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TO A FLAME

by ERIN SHIELDS



A visual feast
in ASL and English

To A Flame: Companion Study Guide

Any individual or organization wishing this guide should contact 1s1 Theatre at:
1s1theatrecompany@gmail.com

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Contributors:

Dawn Jani Birley	Study Guide Project Manager, Producer, Actor
Anita Small	Study Guide Content Manager
Josette Bushell-Mingo	Director
Erin Shields	Playwright
Birgit Schreyer Duarte	Associate Director and Dramaturg
Anna Hardwick	Actor, 2011, Original Script Contributor
Nickeshia Garrick	Actor, 2026
Juliana Monk	Actor, 2026
Meredith Potter	Design and Layout
Dahlia Katz	Photographs
Jung-Hye Kim	Costume design sketch

Cover Credits:

Performers:	Nickeshia Garrick, Dawn Jani Birley, and Juliana Monk
Photographer:	Dahlia Katz
Costume design:	Jung-Hye Kim

2025 Workshop photo credits:

Photographer:	Elana Emer
Set & costume design:	Jung-Hye Kim
Lighting design:	André du Toit
Projection design:	Laura Warren
Composition & sound design:	Deanna Choi

2026 photo credits:

Photographers:	Dahlia Katz and Elana Emer
Costume design:	Jung-Hye Kim

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Moths, “butterflies of the night” - are drawn to the flame – for light, communication and community. Delicate creatures, often shunned, at risk of being burnt - when not released, eat away at the fabric of their being. How do they set themselves and one another free?



Introduction

We invite you to join the conversation!

This guide draws on the experiences, insights and perspectives of the women who collaborated to develop, workshop, produce, perform and evolve *To A Flame* over more than a decade. The guide also incorporates research and observations from the production process. It is intended as a companion to the *To A Flame* theatrical production, presented from September 22 - October 4, 2026, at the Nancy and Ed Jackman Performance Centre in Toronto, Canada. The women were interviewed by me, Anita Small, Content Manager of this Companion Study Guide between August 4-14, 2026 to carry the conversation forward. While the play stands on its own for your consideration, the guide invites you behind the stage to engage further in the layers, history, contexts and important questions raised by *To A Flame*. The guide also centres the Deaf story, which is too often absent from conversations about oppression and intersecting “isms” that shape lived experience. We hope this study guide solicits more questions to consider for yourself, with friends, with your colleagues and in your communities. We also hope it inspires constructive action for you as a witness of *To A Flame*, and an agent in setting the moths free in your life and society.

Canadian Deaf Theatre

1s1 Theatre and *To A Flame* can be viewed within the context of Deaf theatre in Canada. The linguistic and cultural roots of Canadian Deaf-led theatre are naturally based in shared Deaf experience and sign language. Deaf Theatre in Canada originated in two settings - the provincial

schools for Deaf students and in the Deaf community. Provincial schools for Deaf students are the place where sign language and Deaf heritage could be passed horizontally across Deaf students¹ regardless of the communication methods used formally in the schools. When sign language was the language of instruction, students performed theatrical productions in sign. Performances included original productions and adapted plays as well as classic English plays that were performed in sign language.

These productions are to be distinguished from Deaf theatre that arose through the Deaf community. Beginning in the late 1800s Deaf adults gathered in literary societies and clubs to share literary works in sign language and to enjoy talent nights, with some groups traveling to perform in other communities. Professional Deaf theatre companies began to be established in the mid 1900s.² These theatre companies have peaked and dissipated over the last decades and new ones have arisen once again. Deaf performing artists have often performed within the Deaf community or felt pressure to adapt their performance for hearing audiences and/or to rely on American Sign Language (ASL)/ language des signes québécoise (LSQ) interpreters to make their work accessible.

1s1 Theatre

1s1 Deaf-led Theatre Inc. was established by multi-award winning professional Deaf actor, Dawn Jani Birley, in response to that dichotomy and to that pressure. Born to a third-

¹ 90% of Deaf children have hearing parents and so for the majority of Deaf children, Deaf culture is passed horizontally. For more discussion, see *Far from the Tree: Parents, Children and the Search for Identity* (Solomon, 2012).

² For a detailed history of Deaf Theatre in Canada, see Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf. (Series Author) (2020). *Deaf Arts Handbook Series: Vol.3. Showtime! Deaf Theatre in Canada*. [Cripps, J. Project Manager; Small, A. Content Manager.] Toronto, Ontario: Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf, pp. 4-12. <https://deafculturecentre.ca/deaf-arts-series/deaf-arts-handbook-vol-three.pdf> and Carbin, Clifton F. (1996). *Deaf Heritage in Canada: A Distinctive, Diverse, and Enduring Culture*. McGraw-Hill Ryerson, ch.14. pp.342-356. <https://deafculturecentre.ca/resources/deaf-heritage-in-canada/>

generation Deaf family where her language and cultural heritage could be passed vertically from one generation to the next, and where she was surrounded by Deaf theatre from her Deaf community, she witnessed and internalized a sense of theatre and community that was her own. She also attended mainstreamed public schools where she adapted to the hearing education system. Dawn states that she “found who she was” at Gallaudet University³. She left North America to pursue further study, and received an MA with merit in Physical Theatre from Saint Mary’s University, London UK. She was driven to challenge misperceptions of being Deaf and through theatre, to provoke and push for positive change in society.⁴

1s1 creates theatre at the intersections of Deaf and hearing worlds from a Deaf-led perspective. Dawn established 1s1 with the goal of bringing balance to how- and whose- stories are told.⁵ To create theatre for a hearing audience is one thing, to design theatre for a Deaf audience is another, but to put both together while keeping the integrity of one’s language and culture whole is where the challenge and excitement resides. 1s1 Theatre creates a world where storytelling transcends barriers, centering Deaf culture and sign language on and off the stage. Through groundbreaking Deaf and hearing collaboration that is Deaf-led with innovative artistry, 1s1 redefines theatre as a space where diverse experiences unite to inspire connection and understanding for all audiences.

Dawn: For me, as an artist, being on stage is always about the clash that happens when we work on a play. A play is full of dramatic points and dramatic moments. When we bring two worlds together, they will inevitably clash in many ways. But that point of meeting—that

³ Gallaudet University is the first school for advanced education of Deaf students globally and remains the only higher education institution in which all programs and services are specifically designed for Deaf students. Gallaudet University is officially bilingual, with ASL and written English used for instruction and by the college community.

⁴ The handshapes “1” (base hand) accompanied by the “S” (dominant hand) followed by “1” (dominant hand pointing towards the base hand) form the ASL sign “to provoke”, hence the English name “1s1”.

⁵ Dawn is on faculty of Canada’s Deaf Arts Academy, teaching Deaf-led theatre to the next generation of Canadian Deaf performers.

moment of clash—is a beautiful opportunity: an opportunity to learn, to understand each other, to support each other, and to recognize that we can remain who we are.

That meeting point between the Deaf and hearing worlds can create powerful dramatic moments. It allows us to discover how much more alike we are than we may realize, rather than asking one world or the other to adapt to the other.

What is Deaf-led Theatre?

Dawn: Always, it's about language being equal—signing and speaking. Respect for both languages. Creativity. Communication. It is Deaf-led, meaning we fill in the gaps that exist because the world is designed primarily for hearing people. We create space for us to be seen, to communicate, and to participate fully. Through creativity and communication, everyone is included. You show up as you are. It's not somebody else offering their interpretation of your experience.

The whole world is hearing, so there is a lot of ignorance and assumptions about Deaf people, our history, and our experiences of oppression. The world is designed for hearing people, so the hearing world doesn't always recognize the barriers and exclusion that Deaf people experience.

At the same time, because we as Deaf people have been so separated and excluded from the wider world, we often don't have access to the information, conversations, and discussions around social justice that are happening around us. We are not always part of those conversations. We can end up living in our own bubble, thinking we are alone in our fight.

So sometimes I need to use a parallel or a mirror to another experience of oppression to get my message across. For example, as a white Deaf woman, I could never fully understand what it is like to be Black or a person of colour. And a Black hearing person or hearing person of colour cannot fully understand my Deaf experience. But if we share our truths, we can recognize

something of ourselves in each other's experiences of oppression. That parallel becomes a bridge between our worlds.

That is why the story of To A Flame is so important. Sharing each other's truths is the key. It can open up conversations that we might otherwise never have access to. I want Deaf people to see that we need these discussions too—that we are not alone in our fight.

What is Audism?

Audism is discrimination or prejudice against Deaf individuals, based on the belief that hearing people and spoken language are superior to Deaf people and sign language (Humphries, 1977). It manifests through attitudes, behaviors, and systems that marginalize Deaf individuals, restrict their opportunities, and dismiss their linguistic and cultural identities.⁶ Audism has a prominent and ongoing role in the suppression of sign language, particularly in Deaf education, contributing to language deprivation among Deaf children.

Dawn: If teachers don't sign, Deaf children are deprived of language. Hearing children don't experience that same deprivation because the language around them is accessible. But we are stuck with language deprivation. It impacts everything internally—mentally, emotionally, socially—so many things—because of that lack of access to language.

Josette: Audism really is the oppression and the value of sound over communication. This is how I define it. It's everything that's used to exclude a Deaf person, and that's through sound, but it's more than that. It's historic knowledge. For me, it's about community. It's about legacy. That's what audism is.

⁶ See 1S1 Theatre website, About Us retrieved September 10, 2026. <https://www.1s1theatre.com/about-us>

From the seventeenth century to the early twentieth century, there was a high rate of hereditary deafness on Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts (1 in 155 Islanders; 1 in 25 Islanders in Chilmark and 1 in 4 Islanders at the peak in some neighbourhoods). Thus, hearing and Deaf Islanders grew up with sign language. In contrast to the experience of most Deaf people in North America, Deaf Islanders were thoroughly integrated into all aspects of the Island and were central to social and political life.⁷ The history of Deaf education in the United States began in the early nineteenth century. In 1817, the first permanent school for Deaf students in the United States was established in Hartford, Connecticut by Deaf French master educator Laurent Clerc and hearing educator Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet. Their approach incorporated French sign language as a central means of instruction, mixed with the home sign language of Deaf children from Martha's Vineyard, contributing to the development of American Sign Language (ASL) and what became known as the "Golden Age" of Deaf education (Carbin, 1996; Gibson, Small, & Mason, 1997).

The "Golden Age" in Deaf education came to an end with the 1880 International Congress of Educators of the Deaf in Milan, Italy. At the congress, oral education was promoted as the preferred method for educating Deaf students, while sign language was largely rejected. The resulting shift toward oralism had profound consequences for Deaf communities. Deaf teachers were dismissed from their positions, sign language was increasingly suppressed in educational settings, and Deaf students were expected to communicate through spoken language rather than their natural sign languages. Across North America, sign language was consequently pushed underground in many educational environments. The legacy of these decisions continues to shape Deaf education today and reinforce broader forms of audism that devalue Deaf culture, identity, and language.

⁷ See Groce (1985) and MV Museum (2026) for description of the unique socio-political phenomenon among Deaf and hearing Islanders on Martha's Vineyard.

How Does Deaf-led Theatre Confront Audism?

