

Playing God: Theatre exploring cochlear implants



SUMMARY

Playing God, a deaf theatre performance that toured the UK playing to both deaf and hearing audiences, looked at a dilemma faced by parents of deaf babies: whether or not they should allow their child to have a cochlear implant, an electronic device inserted into the brain to help improve hearing. It explored

the danger of isolating a deaf child from the deaf community and deaf identity by relying on a cochlear implant, rather than teaching him or her to sign. The play sparked considerable debate, both in the bar afterwards and on internet boards.

Background

Actress and theatre director Paula Garfield set up theatre company Deafinitely Theatre in 2002, to use drama as a vehicle to explore issues affecting deaf people. Deaf herself, Ms Garfield also has a deaf daughter who was a baby at the time. She found herself under a lot of pressure from the medical community to allow her daughter to have a cochlear implant.

These electronic devices are implanted into a deaf child's brain before the age of two. Accompanied by external components worn on the head or body like a hearing aid, they bypass the damaged hair cells in the inner ear and stimulate the hearing nerve directly.

Their use is controversial, however, in part because they don't restore hearing or cure deafness. They make it possible for profoundly deaf people to hear some sounds, but don't enable them listen to fluent speech or music properly. Parents like Ms Garfield are then often encouraged not to sign to their infants, in an attempt to make them speak using the cochlear implant. This can leave children with cochlear implants unable to communicate properly with either hearing people or deaf people.

Informed consent was another important issue for Ms Garfield. Was it right to let her daughter have such an invasive operation when she was still little more than a baby, and unable to have a say in the matter? Deaf teenagers who had cochlear implants inserted as babies often say they wish it hadn't been done, and they had been taught to sign instead.

Faced with this dilemma, Ms Garfield decided to develop a play exploring these issues, and enlisted the help of writer Rebecca Atkinson, who is also deaf. The result was *Playing God*, which toured the UK and played to both deaf and hearing audiences.

Outcome

The play explores the dilemma of deaf parents Emma and John, who have a deaf daughter and have to decide whether or not she should have a cochlear implant. Their different experiences of deafness feed into their decision. Emma was born hearing and became deaf through meningitis. Her parents could hear, but learned to sign at the same time that she did. John on the other hand was born deaf in a hearing family. His parents never learned to sign, so he was isolated as a child and only learned to sign as a teenager when he joined the deaf community.

Emma is worried that her daughter is unable to speak, and wants her to have a cochlear implant. John argues that the deaf community has its own language and identity, and that his daughter won't need any other. He also expresses concern that he will lose his connection with her if she doesn't learn to sign.

Throughout, the play aims to present the different sides of the argument neutrally, highlighting both the benefits and downsides of cochlear implants, so that the audience can decide for themselves where they stand on the issue.

One of the challenges for the production was to find creative ways of ensuring that both deaf and hearing audience members understand the drama. This means using voiceovers when an actor is signing, or shadow signing if an actor is speaking. It is also possible to convey what one character has just said through the response of another. "My daughter is very well, thank you," clearly indicates that the previous speaker or signer was enquiring after the character's daughter, for example.

How it's making a difference

Playing God travelled to Wolverhampton, Colchester, Gloucester, Derby, Manchester, Salisbury, Edinburgh and London (where it ran for two weeks at Soho Theatre), reaching a total of 2327 deaf and hearing audience members.

Audience members were asked to fill out feedback forms and around a quarter of them did so. Of those, 71 per cent said the play was excellent and 26 per cent said it was good. Forty-six per cent said it was their first experience of deaf theatre and 32 per cent said they were deaf or hard of hearing themselves.

Of all the plays produced by Deafinitely Theatre, this was the one that most affected people. Observers noticed there was a lot of debate among audience members in the bar after performances and the play also sparked a lot of dialogue on internet boards. Some deaf audience members said they wished they hadn't had a cochlear implant, others said that they were going through the same dilemma with a deaf child at the time. Hearing audience members commented that it was an issue they would never have thought about.

A DVD has been made of the production, 100 of which have been sold, and clips have been shown at a debate held at Wellcome Collection.

www.deafinitelytheatre.co.uk

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