

Nobody's Perfect

NOTES FROM THE PLAYWRIGHT

Nobody's Perfect originated as a book for young readers, co-written with the actress Marlee Matlin based on her childhood, the second in a series about nine-year-old Megan who happens to be deaf. Marlee was especially keen that *Nobody's Perfect* reach beyond the deaf experience to address children with autism as well as the fragile dynamic between abled and disabled siblings. For my part, I was particularly engaged by scenes when multiple forms of communication collided -- spoken dialogue, American Sign Language, finger spelling and messages contained in body language. Thematically, it was a full plate -- but we tackled it with high spirits in the hopes of captivating a young reader.

I was thrilled to adapt *Nobody's Perfect* for the stage because the theater is my home; I am a playwright at heart. The project also championed this crazy audacious notion: a youth *musical* with a deaf girl in the lead role. How does *that* work? The challenge set me in motion and the Kennedy Center and VSA Arts pulled together a cracker-jack team of collaborators to support the process.

In any good adaptation, the writer tosses the book over his shoulder and re-imagines the story from scratch. As the co-author of the source material, I knew the heart of the story because I had typed it onto the page. My fascination with the layered communication of the deaf world on the written page presented new hurdles on the stage. While deaf theater companies have successfully staged musical productions, we were attempting to tell a story with a deaf protagonist using the language of musical theater. To be true to a good musical, we needed song and dance. To be true to Megan's deaf world, we needed to present frustrated communication - and silence.

The curious thing about the creative process is that tough problems find their solutions in flights of fancy. Composer Debbie Wicks LaPuma and I stumbled onto the idea that Megan's three best friends - (because nine-year-old girls always seem to have *three* best friends) - would serve as a back-up chorus, giving voice to the songs that Megan would perform in sign. The sound of the show would resemble all the bouncy pop tunes and soulful ballads that nine-year-old girls screech into hair brushes at a sleep-over party.

To tell our story "inside a kid's world," we narrowed the *Nobody's Perfect* cast down to Megan, three best friends, her nemesis Alexis - and a non-singing role, a boy who would play all the other parts: a classroom teacher, Megan's brother, Alexis's little brother with autism, and most importantly, the hamster. (Oh yes, a hamster is the *deus et machina* of *Nobody's Perfect*.) All of this, we blithely assumed, could be performed in American Sign Language.

Enter Coy Middlebrook, our director - whose experience as an associate with director Jeff Calhoun on the celebrated Broadway production of *Big River* with Deaf West Theater, as well as *Sleeping Beauty Wakes* at the Kirk Douglas in Los Angeles, brought great expertise to our project - and Alexandria Wailes, our invaluable ASL Master. I cannot begin to catalog their myriad of contributions to the shape and substance of the show, much less to the practical task of putting it on its feet and into American Sign Language. Early on, Coy encouraged me to write the show's lyrics without concern for the sign language. We soon realized that certain words, like proper names, wouldn't work as lyrics because of the time-required in finger-spelling. As it turned out, the impulse to write punchy lyrics that relied on common images, referencing the educational and social resources of the average fourth grader, translated beautifully into sign language and paid off in performance.

Watch and listen in *Nobody's Perfect* for:

Look around and it's a fact --
Sometimes opposites attract.
Polka dots don't go with plaid.
But pineapple pizza's not half bad.

DOUG COONEY