During a 1s1 rehearsal of *To a Flame*, all collaborators were invited to a circle for introductions. Dawn began with a reminder not only to use interpreters present in formal rehearsal conversations but to refrain from spoken side comments which naturally exclude her as the Deaf person in the room. She went on to explain that out in the world she does not have control over those behaviors but in the 1s1 *To a Flame* rehearsal space, they are creating a contrast to the audism that is out there. They are establishing a model for each other to carry forward in their lives. 1s1 is not only about accessing what is present in dominant hearing society, it is about creating an environmental shift - a transformation whereby Deaf collaborators are in the centre of activity with the power of full contribution - agency.

(The late) Gloria Steinem, journalist, social and political activist, leader of the women's rights movement from the late 1960s to 1990s and agent of change stated, "There is a huge difference between access and change. What we gain from access may not be good for us. We must ask ourselves, what do we need to change in order to create true empowerment?" (Steinem, 2000).⁸ This notion was adapted as a framework and applied to bilingual Deaf education at the turn of the 21st century.

⁸ Steinem, G. *Women's Talk Circle*, Indigo Bookstore. Toronto, Ontario, June, 2000.

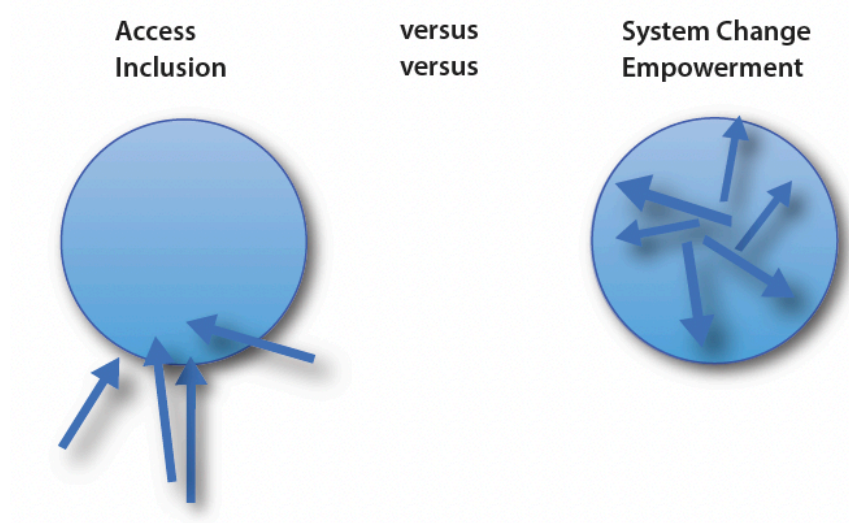


Figure 1. Access versus system change, adapted by Small, A. (2000)⁹ from Steinem, G.

This learning from women's fight for justice had a profound impact on the framing of the fight for Deaf rights, language and culture in Deaf education. Just like life on Martha's Vineyard, 1s1 and rehearsals for *To A Flame* are not about access or inclusion. They are about establishing a model of communication and empowerment through an environmental shift that centres Deaf people both on and off the stage during rehearsals and beyond, in our ongoing conversations and in society.¹⁰



Question:

- Discuss the difference between access/inclusion versus system change/empowerment in your life.

⁹ Adapted from Small, A. (2000). *Advanced Seminar in Bilingual Bicultural Education*. Teacher Preparation Programme in the Education of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students, Faculty of Education York University. In: Small, A., Cripps, J. and Côté, J. (2012).

¹⁰ See *Canadian Theatre Review*, Vol. 206, Apri, 2026 for numerous articles on multilingualism on stage as a decolonial device.

Story

To a Flame is a theatrical feast of image and language that pulls the audience deep into a Victorian Gothic Horror, originally inspired by Edgar Allen Poe's *Fall of the House of Usher*. Three confined women - one Deaf, one Black, and one white - await the conclusion of their story in the ancestral home of the man they call Father. As the drama unfolds, we are compelled to confront forces that shape identity, power and survival. Their secrets of the past can no longer be suppressed and the house vibrates with their evolution from oppression, internalization, and complicity to sisterhood, and revenge. This groundbreaking story comes to life in American Sign Language and English and through physical theatre, Butoh, live cello and video projection in a haunting, multi-sensory performance drawing-in Deaf and hearing audiences as witnesses.



Question:

- Why is it important that the three women's stories are told together?

Evolution of "To A Flame"

To a Flame is written by Governor General Award-winning playwright Erin Shields and features award-winning physical theatre artist and Deaf cultural leader Dawn Jani Birley; award-winning Black Queer actor and dancer Nickeshia Garrick; and hearing actor and dancer Juliana Monk. This world premiere production is directed by internationally renowned UK theatre artist Josette Bushell-Mingo, with associate director and dramaturge Birgit Schreyer Durate; and co-produced by 1s1 Theatre and Nightwood Theatre in association with Modern Times Stage Company and Why Not Theatre.

To a Flame was originally commissioned from Erin Shields by Nightwood Theatre in 2011. It was inspired by workshops involving Dawn Jani Birley and fellow actors Lisa Karen Cox and Anna

Hardwick, with Josette Bushell-Mingo and Birgit Schreyer Duarte. Later 1s1 Theatre reignited the play with further development support from Why Not Theatre and produced a staged workshop of the play in 2025. *To a Flame* also received a reading as part of the Heidelberger Stückemarkt [International Theatre Festival] in Germany in May 2026, where it was awarded the International Author's Prize.

Birgit: There was an idea at one point to make this a collective creation piece so that the group would contribute to the text, all of us. Nightwood had invited three writers so only after that first two weeks [in 2011], this is how we ended up collaborating with Erin Shields - she chose us I guess, and we chose her to be the playwright for it. . . .The process was less of a single person writing than everybody contributing with their thoughts, and questions, and ideas for scenes. And so we approached it very wildly at first. It was about the themes of our greatest fears . . . And then logistically, it didn't work out, and we had to literally take an eight-year hiatus. And then in '20 and '21, we had suddenly Dawn reach out to us again and say . . . "We should make this a play finally. Should we start over?" And we really felt like in these Zoom meetings, we only had workshops on Zoom two times in 2020 and '21 for, I want to say, the length of two weeks or 10 days maybe. . . . And we felt like, is this our second iteration of this all because we now have a different perspective and a deepened perspective? I think it's actually more unique now even to have a play like this and to have conversations side by side like these, and to be bold aesthetically, but also, of course, politically. So yeah, it feels like it's been a long journey, and we've kind of grown and changed, but it feels like . . . this is the right time, and it's good that it took so long in a way.

*Erin: The play was always very physical, and so that was a huge part of the vocabulary of the piece from the beginning and also from the beginning was this desire to have a simultaneity of understanding between Deaf and hearing audiences. And I have learned so much and continue to learn so much from Dawn and the Deaf community about the language itself, but also about Deaf culture and audism and the necessity for Deaf activism. So, gathering all these ideas, and using the framework of *The Fall of the House of Usher*, to explore this. Something Poe does*

really well. He's a horror writer, a Victorian Gothic horror writer - and that's a fantastic genre to explore fear and power and revenge.

Josette: When the audience come to see it, I think, from my limited experience so far, they're shocked because they see these three lives close together. They've never seen that before. They've never seen it where the three histories are laid out. And when we started the piece, which is of course inspired by Edgar Allan Poe's Fall of the House of Usher it became a piece about decay, it's a piece about memory, and it's a piece about family, and it's a piece about secrets, actually. But when we started to work on it, we realized that . . . it was more than that. What we did is we took the original story, we turned the sister from the original into three women, and the friend that arrives to the house is the audience. . . The reason that the story came up is because I wanted a story that would match the actresses and especially Dawn. I had never met a physical theater actress like that. . . My education and inspiration is Laban, Grotowski, hardcore physical theatre training. And Dawn would just sort of arrive and be ready and go, "Yes, let's do it." And I was thinking, "But I have never seen anything like this." But also, to watch Dawn's excitement. . . Respect, challenge, inspiration, curiosity about the language, but also to be led by the deafness, to be led by the culture, not the other way. So every time she would throw something, I'd go, "Yeah, I like it. I like it. . . Let's take your idea. How does this impact the movement?" . . . So when it comes to the piece of work itself, for me, what has been a reason to keep doing it is because it keeps pushing those three stories together, those three identities. And then secondly, it has helped me, as a director, deepen physicality, a conversation with the bodies on stage that I haven't really been able to achieve before. And that's actually because of the stamina of the actresses. . . I think there are elements in the work as well, which we will still struggle with a little bit, but that struggle is vital to the work.

Dawn: We had a workshop initially. It was improvisation without a writer first, and then we eventually invited three or four writers. They saw our movement and our improvisation. It was back in 2011. Our movements inspired their creativity, and then we looked at the different scripts. We were fascinated with Erin's script and her writing. It was me, Anna, Lisa, Josette, and

Nightwood. We chose Erin to be our playwright and then we worked again in 2013. That was when the full script was developed. However, it was put aside for a few reasons. But I couldn't stop thinking about that play because, for me, it helped me realize that all my life I had thought we were the only ones who suffered. I didn't think about other forms of oppression. But then I saw all these different forms of oppression. It made me analyze and feel that people really need to know about this play.

Hearing people do discuss different forms of oppression, but how is our oppression, our struggle, part of that conversation? We don't have that. They had that conversation. When I established 1s1, I had it in the back of my mind: 'We must do that.' We must have Erin Shields' blessing to use that script and have Josette back again. When 1s1 took off as a full theatre company, we got some funding to support it, and we were finally able to have a workshop last year. We got Nightwood's support and attention, and now it's come full circle.

You asked me about two important questions. For me, it's: how do we include audism in the social-justice conversation? And who are the agents of change? Also, with agents of change, is it the oppressed or the oppressor? Who should be the agent of change? If you don't realize what you're doing, if you don't know what you're doing, then you continue it. How do you stop it? In that play, we force people to see. We are all in the room. What are we going to do about it when we go back home? For all three of the women, there are so many oppressive acts.

If you have several matches together and you strike one match, all the others will light as well. But if one of them decides to remove itself, that match will stop the flame from spreading. It's the same idea. You do have a choice to stay or to remove yourself from acts of oppression. You do have a choice. So we can use that metaphor with To A Flame and look at how it can be positive or negative.

During the second last week of rehearsal, in 2026 the ending of the play was changed. The last line, "Maybe you are the flame." was changed to, "No longer in need of a flame" presented by all three women together on stage. Erin Shields had come to a rehearsal and wondered if the creative team had questions about the last line. Through discussion, the creative team came to

realize that the play's final message is that the flame, representing patriarchy, no longer draws the moths toward it. The last line signals the removal of the need these characters have for patriarchal structures. The women have transformed into moths themselves, liberated from the forces that once attracted them to—and confined them within—the patriarchy. These moths are now free, flying into the night.

By the time the technical rehearsal had arrived one week later, the ending had morphed once again. The final lines are: “All is lost you think. Only a story remains. A story that could have been invented in a waking dream.” “Except. . . Except. . . Except. . .” [Stated by all three women]. You see the projected moth take flight as the house crumbles and all three women walk off the stage.

It is significant that the play ends not with words or even with visuals but with action. The audience is left with a story that is not over. All three women - and the audience - are potential agents of change in their own and each other's lives. The ending continues to evolve organically as creative leadership and actors of the production work together. We, as an audience are part of that conversation.

