

(You may need to zoom in to read the full article)

Lend Him an Ear and He'll Sign You a Song

Barry Nickelsberg '72 is a maestro of soundless effects. One of only about a dozen "sign-language artists" in this country, he has interpreted more than 800 musical performances for the hearing-impaired. Armed with a B.F.A. in drama from Ithaca College, additional training at the Yale drama school, and 17 years of sign-language experience, Nickelsberg combines sign and mime for a unique "play on words" that he performs onstage alongside musicians. He's shared the stage with entertainers ranging from the Roches to Adam Ant, Reba McEntire to Richie Havens, and the Texas Gospel Choir to Celtic Thunder. His repertoire also includes rock and rap.

Nickelsberg, who is not hearing-impaired and has no deaf relatives, took up signing as a hobby in the mid-1970s. Driving to his job as program director for the Iowa Arts Council, he would practice interpreting songs on the radio (sometimes steering with his knees!) to master the lyrics of Aretha Franklin's "Respect" and other popular tunes. Later he received additional sign-language training at Gallaudet University and began interpreting at shows in and around the Washington, D.C., area. Off to the side of the stage, in black beret and dark clothing, Nickelsberg is a whirling dervish of syncopated motion. He accentuates his hand and arm signals with body language, dance, and facial expressions to better convey the mood and message of a musical piece.

Nickelsberg's aim is to interpret rather than interfere with a performance, but occasionally he becomes part of the act. On a tour with Arlo Guthrie some years ago, the folksinger interrupted his narration of the epic "Alice's Restaurant" to turn to Nickelsberg, who was furiously signing away, and ask, "Barry, you get that?" On another stage, the scantily clad singers of the risqué group Seduction sidled up to Nickelsberg as he signed to their suggestive lyrics. "I never skipped a beat," Nickelsberg recalls, laughing. "The audience was beside itself, watching these women trying to distract a 40-year-old bald guy. But I never lost my cool."

Nickelsberg's gift for sign-language interpretation is the subject of the 1988 award-winning documentary *When Sound Is Silent*

and a follow-up video, *Sounds Like*. His work has been featured in articles by the Associated Press and the *Washington Post* and in programs on Canadian Television, ABC, and National Public Radio. But his other talents and interests range far beyond the stage.

When he isn't "lending an ear" to the hearing-impaired, Nickelsberg is inspiring people to lend money. In 1981 he founded the Funding Center, an international, nonprofit fund-raising organization based in Alexandria, Virginia. Under his leadership the center has helped nonprofit and nongovernmental enterprises raise more than \$800 million. Nickelsberg, who holds a special certificate in administration from the Harvard business school, conducts more than 100 fund-raising workshops each year and has served as a grants liaison for a member of the U.S. Congress. He also helped create the World Congress on Philanthropy Educational Foundation and its World Congress on Philanthropy, a major international conference that has been held in Toronto and Miami.

Both of Nickelsberg's occupations, sign-language artist and fund-raiser, rely heavily on the power of language—which makes it all the more surprising to discover that he has severe dyslexia. "I can see images far better than I can read them on the printed page," he says. Thanks to Nickelsberg, many hard-of-hearing concertgoers can enjoy the show far better, too.

—Jill Guetz



Frank Johnston/Washington Post