil rights: the 1988 uproar over the hiring of a hearing president at Gallaudet University, the nation's largest university for the deaf. Instigators of their own types of mini-revolutions within the theater, the playwright and his frequent star now find themselves addressing a major event through their work.

"It was huge news for the deaf," says Frelich. "There's a line in the play, 'Wow, we're on TV. Deaf people have never been on TV.' That literally was kind of the truth."

When newly appointed president Elisabeth Ann Zinser arrived at Gallaudet — four months early — she described the scene and wrote in the Washington Post that she "found classes halted, all entrances barricaded and the administration building barricaded by bike chains. The cam-

pus was under siege." Within a tumultuous seven-day period, Zinser resigned, i. King Jordan was appointed, and the Deaf Revolution, as it was being called, was over.

Medoff, who watched the Gallaudet situation with great interest, believed it would make for great drama, but as the backdrop for a family story rather than a retelling of the actual events. Periodically over the next decade, Medoff and Steinberg had shopped the idea without success, even hearing from one studio executive that "there's already been a deaf movie."

Disney eventually hired Medoff to write a TV movie about a strained mother-daughter relationship set against the Gallaudet uprising. The script he wrote would have required extensive captioning for deaf viewers, and Disney gave the story back when Medoff undertook his first commission with Deaf West.

Thus, "Revolution" was born, but Medoff says it was never his intention to write an overtly political play.

"I can't think of things that way," says Medoff. "'Children of a Lesser God,' in a totally unintended way, was a political play in that it caused some

changes in the way people viewed the deaf. I would like to think this play is more about types of people, not necessarily stereotypes, but people who go through very personal revolutions based on things that happen in the past."

Edna Basker, Frelich's character, is a smart but semi-educated woman who feels her partially deaf daughter, Gerri, is perhaps turning her back on the deaf community. Gerri, a journalist, has a hearing 13-year-old daughter who has a better understanding with Edna. On a cross-country bus ride from New Mexico to Gallaudet in Washington, D.C., Edna faces family issues as well as her feelings about the uprising.

"I kind of represent a little bit of the older deaf generation," says Frelich. "Maybe in the beginning of the play I'm not quite ready. All these years of repression and discrimination. I'm not quite ready to revolt, not quite ready for a change. And there was a lot of that, indeed, when the real event took place."

Frelich, Steinberg and Medoff say that "Road to a Revolution" is still something of a work in progress. They plan to restage it at the beginning of 2002 with the hope of touring the production to schools and universities.

Daily News

MONDAY, APRIL 30, 2001

# ENTERTAINMENT TODAY

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## Ticket holders

### Road to a Revolution Deaf West Theatre by Travis Michael Holder

There's nothing more inspiring in this town than Deaf West Theatre, which has continued through the last decade to produce some of the finest and most innovative theater anywhere in the world. This is especially true of *Road to a Revolution*, which also marks the fifth stage collaboration in the last 22 years between playwright Mark Medoff and actress Phyllis Fredlich, both of whom won Tonys in 1980 for *Children of a Lesser God*. *Road to a Revolution* proves without a doubt that neither Medoff nor Fredlich has lost the spark of that glorious partnership which began so significantly all those many years ago.

*Revolution* revolves around the 1988 campus revolt at Washington, D.C.'s Gallaudet University, where yet another

hearing person was about to be selected as president of the country's most prestigious center for the higher education of deaf students. This time, however, the students were sparked by the recent last couple of decades of worthy social protest that had so admirably changed the world around the school's insulating ivy-covered confines. Two thousand Gallaudet students rose up in protest of the hiring decision, demanding a deaf president be elected for the first time in school's 124-year history and finally proving to the hearing world that "deaf kids aren't dumb." As Medoff cites in *Revolution*, with this one event



Road to a Revolution

"hundreds of deaf children tested the chains that bind them in a hearing world" for the first time — and right in tune with current events in the news in those days. When a character first hears the chant "Deaf President Now!" on a radio, she thinks it's a suitably snide remark about President Reagan, who of course was more deaf and dumb than anyone in 1988.

That amazing real-life progression in the history of fair and ethical treatment is the basis of this celebrated playwright's newest work. Fredlich exemplifies all of our own personal rites of passage as she progresses from *Lesser God's* youthful ingenue to feisty grandmother Edna Basker, leading a band of family and friends from New Mexico to Washington in the family's broken down van to join the insurrection. Along the way, the strained relationship

between Gerri, her journalist daughter (Deanne Bray), and Tina, her hormone-enriched granddaughter (Samantha Schwartz), begins to find a cohesion that had long since disappeared. The hard-of-hearing Gerri, who went to a deaf school but was "kicked out because she 'wasn't deaf enough,'" has all but turned away from the deaf world in her attempts to assimilate into mainstream society — much to the distress of her profoundly deaf mother and her hearing daughter, caught in the middle of two people who "haven't found a stable language" between them yet.

Fredlich is, as always, amazing as Edna, riveting in her ability to convey her character's stubbornness, then just as fascinating as she softens into the loving mother and grandmother lurking just below the gruff surface. Bray is a most estimable counterpart to this transformation and Schwartz, in her acting debut at age 13, is nothing short of splendid. As the deaf high school student who makes Tina's hormones more enriched than ever, Alex Vasquez is *Revolution's* other youthful find, a strikingly confident young actor whose reactions are so

simple and honest that it's difficult to take one's eyes off him. There are no games, no pretensions, no expectations in the work of either of these two naturally gifted novice actors, the stuff that makes for the most wondrous of performances.

C.J. Jones is charming as Nathaniel, the old school chum who Edna picks up along the way. In one sweet scene where he reveals the crush he's had on her since their youth, this pair of veteran actors offer some of the evening's most memorable moments. Jevon Whetter and Jennifer Snipstad are excellent as Joshua's football coach and his half-assed girlfriend along for the ride, although the coach character is the only one in Medoff's creation tending to teeter into stereotype, making Whetter's task the most difficult *Revolution* of all. Alejandro Furth better avoids another stereotype as Felix Sifuentes, Gerri's photographer and a man who has his own cause to champion, one which underscores the universality of the troupe's mission to the nation's capital. "You're not the first gringo," he tells the often-abrasive Coach Hayes, "who's made me feel uncomfortable in my own country."

As all the broadcasters, cops, motel managers along the way and, most importantly, the voices of the deaf actors for all of us who wish we knew American Sign Language (God, I'd love to work at this theater), Cisco X. Drayton, John Ireland, Cassandra Davis Marsh, Laura B. Ripplinger, and Felicia Taylor are all exceptional additions to the cast, as is the haunting cello accompaniment of Corey Saldana, keeping with the Deaf West tradition of making hearing audience members feel at home. Doubling as his *Road to a Revolution's* director, Medoff brings inventive staging to his work, performed with echoes of classic ritual drama on Robert Steinberg's starkly impressive set of distressed Grecian platforms.

If you've never seen a production at Deaf West, which won an unprecedented five Ovation Awards last season for its glorious presentations of *Oliver!* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, don't miss the opportunity to support this unique company, guaranteed to make you leave the theater with a whole new appreciation for the wonder of the human spirit — and a tear or two in your eye. For information, call (818) 762-2773 or (818) 762-2782 for TTY.