Questions:

- How is it significant that this script evolved as a collaboration between actors, director dramaturge and the playwright?
- Reflect on the interplay between physical theatre, ASL as a theatrical language, and English as a written script.
- What is the potential impact of evolving a story over 15 years?
- Discuss “no longer in need of a flame” and the contrast between the continued need for community—the positive flame of the kitchen light, a gathering place for Deaf community and conversation—and the need to extinguish the destructive flame of internalized oppression when drawn toward and caught in the structures that harm us.
- What are other options besides revenge at the end of the story?
- What would you choose as a last line or action in the play and why?

Mirrors: Characters and Communication

To A Flame features three characters: Madeline, a Deaf white woman; Harriet, a Black hearing woman; and Fanny, a hearing white woman. Their stories are not simply told alongside one another—they are powerfully, devastatingly, and beautifully intertwined.

This intersection of identities is mirrored in the women who bring these characters to life: Dawn, a Deaf white actor who plays Madeline; Nickeshia, a Black hearing actor who plays Harriet; and Juliana, a hearing white actor who plays Fanny. The creative leadership of the production reflects this same configuration. *To A Flame* is led by Dawn, a Deaf white producer; Josette, a Black hearing director; and Birgit, a hearing white dramaturge—all women.





Photos by Dahlia Katz. Left to right: Nickeshia Garrick, Dawn Jani Birley, Juliana Monk; Dawn Jani Birley; Gloria Brifoglio (ASL Interpreter), Josette Bushell-Mingo; Birgit Schreyer Duarte; Laura Warren, Erin Shields; Juliana Monk, Nickeshia Garrick, Dawn Jani Birley, Josette Bushell-Mingo, Birgit Schreyer Duarte, Gloria Brifoglio; Sally Roberts; Laura Warren

Together, these parallel relationships between character, performer, and creative leadership create an intentional layering of identity, perspective, and women’s lived experience at the heart of *To A Flame*. Just as Madeline teaches Harriet and Fanny sign language on stage, Dawn teaches Nickeshia and Juliana sign language off stage. Dawn notes that both Nickeshia and Juliana worked hard to develop their ASL skills for their characters.



Photo by Elana Emer, Dress Rehearsal, 2026. Juliana Monk and Dawn Birley.

During a rehearsal visit on September 2, 2026, I, Anita Small, Content Manager of this study guide, observed Dawn working with Nickeshia on an ASL monologue, described below.

As Nickeshia learns Harriet’s moving sign-language monologue, she initially follows Dawn’s signing closely. Dawn emphasizes that Nickeshia must first learn to embody the ASL itself rather than simply reproduce the English text. ASL has its own vocabulary, grammar, syntax, rhythm, and ways of expressing meaning; the signs therefore do not correspond directly, word for word, with the English. Whether or not the monologue is accompanied by voice-over, Nickeshia’s first task is to fully embody the signing. Once she has mastered the precise handshapes, movements, and locations of the signs, Dawn and Nickeshia turn their attention to the rhythm and flow of the language. Gradually, the signing becomes more natural, expressive, and embodied. Dawn also guides Nickeshia in making culturally and historically appropriate sign choices. For example, the sign for “light” depends on what kind of light Harriet would have encountered during the Victorian era—an electric light, a kerosene lamp, or a candle. Such details influence the choice of sign and deepen the historical and cultural authenticity of the performance.



Photos by Dahlia Katz. Rehearsal 2026 with Nickeshia Garrick

How the team communicates, how they live the rules established during co-creation leads to an environment that elevates all. Rules include: signing all the time to the best of your ability or using an interpreter, using your physicality for visual communication, no side talking, no overlapping conversation, establishing eye contact, listening with your eyes, presenting ideas with the insight that we each come with our own particular perspective and need to open to

new and broader ways of seeing. The dynamic among the three actors, the three creative leads and amongst them all, establishes a model for how to centre Deaf artists so that all are equal participants in the conversation both on and off stage.

During rehearsal, while focusing on choreography, Josette is observed to use English with an ASL interpreter and to use ASL during break (and/or Swedish Sign Language in which she is more fluent with Dawn, who is fluent in both sign languages when only they are in the vicinity). Similarly, Birgit uses English with an ASL interpreter on set while collaboratively making decisions with all three actors about placement of the shoes during scenes or ASL for side comments when not engaged in formal rehearsal.



*Photo by Dahlia Katz. Rehearsal 2026.
Gloria Brifoglio (ASL-English Interpreter), Josette Bushell-Mingo*

Erin: We did a workshop of this play in Germany, in German, and she [Dawn] came and I just witnessed her taking these hearing folks who had not had any interaction with Deaf culture through the very basics of what they need to know in a rehearsal process. So, I would say that first and foremost ... she's the one who has brought this play to the table again. It fizzled out for a couple of reasons. It's challenging to get any play on. But she's sort of, with her company, she got funding and then reignited the flame, as it were. . . Josette also has a lot of knowledge. And so, in the rehearsal process, in the rehearsal hall, there are things we need to know and things we need to do to make sure that it's a place that is Deaf-led and part of that is just time, needing more time. It's understanding how the language works. It's understanding that there needs to

be space for an interpreter to communicate, and that it really is on hearing folks to learn the language. It's really understanding in your bones that this is not a world in which hearing people have to generously accommodate a Deaf person in the room. It's about, as a hearing person, taking accountability for your knowledge and understanding, and also being part of the conversation and being part of an agent who is communicating as well. So everyone who's worked on this play has worked to learn, to a greater or lesser extent, ASL in order to work towards understanding.

Something that sticks with me is that in a conversation or in a group conversation where there is one or two Deaf people, but the conversation is moving along mostly spoken out loud, the Deaf person is always behind because they are waiting for the interpretation to sort of catch up. And so in this play, we didn't want to replicate that experience for the audience. So I don't think there's any moments where the Deaf audience is behind the hearing audience. Sometimes the hearing audience is given the opportunity to feel what it feels like to be behind in understanding, which I think is great. But we didn't want to do-- I'm sure Dawn can talk more clearly, and others can talk more clearly to this, but I think it's a common fallacy that sign language is just a direct word-to-word interpretation of a spoken language. And so speaking at the same time as signing, you would naturally have to adapt the sign to reflect the spoken language in order to put the sign language into the rules of spoken English, but that isn't true American Sign Language or any sign language. So, it's a stronger choice to have two people, if we're going to do both languages at the same time, to have one actor to be verbalizing the text and the other actor to be speaking in a different language, but not having parallel words, if that makes sense. It's fascinating to watch how curious and open and excited they are to learn ASL, to learn about ASL, to learn about Deaf culture. And I think that sort of excitement is both reflected in the play itself. . . I think one of the things we've done as people who are really trying to think about how we are in the world is we've really armed ourselves with a lot of words and a lot of vocabulary around how to speak to one another, and how to be careful with one another, and how to listen to one another. And while that is good, I think that can also make people scared to actually embark on a conversation because they're scared of doing something wrong, and they're scared

of hurting somebody. And that, of course, applies to with the Deaf hearing communities, but it also applies in terms of race, it applies in terms of gender And I think part of our national characteristic as Canadians is that we want to be good, actually. I really think we do. And, so the idea of being bad or saying something wrong or hurting somebody, I actually think has become even more magnified in our culture, almost as a counterbalance to all the horrible, awful stuff. But it can be just as paralyzing in some ways. So what's wonderful is actually seeing how folding into this, the play, how freeing it is for these people set 150 years ago, just encountering one another for the first time without really any language about difference, without language about how to communicate with one another. They sort of learn that together. And so I think that's what we do in the room all the time, and that is what the play is about as well.

Birgit: I have to be reminded by my collaborators that, "This is not accessible at all," or, "Yeah, but you forgot the part where this needs to be signed," or, "Yeah, but you're adding this only for the hearing audiences." I think all the time, even though now I should be more aware, but it's still a real learning curve for me. And it just takes a lot of humility, I think, to say, "Yes, I'm not considerate that way sometimes because I'm not equipped, maybe." So little things like, I imagine a scene, a dialogue, to go a certain way, and I have this tone, for example, tone of voice in mind for a certain character at a certain time, and then I communicate that to the cast, and then I'm ready to move on. Meanwhile, the second part of the same conversation needs to be, well, what does that change in the signed conversation, for example.

I still have an impulse sometimes, and I'm sure some others do too, to turn to whoever stands beside me and make an offhand comment, and I catch myself all the time thinking, did I make this decision consciously that I wanted to not have to wait until someone is there to communicate this to the Deaf collaborators? Is this just easier? Do I think it's not important enough for everybody to hear? And sometimes it probably really isn't. But to just be aware of that, it's been taking me a long time to be alert I think, or more alert, not even alert enough. But saying something offhand, not realizing this was clearly not for everybody. So those kinds of situations I feel like are still definitely challenges for me for sure, and I'm assuming for some of the others as well.

But I remember when . . . our stage manager said, "Okay, I need to mention this. Very well done today. Very little interrupting." So it's such a typical way of expressing ourselves as hearing people, and it's never necessarily meant as a sign of disrespect, but it comes across as thoughtless, I think. And, just disregarding, I think, not necessarily disrespectful, just thoughtless. And my thought structure is different now that I'm aware of that. I can't just keep going. I have to sit and listen and watch and then think, 'Is this still important enough, what I wanted to say?' And sometimes it's not. So I'm also restructuring my own communication around that, or at least I strive to do so, not always successfully.

Anna: As an English speaker, wherever you go, you feel an entitlement that other people will try or understand some of your language. . . . When Dawn said to me, "Are you okay? I just need you to know that you're not making eye contact with me, so I do not feel like you're trying to communicate with me . . . I need your eyes on me," that was a huge wake-up call. . . It was also that humbling, often confusing and exhausting feeling of trying to learn sign language and trying to communicate in sign language. Your brain is on fire trying to understand a new language. We studied it. We had weekly sessions in between one year of the project and another year of the project. We had weekly sessions studying it. And it was an exciting feeling when we were able to put the piece together and perform it . . .

What was really key for me in that process was to learn to listen a lot more. . .

I entered the project with a real curiosity and sense of the need to fight for social justice and opportunities for all. The understanding that I was coming from a place of privilege as a white woman in Canada, understanding that I needed to listen and take a step back. . . in this story, there's a collective spirit of these sisters supporting each other, and this concept that we're all interwoven, we're all interconnected, and my rights as a woman do not rise if someone else's rights don't rise.

