

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

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### *Emotion and Passion Through Sign Language*

As a performing arts sign-language interpreter, I was delighted by David Gunderson's "Breaking Fences for the Disabled" [op-ed, Aug. 27], and I was utterly amazed to read the follow-up Free for All piece by Sigrid and Vint Cerf ["Theater for Everyone," Sept. 4].

No one (including myself) could argue that closed captioning of live performances would provide the hearing unpaired with the words that are being said or sung from the stage. Unfortunately, such captioning does not capture the feeling, expression, emotion (and, especially in music, the rhythm) of what is happening on stage. Since 1981 I have interpreted more than 1,000 performances throughout the Washington area and hundreds more throughout the United States. I have interpreted everything from rap and country-swing to gospel, folk, rock-and-roll and opera. In each instance, the music calls for an interpretation that the words alone simply cannot provide.

I am amazed that the Cerfs, who are themselves hearing impaired and are involved in a closed-captioning project, would make disparaging comments about "distracting . . . sign-language interpreters." I have spoken with hundreds of hearing-impaired and hearing people following various performances who have told me that performing-interpreting was anything but distracting and, in fact, added to the total performance.

When theatergoers everywhere will sit in auditoriums and listen as actors and singers read the words of the script or music with the same bland complacency and lack of emotion and passion as closed captioning

provides, then closed captioning will be appropriate in not expressing any feeling, emotion or rhythm. Until then, our society might be better served in welcoming the estimated 20 million deaf and hearing-impaired Americans into our theaters and concert halls by providing performance sign-language interpreters who truly do have a definite and important role for audiences everywhere.

BARRY NICKELSBURG  
Alexandria

David Gunderson's op-ed hits the nail firmly on the head.

As the producer and promoter of a number of concerts throughout the Washington area, I have always had a performing arts sign-language interpreter on stage right along with the other artists. The interpreting is enjoyed as much by the hearing audience as it is by the deaf audience, and few people (including the performers themselves) find the sign-language interpretation on stage distracting. To

the contrary, people find that the sign-language interpretation adds to the total performance.

We have never set aside special seating for the deaf because we have been told by members of the deaf community that this is a form of segregation. Rather, we allow people to sit wherever they wish, and audience members are then all part of one group enjoying the show.

What concerns me is not that Mr. Gunderson was correct about the segregation of certain performances in Dallas, but that so many performing institutions in the Washington area follow the same kind of segregation and insist that sign-language interpreters work from a seat in the audience instead of being on the stage where they belong. Such action only alienates the deaf community, which allows the managers of those venues to justify their actions by saying, "The deaf don't come here anyway."

When performances are fully accessible and the sign-language interpreters are on stage, the deaf community responds by purchasing tickets and enjoying the show every bit as much as the hearing audience.

I hope that the managers of theaters and concert halls across the nation will hear what Mr. Gunderson has said, and I hope that they might learn from the example that I—along with many others—have set and put sign-language interpreters on stage. We should reach out to the deaf community, which has every bit as much right and ability to purchase tickets and enjoy performances as the hearing.

JAMES L. ARNOLD  
Marco Island, Fla.

#### *Who Owns Whom?*

In his article "The Big Squeeze" [Outlook, Sept. 12], Vice President Al Gore talks about citizens as "customers of the government."

Would someone please remind him that we are "owners." Big difference.

ELIZABETH GASTON  
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