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Actress 'Signs' Performance; It's Her 'Native Language'

Author(s): Steve Millburg Fred Veleba/World - Herald **Date:** March 1, 1987 **Section:** Entertainment

Williams and Ms. Sweeney . . . play a teacher and a deaf young woman in "Children of a Lesser God." **Janna Sweeney** and Sarah Norman have a lot in common.

In one sense, **Janna Sweeney** is Sarah Norman. Ms. Sweeney is playing the part of Sarah in "Children of a Lesser God," which opened Thursday at the Omaha Community Playhouse.

Sarah is a young deaf woman who works at a school for the deaf.

She falls in love with James Leeds, a teacher at the school who wants her to "voice" as well as "sign" to communicate vocally as well as through sign language.

The fiercely proud, fiercely independent Sarah refuses.

"I really love Sarah," Ms. Sweeney said.

One reason, she said, is that Sarah expresses her feelings even angry ones. "I can't stand up like Sarah does," Ms. Sweeney said.

"I don't share things with people. I tend to hold things inside." The two women share many similarities, though, including a preference for signing over speaking.

"Moderately Deaf' Ms. Sweeney, 23, has been hearingimpaired from birth, though her parents are "hearing." "I'm what hearing people would call a moderately deaf person," she said.

"I use my voice often, maybe while I work, maybe with members of my family. I prefer to sign because it's my native language." During

the interview Ms. Sweenie communicated in American Sign Language. Translating was Kevin Williams, her co - star in "Children of a Lesser God." Williams, 28, is pastor of the Christ Church of the Deaf in Council Bluffs and director for special programs of deaf missions.

For the past year and a half he has coordinated the sign - language interpretations the Playhouse implemented for its productions. Ms. Sweenie is a member of the interpreting team.

Williams also is president of the Omaha Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf.

"When I grew up," he said, "I was hearing - impaired. It was surgically corrected when I was in the fourth grade." Despite the early problem, Williams did not grow up using sign language.

Although he now signs fluently, "I will never be kin to deaf people, because I am not a native signer _because I did not grow up with signing as part of my culture," Williams said.

"Deaf people are very, very familial," he said and the non - deaf never can be part of the family.

"I'm always going to be 'hearing,' " Williams said.

Deaf Person's View If that sounds insular, consider the point of view of a deaf person.

"We perpetuate our culture through our language," Williams said.

Children learn language from listening to adults talk, imitating the sounds, correcting themselves until the sounds they make match the sounds they hear.

No matter how skilled a deaf person becomes at signing, reading lips and voicing, the hearing world remains an alien culture.

"When you are a deaf person you learn to have this 'ability to function in the hearing world' so that when you die they will praise you," Ms. Sweenie said.

When she was young, she said, she practiced diligently on her voice. "When I got out of high school I started to think "Why am I doing this?" " The answer was simple: If she wanted to "function in the hearing world," she had to learn its language. The hearing world was not willing to learn hers.

"I really don't have a choice," Ms. Sweenie said. "'It's not really fair, in my opinion.

"I really prefer to live in the deaf world," she said. "I'm happiest

there." Could she become romantically involved with a hearing man, as her character does in "Children of a Lesser God"?

Ms. Sweeney paused. She smiled. "Not really," she said.

She certainly could not see herself becoming romantically involved with someone like James Leeds. "I hate him," she said.

At first "I couldn't understand why Sarah falls in love with him," she said, "but now I understand that he's the only one who tries to communicate with her.

"I hope I don't end up hating Kevin because of him," she added with a smile.

Different Ending

James insists that Sarah learn to voice as well as sign. In the 1986 movie version of "Children of a Lesser God" Sarah appears to capitulate to James' domination at the end. The play's ending is different.

Williams said he has seen both the movie and a production of the play by the National Theater for the Deaf.

"I enjoyed the play better than the movie because the movie really deviated from the purpose of the play," he said. "The play is really framed on Sarah's right to independence." Williams also is not always fond of his character. "Sometimes," he said, "I am very angry with James, and I have a hard time getting rid of that anger and doing the character." Eleanor Brodie Jones has taught arts classes at the Iowa and Nebraska Schools for the Deaf.

"One other thing in the character's defense," Ms. Jones said, "is that people who work with deaf and hearing - impaired students, as I do, have this realization that they are going to have to accommodate the hearing world to some extent." If those children want to use their talents fully, they must compromise with the hearing world, Ms. Jones said. "I don't want them to grow up with their brilliant minds only to be a janitor." Ms. Sweeney said she hopes to keep compromises to a minimum. She currently works at a floral center and as an intern for the Metropolitan Arts Council, acting as liaison between the council and the deaf community.

She said she hopes to get a degree in counseling from Gallaudet University, a school for the deaf in Washington, D.C., and work as a counselor for the deaf.

"She's an incredible lady," Williams said.

Charles Jones, executive director of the Playhouse and Ms. Jones'

husband is directing "Children of a Lesser God." He said he has added six characters to the Playhouse production of the show, and that they play a variety of parts. At times, Jones said, those characters will even become part of the audience, commenting on the play.

The total cast, he said, numbers 14. Seven are hearing.

Three performances of the show are being interpreted in sign language. The next two will be on Thursday and March 12.

Millard Foundation Grant "Now that the Playhouse is in a position with the new facility to be able to offer our expanded programming for the total community, we want to make the Playhouse accessible for everyone in the entire area," Jones said.

The goal is to offer sign - language interpretation for at least one performance of each production, he said.

This season, he said, interpretation will be offered for all the main - stage productions plus "Children of a Lesser God" and "Quilters," both of which are scheduled for a smaller performance space at the Playhouse.

The interpretation program is one result of a \$10,000 grant from the Adah and Leon Millard Foundation to enable the Playhouse to provide services for the deaf and other people with disabilities.

The program involves the Playhouse, the Metro Arts Council and Very Special Arts Nebraska, an organization of which Ms. Jones is executive director.

Very Special Arts is a national program operating out of the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., Ms. Jones said. It is in the process of becoming an independent, non - profit organization designed to provide arts services to people with handicaps or disabilities.

Handicaps and disabilities, in the broadest sense, are what "Children of a Lesser God" is about, Jones said.

We all have them in some ways, he said. "I think that's what the title means and what the play's about: coming to terms with our imperfections." Performances are scheduled in the Playhouse's new performance space through March 15. Curtain times are 8 p.m. Thursdays, 8:30 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, and 3 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. Sundays. Tickets are \$10 for adults and \$5 for students.

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