Nickeshia: *The production team, quite a few of them know a bit of signing or know how to sign fully or have learned how to¹¹, so that we can communicate in multiple ways; And also, us as hearing and speaking actors who are working with Dawn, we are also learning sign language, which is very beautiful. So for me, that's what really fortifies the signing within this work and that's what really makes it Deaf-led. There's such care surrounding that and the fact that we need to know how to sign as well to be able to communicate. . . It was really important for us to understand Deaf culture as well, the history behind it, how it was even created. Just the focus as well. Even when I'm speaking, I realize I look around the room, which is to gather my thoughts. That's naturally what I do. But that's considered very rude when someone who is Deaf, who's signing, the focus needs to be solely on them. Something as simple as trying to get someone's attention. . . . Just something as simple as me having side conversations with someone who is hearing and speaking. It totally negates or dismisses the Deaf person's experience. They need to be included in these conversations because it could be imperative information for them. So just making sure that whatever I might be saying on the side, that they're also able to capture it. Making sure that I'm not speaking over. Within our culture, hearing culture, a lot of the times it is easy to speak over people and have that topple, and we can still try to understand it. You cannot do that, or you should not do that when there are Deaf people in the room. We have to make sure that it's very clear for them and the conversations and the communication is very clear. So, ultimately, it's really taught me to be such a clear communicator, which is always a great skill to have.*

Juliana: *The times where we - me, Nickeshia, and Dawn - have been chatting, even just over lunch, it's amazing how much we really can communicate without spoken English, even if Nickeshia and I aren't fluent signers, through this imagery and through physicality and body language. So that's been really amazing to see.*

¹¹ As an example, *To A Flame* Stage Manager, Sally Roberts, studied to become an ASL Interpreter prior to her work on *To A Flame* and following her work as Production Manager on Deaf-led Signed Musical, *Black Drum*, featuring Dawn Birley and produced by DEAF CULTURE CENTRE, Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf. See Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf. (2021). *THE BLACK DRUM Signed Musical: Behind the Scenes Youth Activities Guide*.



Questions

- What are the most fundamental rules of behavior for you to feel respected in an environment when you are “the different one”?
- What benefit have you gained when you have made the effort to use someone else’s primary language?¹²

Projections

Video projections by designer Laura Warren provide another layer to the depth of the production. They are another actor through visual gaze.

Projected Moths

In the play, moths signify the oppressions through history. They are our truths. They are the butterflies of the dark. With the moth, if your real truth is not out there, it's not shared, then what happens? The moths will eat away at the fabric of your being - of who you are - because your truth isn't out there in the world.

¹² Deaf Gain is a term that reframes being Deaf as a benefit highlighting the unique contributions of Deaf individuals and Deaf culture to society. Deaf Gain recognizes how Deaf ways of being can inspire new ideas, challenge traditional norms and innovations in language, art and education. For more information on Deaf Gain see Dr. H-Dirksen L. Bauman (2009) *Changing Perspectives - Reframing: From Hearing-Loss to Deaf-Gain*.



Photo by Elana Emer, Dress Rehearsal 2026. Featuring Dawn Jani Birley

Dawn: Deaf people are always attracted to the kitchen. It's the heart of the house, perhaps because of the lights, and so that's where we all congregate. That is the idea for the moths. Also, the idea for the design in **using my hands as the moths**¹³. Deaf people always have a sixth superpower. We don't hear, and so we have a very strong sixth sense. And so I **have a special relationship with the house and the moths. We always support one another. That's why the house and the moths and Madeline, have a special relationship. The moths inform me.** There's that relationship. The moths represent the Deaf community. And also, people think, "Oh, moths." They don't like moths, right? But just like with Deaf people, we congregate together. I feel there have been Deaf people on earth in all of time. Why do they try to fix us, to shun us? We were put on Earth for a reason. We have been on Earth since the dawn of time. Why try to extract us or fix us? I feel we have survived, so there is some balance. Listening and sight, communicating. I feel we are encouraged to provide a balance. A balance of listening and seeing, communicating. Yes, the moths are my truth, my experience . . . (Anita): It's fascinating, the moths, and **how they are attracted to the flame. It can be positive or negative.** Dawn: **Yes, it is both. And that's also humanity. All humans, regardless of religion, race, age, belief, how**

¹³ This is a wonderful example of Deaf View Image Art (De'VIA). For further discussion of De'VIA see "Set Design".

we connect can be good or bad. How we connect can be good or bad and for myself, I decide for myself. They shouldn't decide for me.

Erin: *They're the little creatures that survive in this home and are very quietly nibbling away at it and making little holes in it, little holes in the fabric of this home. They camouflage. They're gray. They're not butterflies. And yet they're very **delicate**. There's something really beautiful we discovered in Dawn's character finding a way to communicate with these moths through ASL. And it really feels like they become almost her . . . guide in the play. And yet they are drawn to the light. They're drawn to the flame. So they are susceptible. They can be destroyed in an instant, and yet there's hundreds of them.*

Nickeshia: *The moths and Madeline are deeply connected and intertwined. They become the ears for Madeline who is Deaf and the whispers she cannot understand. **They are a means of communication, allowing Madeline to access the conversations being withheld from her in the house.** This brings up the conversation of accessibility: what is accessible for Madeline and what isn't. . . The moths hold the stories and secrets and experiences of all the other members in the house. . . **The moths became our scene partners. . . The moths are our historians.** . . because the moths have been there since before we were there. They were there with Father's doings and goings on from before he invited us to come, to heal us and treat us for our "deficiencies". So the moths have seen this house and have seen Father and have seen what he's done years before we were there. So if the moths could speak, and actually they can with Madeline - she finds out how to communicate with them. . . But if really the rest of us could really, or Harriet more so, can understand. Yeah, I don't really think Harriet would've been there. I think Harriet would've said, "Okay, I'm out. I will take my chances elsewhere." But yeah, they are the historians. **They are the timekeepers. They are the elders. When we think of the story keepers, the knowledge keepers of our societies,** the moths to me are a representation of that.*

Josette: *I have come to a point in my life, my artistic life, where I will only tell stories that make a difference. . . I see that that is my place, and how I am at my fullest as a person. And the stories I*

want to tell must, should speak to our existence as human beings, the struggles, the terrors, the joys, the ecstasy, the extreme of our lives. I'm only interested in that now. And for me, which is where I have been held by the Deaf community, everything I say is what was given to me by the Deaf community globally, nationally, locally. . . They changed me as an artist. **This is a blood transfusion, it's a cultural linguistic transfusion. I am not the same person. And the reason that I do that is because I believe in the fundamental power of the arts to change lives, to hold stories, to hold memories. And I believe that it gives us courage to deal with what is, in fact, a bit like the butterfly metaphor, right? It's a very brief life. Extravagant and amazing, but it's actually very, very brief. And I believe the arts allow us to see ourselves, the best and the worst of us.**

The moths represent, for me, the spirit of the dead. They're also about rejuvenation as well. Absolutely. They're also about infestation of ideas, and as you've seen, the father realizes that Fanny's sexuality has to be stopped, and therefore, or in my head sometimes, is multiplied. So there are thousands of moth eggs laid in her. The eggs are symbol of growth, new life, fertility. But the father goes, wants to the horrific, which is to stop them from hatching. So these larvae are imploding on themselves, stopping the energy, the female energy of coming out.

Care for the Visual Designer

Josette: And when we spoke about it and we realized we were working with a wonderful visual designer, and again, also care, that's the decision I made was to care for everybody involved in the piece because the person doing all the visual images had to go find . . . some of the stuff we saw, we didn't even use it. We couldn't use it. It was just like, no. But she had to sit through that and go, "This one, this one," because otherwise what they do to the father doesn't make any sense if it's not brutal, their journeys before. And for me, the **moths also symbolize fragility. Some kind of beauty too, as well. And the moths in themselves aren't horrible. Moths in themselves are part of nature. They're not horrible, but confined and manipulated in that way, they become horrific. They become symbols of decay.**

Projection Composition

*Josette: The next thing which was very important to me was the visual pictures and the projections. I made a very clear decision that **they are another actor, and timed, and through the visual gaze.** What's also important about the visual gaze, and sometimes I would say this in the room, if this was to be Deaf-blind translator, what would they translate? Let's go further than this now. What would they translate? . . . How would they describe what's happening? I think **the pictures for me also needed to be each one a poem on their own, so together they would make one whole.** The moon, the cross, the father's leg. Those three images make one statement, and then on top of that is how the women are moving.*

Text Projection

Another crucial element in Bushell-Mingo's production of *To a Flame* is written text projection, whereby written text is not intended as merely a basic means for access for audience members (either Deaf or hearing individuals to each other's language) but rather an integral artistic and dramatic dimension and means of communication in the play. Again, it is not about access but a wholistic composition to convey the three women's experiences.



Photo by Elana Emer, Dress Rehearsal 2026. Dawn Jani Birley, Juliana Monk and Nickeshia Garrick



Questions

- What do the projected moths represent to you?
- Describe what you noticed about the composition of projections overlayed onto what was occurring in specific scenes to create a whole?
- What impact did the projected text have on you in the play?

Set Design

The play is set as a Victorian Gothic horror in a house entombed: the women are “buried alive” through their oppression by their paternally constructed “deficiencies” and then bury alive their oppressor. The set is simple with angles much like a coffin. The set angles also give a sense of being disoriented, much like bright light disorients moths in their orbit when they come close.

The stage is encased along its edges with piles of shoes, evoking the collective oppression of women across both literature and history. The shoes reference the women trapped in literary tales such as *Bluebeard* and *The Twelve Dancing Princesses*, as well as the shoes left behind by victims of the gas chambers during the Holocaust, slaves who travelled the Underground Railroad, and Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women. Together, these shoes evoke the countless women who came before and after the three characters and whose histories haunt the house. The characters scratch on the wall to get out of this house - this “coffin”.



Photo by Elana Emer. Dress Rehearsal 2026. Juliana Monk, Dawn Jani Birley and Nickeshia Garrick



Photo by Dahlia Katz. Rehearsal 2026.

Juliana Monk, Nickeshia Garrick, Dawn Jani Birley



Photo by Elana Emer. Dress Rehearsal 2026.

Juliana Monk, Nickeshia Garrick, Dawn Jani Birley

Juliana: *This idea of a haunted house, of a decaying house, and what that can mean is so everywhere in our society, that it just immediately makes us understand the worldview of the play. And then we also see the House of Commons, all these big industrial structures. I think that's really, especially in this version of The Fall of the House of Usher, what the house stands for. It's the institution. It's the patriarchy in a very big way.*

It is a simple set with three levels - a table placed centre stage where Fanny is vulnerable to pleasure and pain when lying down; a chair at mid-level; and the floor. The only thing higher than the table is the hook on which the Father's coat and hat are hung. The table represents, power, disenfranchisement, and oppression. Fanny is operated upon there. The table also contains the drawer with the opiate to drug Fanny.



Photos by Elana Emer. Dress Rehearsal 2026.

Dawn Jani Birley, Juliana Monk; Dawn Jani Birley, Juliana Monk, Nickeshia Garrick.



Photo by Elana Emer. Dress Rehearsal 2026.

Nickeshia Garrick, Juliana Monk, Dawn Jani Birley

Nickeshia: *The chair is a representation of those moments where it's Father, or those moments where I'm pretending to play Father because there's a moment where I'm stepping onto the chair or stepping onto the table, and I'm a representation of Father. I'm reenacting him or mocking him. And the other two clap for me, and I do this big speech where I'm pretending to be Father. . . . And the floor . . . acting as our beds and where we sleep, or where we play, or what we clean. So they're all intrinsic moments, where they represent the house and how we*

interact with one another. And then also where Harriet does harmful things to Fanny or forces Madeline to practice her speech or even stops signing and really interacting with Madeline the way in which she should be interacting with Madeline. So, yeah, they're all, for me, the chair, the floor, the table, are all different representations of powerful moments. And for me, it's again, making sure that it truly does represent that, and that I interact with those specific things in that way so that the audience can understand it. And so it's very enriching for me as well, as the actor being able to bring out those moments using these things. And these things also become our scene partners as well. I love working with props or with different sets. And I always see it as they morph into living, breathing thing as well, a living, breathing being for me. Because there's such an intrinsic part of the work and they represent so many different moments, yeah, they also become scene partners.

Josette: The table and chairs were symbols as well of... If you study space and space dimension, the table is halfway in the world. It's halfway. It's neither up nor down. It's in the middle. I used a lot of circles, repetition as well, so that the audience get a vocabulary. Going round and round. The circle is also based on the spiral. The spiral is actually the spirit. Going inwards is to spirit, outwards is away from the soul, for example. Other things that I used, tarot cards, for example, hanging upside down, crawling. I used a lot of imagery from there.

The table has particular significance to the Deaf community. ***“Dinner Table Syndrome”*** has become a metaphor for disenfranchisement and ostracism of Deaf individuals in hearing society. It appears in Deaf literature and has been featured by numerous Deaf View Image Art (De’VIA) artists across three decades and in performance art as detailed by Canadian Deaf curator, Maryam Hafizirad.¹⁴

¹⁴ For detailed discussion of Dinner Table Syndrome in art see MA Thesis proposal by Hafizirad (2026). Experience with Dinner Table Syndrome was also featured in *Qalb: A Journey of the Ego* produced by 1s1 Theatre in 2024.

De'VIA is art created by Deaf artists exploring Deaf experience, values and ways of being. Resistance, Affirmation and Liberation De'VIA include: Intense and contrasting colours; contrasting textures; emphasis on eyes, mouths, ears and hands; motifs, metaphors, insights and perspectives that reflect Deaf experience.¹⁵

In both De'VIA images below we see the common experience of a Deaf individual excluded from conversation at the table - whether at the coffee table in *Family Dog* or at the dinner table in *Dinner Table Syndrome*.



Family Dog

Dupor, S. 1991. Lithograph



Dinner Table Syndrome

Rourke, N. 2024. Oil on Canvas



Questions:

- What did you first notice about the set? How did it impact you?
- How would you design a set for this Victorian Gothic Horror?

¹⁵ See Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf (Series Author) (2020). *Deaf Arts Handbook Series: Vol.1. Deaf View Image Art: Canadian Exhibits for details and examples of Canadian De'VIA*.

- What is your experience with Dinner Table Syndrome? Is there a metaphor that you relate to that is depicted in the visual art or/and literature of your cultural group?
- Research the history of resistance through visual art in De'VIA as well as other resistance movements.

Lighting

Josette: . . .the other part of it, which for me is just not negotiable, is lights and sign language on stage. That's it. It has to be seen. Everybody needs to know what the sign language shadow is, which is when you have your signing, and then the light is hitting you and your body. . . lights for me wasn't a discussion. I need to see them. We can have all the shadow and the light and stuff, but I need to see those hands.

Costumes

Dresses

Josette: Costumes . . .They have to work for movement and motion. These were decisions that are just normal for me. . . Other decisions that I made - the era, the time that it was set in is very symbolic so corsets, the constriction of someone. The freedom of the skirt, the layers of personality, the petticoat, the skirt . . .

Dawn: The blue dress follows "order." The nightgown is private, more intimate - when you're sick - you don't see us in our nightgown usually. With the blue dress, everything's supposed to look just okay, even though in the nightgown, everything may be horrible. It's like day and night, so it's what people see and what they don't see.

Juliana: Even just the image of a corset, that restriction is so prevalent because it represents what women were supposed to be, while also incapacitating them, making them weaker. And

so just having women physically weakened and told it's beautiful is so eerie, and it makes you wonder in what ways are we doing that to this day.



Costume sketch by Jung-Hye Kim



*Photo by Dahlia Katz. Rehearsal 2026
Michelle Soicher, Juliana Monk*



*Photo by Elana Emer. Dress Rehearsal 2026
Juliana Monk, Dawn Jani Birley, Nickeshia Garrick*

At the end of the play, the three women shed their corsets - their chrysalis - and morph into moths. Their physical transformation is deliberately personified, making their emergence as moths a visible embodiment of their liberation.



Photos by Elana Emer. Dress Rehearsal 2026
Nickeshia Garrick; Juliana Monk, Dawn Jani Birley, Nickeshia Garrick

Hair

Josette: Other decisions I think were important, the costumes - very important. The hair, so there'll be a discussion this time again, particularly for Afro hair. Should we have their own hair this time? Or even the plaits. As we know, the cane row, you call it French plait, I think. These cane rows, we know that from the time of slavery. They were intricate maps which told people where to go. So people would plait into the hair different rivers, stars, and constellations. Very fine. And it looks like this. You can see this. But actually, this is a river ... And it's so many steps here - unbelievable, to save each other. And they could read it in the dark, of course. Because you could feel – so, the hair. What should we say with this?

Shoes

Dawn: And the shoes – they are so restricting for women.

Josette: The shoes, a symbol from Bluebeard... no, the 12 Dancing Princesses. The shoes laid out, for example. And the shoes were a symbol of conformity and repression, to tie up and to hold the feet. Talking about from Japanese foot binding all the way to the design of women's shoes by men with these incredible arches.



Photo by Elana Emer. Workshop 2025
Dawn Jani Birley



Photo by Dahlia Katz. Rehearsal 2026

Juliana: *It's a very different effect to walk barefoot, even in flats, to heels specifically. And it makes you go slower. You can't move as easily. It makes you present - it makes you hold yourself differently, almost like a doll, is the way I interact with it. Your whole body changes when you are wearing heels or shoes like these characters are. I think it is also, in a sense, again, not unlike the corset, but a symbol of womanhood. In our society at least, you don't see little children usually wearing heels in that way . . . to see these women almost find their shoes, find their womanhood, or have it thrust upon them, in a way that makes them controllable. It's almost like-you're a woman, now you are unpredictable, so we must control you. So let's make it so you can't walk, so we can hear you coming.*



Photos by Elana Emer. Dress Rehearsal 2026
Juliana Monk

Coat and Hat

The Father is ever-present even though he is not physically there. He and his patriarchal teachings and oppression have been internalized. The costumes - coat and hat - are an essential presence on the stage.



Photo by Elana Emer. Dress Rehearsal 2026. Nickeshia Garrick; Juliana Monk

Question



- What wearable material symbols within your community represent experiences of oppression (e.g., corsets and shoes in women's oppression, cochlear implants in the Deaf community) or resistance (e.g., plaits/ cane rows within the Black community) that people from outside your culture may not be familiar with? Discuss with each other for cultural and experiential exchange.

Cello

Cellist Beth Silver is not hidden in the play. The cello is a visible character in *"To A Flame"*.



Photos by Elana Emer. Dress Rehearsal 2026

Cellist Beth Silver; Beth Silver, Dawn Jani Birley, Nickeshia Garrick and Juliana Monk

Dawn: Now the music—the cello. That is connected with Madeline and the house because she can feel the house. She has that relationship with the house, and the music gives information to Madeline. Even though hearing people can hear it, for Deaf people, we feel it. It's a different relationship. You hear it, but I feel the meaning behind it—the vibration. That's my relationship to it. And when it comes to the unknown, it is what I feel. That's my connection to it.

For me, the cello is one of the most powerful instruments. I can feel the difference in the strings, high and low. The cello has that skill, that ability. Other instruments don't do that in the same way. I can't feel them. It really touches me. I can feel it. The sound really matches Deaf—the feeling of it.

With other instruments, I don't feel the changes in the same way when the sound moves up and down. But with the cello, I feel it. I have a relationship with the cello's music on different levels—different emotions and experiences, different perspectives and meanings.

Josette: Dawn is an artist that will basically say, " . . . I want to try everything." Sound is not my problem. My problem is, that it's never built for me. Vibration is different to sound. I don't need to hear top pitch and I don't feel anything." And this for me was just delicious so in the first part of the rehearsal, for example, Dawn held the cello, described to us what that felt like, embedded that into the story. It was also visual, the shape of a woman's body, but also the visual stroke

here. And that could be added to it. When it comes to vibration underneath, I'm more optimistic this time because we're in one space, how they will build a sound. But at the same time, people go, "Oh, they can feel the vibration." But it's also irritating. The vvvv - how this shakes. You don't want that all the time. It's got to be really nuanced.

Juliana: The cello, of any instrument, makes so much sense because it's so human. It sounds almost like crying or singing from a human voice, and there's something so sorrowful about it. There's something so sorrowful to me about a cello and the sound that it can evoke, that again, I think, really matches the tone of the piece.



Question

- If you were producing this play with these three characters, would you incorporate an instrument? Why or why not?
- If yes, what instrument might you consider and why?
- Who should make this decision?

Butoh

To A Flame features a Japanese dance-theater art form called Butoh, originally called “dance of darkness,” using intentional, slow body movements to draw the audience in. Butoh often explores themes of darkness and transformation, and captures both beauty and horror. It often uses a triptych – a three-person tableau that lends itself to the beauty and horror of the three women in, *To a Flame*. Movement and dance are woven into the very fabric of the play.



*Photo by Elana Emer. Dress Rehearsal 2026.
Juliana Monk, Dawn Jani Birley, Nickeshia Garrick*



*Photo by Elana Emer. Dress Rehearsal 2026.
Nickeshia Garrick, Dawn Jani Birley, Juliana Monk*

Josette: Butoh is both a celebration, if you like, of life, but embracing death and decay. It also works on nonlinear, so the body's very rarely upright. It was a tension or a response also to Western ideals of movement. It was also, and this is where I spoke very much, it was also entering a world of extasis or extremis in the body. And . . . what I love about it, it's the way that

it allows every body, everybody's body language, to respond to the ideas of flow and tension, of breaking and fragility, not dissimilar to the moth. What I delight in it is its facial expressions, that the face is a mask, and there are many resonances in the sign language to that - that the face must respond. For me, it's also the fascination of movement itself, which means that as you're moving through the space, it doesn't just go one, two, three, four. It's a complete breakdown of that. Then there's the relationship to nature as well, it being done in the street, in caves, in the forest. . . the human right, the naturalness of Deafness. Nature. It's natural to be like this. It's not odd. It's not weird. It's not. Butoh also is the ritual, which is what the women hold onto, the ritual of getting up, making tea, but also how you handle things. You never pick anything up just casually. There's a consciousness, there's a presence, a mindfulness about what you're doing. And in relation to the story, Butoh allows the women to not only form character, to keep that visual resonance there, so they're always breaking the line. They're never upright unless they choose to be. They're never upright. And for me, a Butoh path is not only the state of mind that they're in when the story starts, but Butoh also allows a very, how can I say, disciplined physical response to what's happening, which is different to punching someone. And actually connects very well, not only Butoh, but with Laban¹⁶ as well, which is what I've also trained in. Laban specifically, because that also looks at breaking the body's movements down into punch, kick, float, these things. And suddenly, and I've seen this particularly again, which is my own private frustration of people's access to some of these art forms, if you like, is that my Deaf community, and I say that loosely when I say my, respond a thousand times to Butoh, a hundred times to Laban. This physical response, which is not looking for a hearing uprightness, but is actually much more connected to land and soil. Butoh also is a way of life. It's not a life that I follow, but it's also extraordinarily visual in a way unprecedented. Sankai Juku is one of the world's most famous.¹⁷

¹⁶ Laban is named after Rudolf Laban, movement theorist, choreographer and dancer.

¹⁷ Sankai Juku is an internationally known Butoh dance troupe. Co-founded by Amagatsu Ushio in 1975, they tour worldwide, performing and teaching. As of 2010, Sankai Juku had performed in 43 countries and visited more than 700 cities. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sankai_Juku

Collective Memory, Crab Theory, Identity Development and Sisterhood

To A Flame explores the collective memory of three distinct yet intersecting communities shaped by their oppression: white women, Black women, and Deaf women. Their stories are owned by science and textbooks rather than by their human cultural heritage keepers of knowledge – they are written out of their own history. The play also examines the women’s own complicity in the Father’s oppression, particularly the ways in which they participate in oppressing one another. This evokes the concept of “crab theory,” a metaphor for the ways members of an oppressed group may, rather than supporting one another’s efforts to succeed or escape oppressive circumstances, attempt to pull one another back down.

Dawn: Language deprivation, crab theory - Language deprivation is a serious issue in our community. It comes from audism. Why are Deaf people still left out of the conversation when it comes to isms – racism, sexism? People don’t know about audism.

Audism can be better understood by looking at identity development experienced by both more privileged and less privileged contextual groups. Identity development models are summarized below in Figures 2 and 3. These models were originally developed based on relationships among Black and White students in the United States in the 1990s (Cross and Helms in Tatum, 1992). Later they provided insight in understanding Deaf and hearing identity development and relationships of Deaf and hearing personnel in the first bilingual bicultural schools for Deaf students in the United States when they went through their transformation to

become bilingual.¹⁸ These models were later applied to teacher education programs for Deaf students in bilingual Deaf education in Canada.¹⁹

They provided insight and opportunity for reflection and discussion on personal identity development, growth and shift among members of Deaf and hearing groups related to audism. In Cross' and Helms' models, members of more and less privileged context groups cycle through identity stages, sometimes returning to an earlier stage and then progressing again. The environment has a significant impact on movement from one stage to another.²⁰

¹⁸ Grace, P., O'Donnell, M., & Staver, N. (1989). Caught in a Cultural Cross-Fire: Clinical Social Work in Schools for Deaf Children. *Smith College School for Social Work Journal*. Spring/Summer, 1989, 10-13; Philip, M. & Small, A. (1992). Bilingual bicultural program development at the Learning Centre for Deaf Children. In *Deaf Studies: What's Up?* Gallaudet University, Washington, D.C., 51-105.

¹⁹ Adapted by Small, A. (2000). York University, *Advanced Seminar in Bilingual Bicultural Education*. Teacher Preparation Programme in the Education of Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Students, Faculty of Education. Modernized in bias-free language in 2022. See American Psychological Association: APA Style: Intersectionality <https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/bias-free-language/intersectionality>. Retrieved September 1, 2022.

²⁰ See Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf. (2022). *Def-T Training Package for more details*.

MORE PRIVILEGED CONTEXT GROUP - IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

Stages	Values	Strategies
Contact	Lack of awareness of cultural and institutional -ism (racism, audism, etc.) and own privilege	Stereotypes
Disintegration	Awareness and guilt, shame, anger, cognitive dissonance	Denial or attempt to change significant other's attitudes of less privileged contextual identity group; withdrawal
Reintegration	Pressure to accept status quo	Guilt and anxiety redirected as fear and anger at less privileged contextual identity group; blame them for discomfort
Pseudo-independent	Abandon beliefs but may still unintentionally perpetuate system	Actively affiliate with less privileged context group and alienated from more privileged context individuals who have not yet recognized or begun to examine their own -isms (racism, audism, etc.)
Immersion/ Emersion	☒ Uncomfortable with being member of the more privileged context group compared to less privileged.	Independently and seek with other anti-ism seekers to unpack and learn how to be more accountable (e.g., anti-racist, anti-audist, etc)
Autonomy	Newly defined sense of self	Energized to confront -ism/oppression; can forge alliances because more consistent anti-racist or/and anti-audist, etc. behavior

Figure 2. Adapted by Small, A. (2000) from Helms, J. (1992). In: Tatum, B.D. Talking about race, learning about racism: The application of racial identity development theory in the classroom. *Harvard Educational Review*, 62 (1), 1-24. Modernized to bias-free language in 2022.²¹

²¹Appreciation to Jenelle Rouse, PhD, for her consultancy related to identity development. See American Psychological Association: APA Style: Intersectionality <https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/bias-free-language/intersectionality>. Retrieved September 1, 2022.

LESS PRIVILEGED CONTEXTUAL GROUP - IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

Stages	Values	Strategies
Pre-Encounter	Think more privileged context group is better	Think less privileged context group has nothing to do with their personal life
Encounter	Events force them to confront -ism (racism, audism, etc.)	Forced to focus on their identity as a member of less privileged context group
Immersion/Emersion	Denigrate more privileged contextual group and glorify less privileged contextual group	Surround with symbols of resistance and celebrating one's own differences and current identity affirmation, etc. and avoid symbols of more privileged contextual group
Internalization	Secure in one's own differences and current identity, etc.	Build relationships with members of more privileged contextual group who demonstrate respect
Internalization/Commitment	Commitment; proactively recognize and go past oppression	Point of departure to discover universe

Figure 3. Adapted by Small, A. (2000) from Cross, W. In Tatum, B.D., (1992). Talking about race, learning about racism: The application of racial identity development theory in the classroom. *Harvard Educational Review*, 62 (1), 1-24. Modernized to bias-free language in 2022.²²

It is also important to consider intersectional identities. Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term “Intersectionality” (1989).²³ Intersectionality refers to how individuals identify with and are

²² Appreciation to Jenelle Rouse, PhD for her consultancy related to identity development. See American Psychological Association: APA Style: Intersectionality <https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/bias-free-language/intersectionality>. Retrieved September 1, 2022.

²³ See Crenshaw, Kimberlé, 1989. Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Anti-discrimination Doctrine. University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989: 139–168, and Crenshaw, Kimberlé, 1991. Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity, and Violence Against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43 61: 1241–1300.

impacted by a variety of cultural, structural, sociobiological, economic, and social contexts. Identities are layered and complex and impact relationships between individuals and within and amongst groups (Howard & Renfrow, 2014).²⁴

In *To A Flame*, we witness the women's transformation from internalizing their oppression and participating in one another's subjugation to forging sisterhood, reclaiming their identities, and ultimately turning the Father's own scientific methods against him. Their journey culminates in an act of liberation, yet the play leaves us with a lingering question: What comes next when the structures that have defined and constrained their lives have been dismantled?



Questions

- How do we include Deaf people in the social justice conversation?
- Why do we pull one another down and how can we change that response to our own oppression?
- What is the role of collective history, shared history and collective memory in growth?
- Reflect on what influences you in progressing from one stage to another in your own development.
- Is there a model of identity development you wish to share related to your cultural group?
- Who should be the agents of change?
- What change is truly liberating?

²⁴ American Psychological Association: APA Style: Intersectionality
<https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/bias-free-language/intersectionality>.
Retrieved September 1, 2022.

Continuing the Conversation: Questions Posed by "To A Flame" Women Collaborators

Dawn – Producer and Deaf actor (role - Madeline)

How do we break through and be part of the social-justice conversation? There is a lot of discussion about social justice, but audism is never really part of that discussion. My question is: how do we put Deaf people in positions of power?

There are legal protections for other forms of oppression, but where is the legal protection for audism? As oppressed people, there are a lot of parallels between audism and racism. There is oppression because of age, race, religion—all the different 'isms.' But where is audism?

If we don't recognize something, how can we address it? Many people don't know what audism is. It's not taught in universities. It's not really discussed or addressed in the wider community. There is a divide between the Deaf and hearing worlds, and communication is really at the heart of it. That's the one main thing: communication.

There hasn't been much change since then. Maybe in other parts of the world, there is more progress. Maybe sign language is being recognized in school curricula. But here in Canada, when I look around, I see more and more diversity in positions of power, but not Deaf people. So who is responsible for that? Who is accountable? How do we break the glass ceiling when there are no Deaf people in positions of power? Deaf people are underneath that glass ceiling. Who is going to break it? Who is accountable for breaking it?"

"Those barriers. Hearing people put those barriers up. The problem is not being Deaf. The problem is out there. It is the attitude of people. What is their responsibility to break those barriers? Who has the power? Who makes the decisions? Who is left behind? If something

works, should we follow it? Who controls this? Should we follow or protest? When things break down and then go up again, it's just a cycle. Who is responsible? Who are the agents of change? Is it those in control up there, or is it all of us?

Erin Shields – Playwright

- How is *To a Flame* inspired by Edgar Allan Poe's *Fall of the House of Usher*?

*This piece is not a close adaptation of Poe's short story. Rather, it uses the setting, characters and plot of the story as a jumping off point. I was inspired by the relationship of the narrator to the Ushers. He is welcomed into the house and tells the reader about his observations of Roderick and Madeline Usher; about their illness and decay; about Roderick's sense of desperation. In *To a Flame*, I envision the audience in the role of the narrator. The audience is welcomed in by the characters at a moment of crisis. I was also deeply inspired by the heightened, Victorian language of Poe's story and the way he crafts the house itself to be a character acting on the humans that inhabit it.*

- How do you write a bilingual text?

*With a lot of help from my collaborators. In our earliest workshops we experimented with ways both ASL and English could be understood in tandem. Sometimes this was simultaneous – one actor speaks while another actor signs. Alternately, a projected text can be understood by all. Sometimes understanding was asynchronous – someone signs then someone speaks the same text afterwards. We also experimented with conversations in which one actor would speak English and the other would reply in ASL meaning a hearing audience would understand one side of the conversation while a Deaf audience would understand the other. And then, of course, is the universal language of movement which features heavily in *To a Flame*. If you've seen the play, you'll know that we have employed many different methods to achieve this simultaneity of comprehension. I think this is something that makes this play so exciting. As the playwright, I have had to keep an eye on the story to make sure it is always clear for every audience member.*

- How do you write in ASL?

One thing that I really had to wrap my head around as a hearing writer is that ASL is not a written language. Whatever text I write in English can be spoken word for word out loud. But for that text to be signed, it has to be translated into ASL by someone fluent in the language. In our case, Dawn not only translated the text for herself to perform but also for the rest of the cast. As in any language, there are choices to be made in terms of which words or sentence structures most authentically convey the meaning of the text. It has been a gift to become more familiar with the language and the process of translation from English to ASL.

Josette Bushell-Mingo - Director

- Is revenge possible? What does it achieve?

The questions I ask myself are, and I've been obsessed with that, I think, all my life, really, is the idea of revenge and forgiveness. For me, it's huge. It's a huge part of who we are. That's a question that I ask myself in a lot of the work, historic work. When it comes to this piece of work, I'm very reluctant to tell an audience what they should think. But what I do know is that when the story, which brings together these three women with three very, very different backgrounds, Black, Deaf, and a white woman from a specific period in time, more questions come than I could ever ask. One of the things that the piece does, I think, is ask the question: What is the women's relationship to each other and the world? This is one of the fundamentals. I think it's a piece that also explores the horror of violence. And in a rare, for me, very, very rare, brings three histories together I have never seen before, which is a Black history, a white history, and a Deaf history. I think the piece also, for many of us, not for us maybe, I'm only an ally, but certainly it brings the Deaf voice literally to the center of our civic question of respect and value, but also of historic abuse, neglect, and a complete disregard for our Deaf and hard of hearing community's presence in the world. When Dawn and I have spoken, the fact that no matter what discourse I'm having when I'm speaking about inclusion, a really strange word anyhow, but when we're speaking about inclusion I know from my limited experience as a Deaf ally that the Deaf voice, hard of hearing, and the language and culture is not on the agenda. Now, if I take it from a

Black gaze, from my perspective as a Black person, my Black Deaf and hard of hearing people are not in the picture. And this continues to terrify me slightly, but it also enrages me. And one of the ways that I can assuage that rage is to create work that is prepared to ask the most dangerous questions. And I think that To A Flame does. . . Is there another option between revenge and forgiveness? I don't know. I think that's a question for the audience. Is what they do to the father justified? That's my question. Do I think that there's something in between? I think most people are navigating that all the time. And that's what makes the piece so poignant, I think, is that it becomes harder to navigate when you know these things. In the piece, where it says, "He was watching me in the barn, in the kitchen, on the table. They drugged me with this," etcetera. These are contemporary resonances as well as historic. And we are often powerless as women in many instances to be able to change our circumstance. Not all the time, and it's both psychological and physical for me. But I think most people are navigating it. And in a so-called civilized society, one would like to think you think about it, but you don't do anything about it.

- Is it more important to know our own history as communities or our shared history as women?

I think when people are watching the work, I think part of the reason it gets such a strong response is because for the first time you see a history you think you know mashed up, and I use the word very deliberately, crushed up against another. You think you know what Black history is because you think of slave ships. Deaf, it's about this with the hands or something like that. And they'll never seen, often, someone like Dawn before ever. And then to see that in relationship to the white woman and her experience, to watch, and this is something we actually spoke about in the rehearsals. Is this some sort of Olympics of oppression? We've started to go into this area. But I think in relation to the piece, it depends on how you learn about your own history, as to whether or not it's better to know one or the other. I've understood that knowing more about my own Black history, but I work in the arts. That's different, I think, if you're in regular school, regular university. We know that education doesn't suffice that. But in relation to the piece, I think it is more important to know your own, but it really depends on how you learn about it. It really depends on how you learn about it. Of course, it's important to learn about everybody

else's history, but I don't know how you can relate that to your own position. So I believe that the way I learnt about slavery, the way I learnt about Black history, Black British history, etcetera, yes, to my family, yes, to my parents. But because I was in the arts I learned about other people's histories in a different way. But even that, as you indicate, is manipulated because I learned about Shakespeare. I didn't learn about Lorraine Hansberry²⁵ or August Wilson²⁶, for example, African American, at this point, writers. And I think the difficulty comes is that you can learn about other people's histories, but all of those histories are manipulated. You can learn about your own history, but you've got to dig deeper than what people tell you, and this is where the tension happens, I think. And I think in the play, you see the terrible manipulations of language, communication, silence. Silence is huge in the piece. I remember when we first spoke about this piece and what kind of nightmares the women have, what could happen to them. Dawn spoke very much about, from a deaf perspective, of being locked in and to be in the dark. This would be something terrifying. Certainly, the African Black global actresses spoke about violence, racist violence, and the stereotype of women and sexuality, Black women and sexuality. This was another kind of grotesqueness, this animal and ignorance. And certainly, we'll find out in this generation of actresses what their nightmares would be. But it was, again, always with the subliminal air of sexuality, the repression of the female, the repression of the life force, the repression of the body, and the abuse of the body, which runs through all three characters different. And I think you're absolutely right. I think until they know their difference, they are part of each other's manipulation. They are part of each other's. That's what happens to Harriet. Harriet, which is the Black character, of course. She is taught that she is ignorant. She's an animal. Dawn's character, of course, is taught that she must speak. And what I find an interesting tension is, which binds them all together, I think, is the sexuality. It's the female force. It's the feminine energy, of which, of course, Fanny comes to light with and

²⁵ Lorraine Vivian Hansberry was an African American playwright and civil rights activist. She was the first Black American female author to have a play performed on Broadway.

²⁶ August Wilson was an African American playwright. He has been referred to as the "theater's poet of Black America". He is best known for a series of 10 plays, collectively called The Pittsburgh Cycle, which chronicle the experiences and heritage of the African American community in the 20th century.

understands that in the piece, and what that awakens, and that in itself is dangerous. We know that in society. It's brutalized and manipulated and transgressed so many times, and we struggle with it to this very day, I think, with it, what that identity is, who we need to be as women. And I'm talking about the broadest spectrum now, all the way from our trans identity all the way through. There is something really complex happening at the moment. And even those multi-identities which exist in the piece at the time of Shelley, Frankenstein, all of these at this era here. Sometimes I think in some instances we were further ahead than we are now. I think we suffer from huge terror. I think most of the world is afraid of women, period. I really do. I think, and the life force that's contained in us, particularly older women, but that's a whole other play. I really do. So I think in that sense, that last question for me is very much about the navigation, as always, about learning about your own history in order to understand other people's histories. But depending on how you learn your own history means you may never be curious about other people's histories, and that's the danger.

- Why is the Deaf community excluded from the civil rights question?

My own experience is that people are afraid of Deaf people, that there is a hierarchy of humanness, and Deaf people don't fit that. That we have decided that speaking and talking and thinking is connected to greatness. It's like whiteness. It's all connected to a certain stereotype, a certain image of what a human being is. And Deaf people don't fit that. It doesn't matter what the spectrum is and how wide it is. My experience is that when I've been to Uganda, when I've been to Ghana, when I've been to New Zealand, Russia, it's the same. . . I think there has been and continues to be a systematic, and this is very important, a systematic brutalization of the Deaf voice. It is not seen as of value. It is not seen as human. It is not seen as worthy. And this is structural, financial, historical, academically, across the board.

Birgit - Dramaturg and Associate Director

- The question is, what are we going to do with the Father? What do we want to say with the surgery on the Father?

The premise that is in the script right now is we wanted to find out what makes a person tick, what makes this man act the way he did in a larger sense, like what makes humans evil? What has to happen that someone acts this way and is led or guided by his principles? And we will need to take him apart to find out, no matter what. It doesn't matter what it takes. So that's still in there, but we keep coming back to the question, what is it that we want to say with this? There are different options, right? Does it mean we didn't find anything? Like we won't find anything, like a thing. We don't find anything in specific that will tell us why he became the way he is and why humanity has been acting this way. And do we leave that to the audience to figure out? Or is it more important to suggest that we're all implicit and complicit in it? Because we're all sustaining the system, we're all tainted in a way by this way of thinking and acting. Is that actually what the message should be to the audience? That for the audience to be there means, on the one hand, yes, we are witnessing something, we are witnessing change, but it also means we're also complicit because we're watching it again, and it only happens because we're watching it, so it's quite multilayered and we're still sort of trying to figure out what is the most... I don't know if I want to use the word useful, because art should only be useful to a certain extent, but what is the most productive maybe, or- Yeah ... in a way, maybe effective in the long run, right, for an audience to come away with . . . And so, we're still sort of dancing around that part, for example. I know that we haven't quite landed on that yet, and it's definitely something I know Josette wants to explore further. And then the other part that might change a little bit is, and that's something that has changed from the beginning to now, in the different iterations, the relationship between the sisters and the audience. I think we've realized it's much more important maybe than we thought when we first started the project. Again, it goes back to the proposition that we say, this is something that everybody's complicit in, but we can't separate ourselves as an audience from what's happening. So how do we let the audience experience that and to what effect? Do we want the audience to feel like, yes, they're complicit, but they're also part of the change? Or do we want them to leave empowered because they

*know they're part of the change? Or do we want them to be pensive and considering what it is that they're doing to keep the system alive.*²⁷

Anna Hardwick – original script contributor, original hearing actor, 2011 (role Fanny)

- Have you ever been somewhere where you do not speak the language? How did you feel? Excited? Curious? Confused? Exhausted? Now imagine living in your own home country, speaking a different language than almost all of your neighbours. How does that change how you might feel? Did you know that American Sign Language is considered a language, and culture, and being Deaf is not considered a disability but a cultural group? Did you know that each country has its own version of sign language?

When you travel as an English speaker, and this is not something I'm proud of, it's something that I've experienced, is you might learn a few of the keywords like hello and thank you, but then you know that if you try to use a little bit of English, or now we have Google Translate, you might get a little further along than, say, if you spoke Hungarian. So English is a very dominant language. But with sign language, it is, first of all, something that I learned in the process is it's considered a culture and a language. . . And you might be living right next to a Deaf person, or a Deaf person in your community, who speaks a completely different language than you, but on the day to day, the dominant language is around them. So, that was sort of an interesting thing to me, the whole language aspect of sign language, that each culture has its own sign language. Like there's BSL, British Sign Language, which differs from ASL, American Sign Language, and in Canada we use ASL.

- Do you consider yourself part of, or are you close with someone who is part of, a marginalized group? There are three marginalized groups in this play. Which group do

²⁷ Since the interview, the team decided to revise the last line to “No longer in need of a flame” placing the emphasis on the women’s decision to free themselves from the forces of patriarchy. However, the question remains what will become of them now and what is the audience role in that future?

you most identify with, if any? Do you know the term intersectionality? If so, how does that term get reflected in this play?

One thing that I learned working on the piece all those years ago was the term intersectionality, the idea that you can be a feminist, but you can also be working for Deaf rights, or you can be a feminist and also an environmentalist, or you can be a feminist and also working on race and access for people from marginalized communities. So it's the idea that we're not siloed in different areas that are traditionally oppressed, like being a woman in a patriarchal society. That I am, I identify as a woman, and therefore, living in a patriarchal culture, I'm hitting up against things often. I would feel that my privilege as a white woman and as a hearing white woman allows me certain access that other people would not have. And I also learned in the process to listen a lot because I was playing the character of Fanny, the girl who is white in the story, and we explored some of the privileges that she had. And we also explored some of the suffering she endured because of being a woman. And, I think what was really key for me in that process was to learn to listen a lot more. I think because we were exploring historical and present-day context, three marginalized groups. As a white woman, I can imagine, and as an artist, I can put myself in the shoes of another group, but to represent that group, I would not consider that to be fair. And so it was about listening and learning as much as possible.

- What Gothic horrors depicted in this play reflect our current reality and oppressive regimes that exist in your home country and/or exist in other places in the world?

The optimist in me feels like there's a final last stand against progress, against rights for women, and for marginalized people, and that there's a resistance that's rising up in a sort of final futile effort of asserting itself before the population fully swings towards support for women and understanding of different cultures and different human rights, queer rights, trans rights. That all of that has come so far, but yet there's so much resistance in this moment in time, that I feel like it's almost like a last blip on our cultural timeline. But then the pessimist in me fears that we're really backsliding, and it's a very dangerous and scary time, that we didn't learn anything from the Second World War about fascism, that we didn't . . . I feel like at the time that Edgar

Allan Poe was writing and that we took this historical piece, we were looking at women at that time and how oppressed they were, and I am concerned that we're moving back into that place.

Nickeshia - Black Actor, 2026 (role Harriet)

- What is the 'Father' a representation of?

For me, the Father represents the shadow side of the human psyche. He comes in as the astute and wealthy saviour but has many flaws of his own that get projected onto the three girls. There is a line that Harriet says: "For a wink of acquiescence between men who share an appetite for inexperienced flesh". The inexperienced flesh being the three girls he decides to save and heal of their "natural deficiencies". . . one being Black, one being Deaf, and the other being white, young and sexually attractive. Father becomes this idea of how humanity so desperately wants to fix things, often a result of their own shortcomings, and how this 'fixing' of things can often cause more harm than good.

- How does sign language play an important role in this work?

I feel that signing allows for a special connection between Madeline, the moths and the house. The moths inform her of the whispers and sounds occurring in the house that she normally would not have access to. It also allows for the three sisters to have their own form of communication behind the father's back, which draws them closer together, showing how we are capable of acquiring new skills/languages to accommodate others. This goes beyond. I personally (as the actor playing Harriet) plan to continue learning sign language, now that I have been invited into this world. Lastly, the multiple languages allow for more diverse audiences and opportunities for others to feel seen in this work.

Juliana Monk - white actor, 2026 (role Fanny)

- How has the experience of being a woman changed since this play was set?

This play was set in the 1830s, when women existed under the shadow of men. In this play, the patriarchy takes the physical form of the house, which is reminiscent of the way the patriarchy is deeply baked into institutional structures to this day. The fact that women in our society now have more independence means that the play's characters, and their mothers, would likely have had more options open to them. However, the ending may have been the same, as the patriarchy is still omnipresent, though sometimes lurking in the shadows. It still traps us, even if we live under the guise of freedom (look no further than our neighbours to the south). These women were coerced and brainwashed into living under Father's system of oppression – We don't need to look far to see that happening now.

- Why is this story important to tell now?

A resonant theme of this play is how oppression intersects. Ableism, sexism, racism, and audism are all huge issues that are vital to explore. These systems of oppression create divides among the play's characters, but equally explores the experiences the characters share. Reflecting on our shared experiences lets us build empathy, and in this case, sisterhood. This play is relevant now, as we live in a world more aware of the challenges of the oppressed than previous generations, yet this piece takes it a step further, challenging and deepening that work, highlighting the complexity and nuance of these issues and intersections.

- Is there a clear moral to this story? If so, what is it and how is it important?

There isn't an easily definable moral to this play, which is what is exciting about it. There are plenty of themes, like sisterhood, destruction, resurrection and freedom that are integral to the piece, yet what this piece's strength is, is that it invites the viewer to take away what they need from seeing the play. The hope is that it affects the viewer and invites them to think on these interwoven themes and images and reflect on their own relationships to them.

Other Questions for the Audience/Reader

- What do we learn about sisterhood in this play?
- What do we learn about moral trauma in this play?
- What do we learn about revenge and forgiveness in this play? Is there another response to the oppression?
- Whose story is this?
- Who is responsible to address this?

Your Questions and Actions

To A Flame impacts us viscerally - meaning, we actually feel it – heart, mind, body and soul.

- How can we use that to pose questions to ourselves and each other and to take action with heart, mind, body and soul?

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APPENDIX A

ADAPTED EXCERPTS FROM: Schreyer Duarte, B. (2012). "Theatre against silencing", *Das Zeichen / The Sign*. German professional journal on the language and culture of Deaf people; Translated from German to English by the author. Printed with permission from *Das Zeichen/ The Sign*.

[...] Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839) draws on the style and themes of Victorian horror fiction, which explores the festering dark forces behind the cracked facade of a seemingly highly civilized, yet sensually starved society. Some of the characteristics of the genre, which Poe's text also features, are: ghosts and the undead, those buried alive who knock on coffin lids at night, a house with hidden cellars and a tragic past, ominously dark natural spectacles, incest, experiences of intoxication, and the fine line between genius and madness.

As her initial source of inspiration for an artistic collaboration between the Deaf performer Dawn Birley and the two hearing actresses Lisa Karen Cox and Anna Hardwick, director Josette Bushell-Mingo suggested Stephen Berkoff's stage adaptation of "The Fall of the House of Usher". The choice of this material was based on multiple considerations. The questions underlying the project which Bushell-Mingo wished to explore, are: What does terror mean? How do we experience terror? While horror refers to the external, concrete circumstances that frighten us, terror is primarily experienced sensorially. Therefore, the integration of non-textual communication was particularly suitable for the treatment and artistic representation of the subject matter. The bodies of the actors, image and video projections, Japanese Butoh dance, and pantomime were to become the basis on which the project would communicate with its audience. [...]

The idea soon arose to develop a feminist version of the source material: to transform the three main characters in Poe and Berkoff's play (the visitor, the young master of the house, and his sick sister) into three young women who, imprisoned in the patriarchal structures of the 19th century, face the downfall of the dilapidated house (itself a symbol of the ruling system). Our play, *To A Flame*, first and foremost, tells of processes of systematic concealment and

silencing, of hiding and belittling dissidents, social outsiders, and women. The three characters in our project are brought together on stage as representatives of oppressed population groups. They come from different times and different geographical zones and are therefore intended to be understood across countries and eras. [In this first version of our text,] "Fanny" is a Western European, middle-class woman and represents all those who were and are diagnosed as hysterical by patriarchal Victorian society and silenced with opium [Note: in the current script version, she is the daughter of a (White) prostitute]. "Harriet" is a young African slave in the house of a wealthy colonial master; "Madeline" represents those Deaf who were considered mentally ill and kept in "insane asylums", especially in the 19th century. As girls, the three women were "rescued" from their respective environments by a mysterious father figure, and brought to "safety" in a huge, inaccessible house in the countryside, where they were locked away. In their shared otherness and tied to each other like sisters by similar traumatic childhood experiences, the three live completely isolated from the outside world. Left to their own devices, they develop their own rules and rituals, as well as means of communication. All three of them use sign language; Madeline can read her "sisters" lips, and Fanny and Harriet communicate with each other in both sign language and spoken English. *To A Flame* also addresses the possible break-down of misunderstanding and prejudice through an unconventional approach to communication, represented in the utopian coexistence of the three children and adolescent girls.

An unexpected discovery changes the symbiotic relationship between the sisters. It becomes increasingly unbalanced, with each woman individually fighting against the decay of their shared little world, and thus against each other. When Harriet discovers Fanny in the basement as the subject of medical experiments, she, in turn, begins to systematically investigate the authoritarian father figure—drawing on the medical knowledge she has acquired through her scientific studies. Finally, the house, a symbol of the prevailing patriarchal structure, collapses. Madeline is the only survivor. Now it is up to her to pass on her experiences.

The play also poses the question: In what ways do we repeat and recreate existing mechanisms of oppression and behavioral patterns after having functioned within such a system long enough? Oppression from outside ultimately leads to oppression among ourselves and to the maintenance of existing structures: "The oppressed become oppressors."

[...]

Through the characters on stage communicating with American Sign Language, with the help of simultaneous translation as part of the dialogue, or through projected text as part of the stage design, Deaf people are supposed to have linguistic access to 90% of the play's text, while hearing people are only supposed to be able to hear, read, or have translated approximately 60% of the text. This is intended to create for hearing audiences the same situation that Deaf people are so often exposed to in their daily interactions with hearing people.

[...]

We learn that the use of sign language was prohibited in Canadian schools from the late 19th century until the 1960s because it was mistakenly believed that it would cause Deaf children to develop speech disorders. Dawn Birley shared with us that she openly opposes the use of cochlear implants in young children, who, unlike Deaf adults, rarely have a say in such a significant decision for their future development. What hardly any hearing person is aware of is that in 2007, Canada was one of the first countries to sign the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; yet, to this day, many fundamental rights of Deaf people are still being curtailed in Canada: "Canada ratified the convention and yet they are doing the wrong things, cutting down on interpreting services, trying to close down schools, or even worse, banning sign language." (D. Birley)

[...]

Another core concern of *To A Flame* emerged: "Where are we today in relation to this Victorian context? Where are we as women (Black women, Deaf women, other groups of marginalized) today and here, in Canada? What if these groups of women had known of each other then? What could have been done, what prevented? What is it that prevents feminist progress to continue, at certain points in history and for certain groups of women?"

How should or can we represent a unified position in the minority debate, for example, by arguing solely from a feminist perspective? In the rehearsal room alone, several feminist perspectives were represented, some of which overlapped but also contradicted each other: those of immigrants, Deaf women, Native Canadian women, European women in North America, African-British women in Europe, etc. This conscious discussion and juxtaposition of related outsider perspectives, for which the term "intersectionality" is used in English, has become a guiding principle for Bushell-Mingo's work with minorities. However, this is also a term that calls for caution, and thanks to Bushell-Mingo, this also became a parameter of our project: "Perspectives shift depending on the culture, ethnicity, history, race, etc. from whose vantage point we view things. Things change for each individual and each group, even over time. The dilemma becomes apparent when we all come together to tell our respective stories: Here we must be able to say: 'No, that doesn't apply to me (anymore).'" (J. Bushell-Mingo) [...]

"Deaf people are frequently left out in the dissemination of knowledge – my grandmother wasn't taught about reproduction and sexual education until the age of 18 or 19, when she was already married and pregnant," Dawn told us. [...]

Logistically, a performance using sign language also requires perfect planning of sightlines for Deaf viewers; and in darkly lit or screen-projected sign language scenes, the facial expressions of the communicators, which are so important for understanding ASL, are often lost.

Currently, all dialogues and monologues will either:

1. be signed or spoken/sung in ASL by one of the actors and simultaneously translated by another
2. be presented with text via video projection (with or without parallel presentation through spoken text or ASL)
3. Signed or spoken by the dialogue partner through a corresponding response and/or partial repetition
4. Displayed as a video of the same person in sign language

5. Supported by projections of images as poetic associations or localization of the narrative (view of a cathedral, a historic asylum, a cemetery, or historical depictions of Deaf people in portrait photography, etc.).

6. Individual sentences or words are projected, “wandering” across the stage and the bodies, remaining as projections, as aphorisms or pointed summaries of the events.

This creates four levels of communication (“echoes,” as we also called them): spoken text; displayed text (ASL and projection); sung text; associations and fragmentary understanding of the Deaf and hearing: an open space, an “additive translation,” is created.

[...]

Another dramatic insight we found valuable was the realization that we can play with the delayed delivery of information, often perceived as a hindrance for Deaf people. Consciously used, this strategy underscores the power that the dissemination and withholding of knowledge exerts over us. [...]

- end of excerpt -

APPENDIX B

To a Flame – Cast and Creative Team

Written by	Erin Shields
English to ASL Translation by	Dawn Jani Birley
Directed & Choreographed by	Josette Bushell-Mingo
Starring	Dawn Jani Birley
	Nickeshia Garrick
	Juliana Monk
Accompanied by Cellist	Beth Silver
Dramaturge & Associate Director	Birgit Schreyer Duarte
Assistant Directed by	Andrea Donaldson
Set and Costume Design by	Jung-Hye Kim
Lighting Design by	André du Toit*
Composer & Co-Sound Design by	Deanna H. Choi*
Co-Sound Design by	Jenna Geen
Projection Design by	Laura Warren*
Assistant Projection Design by	MacKenzie Cornfield**
Stage Managed by	Sally Roberts
Assistant Stage Managed by	Michelle Soicher
Production Managed by	Maya Royer
Technical Direction by	Micah Champagne
Carpentry by	Dale Sharp Jr.