

# THE EBISU SIGN LANGUAGE THEATRE LABORATORY AND THE GRAMMAR OF THE BODY

Wendy Sandler  
August 20, 2018

## 1. INTRODUCTION

A new deaf cultural phenomenon was founded in 2014: the Ebisu Sign Language Theatre Laboratory. The theatre arose as part of a larger research project in the Sign Language Research Laboratory at the University of Haifa, funded by the European Research Council, called *The Grammar of the Body*.<sup>1</sup> The goal of the overall project is to investigate the relation between the body and the structure of human language, both signed and spoken. The theatre part of the project has two aims, one scientific and one artistic.<sup>2</sup>

The scientific aim is to understand how actions of every part of the body in a visual medium interact to convey information. It is ideal to explore this with deaf actors because they have a visual language at their disposal – sign language – and the ability to incorporate their tacit knowledge of this language into mime and physical theatre.

The artistic goal is to mold a new visual ‘language’ of performance, which conveys ideas and emotions through intimate interaction between the linguistic foundation of sign language and the artistic devices of physical theatre, including pantomime. Unlike most deaf theatre in the world, which is typically interpreted to speech or captioned, the Ebisu Sign Language Theatre Laboratory aims to create a medium that is accessible to both deaf and hearing audiences without interpreting.

At this writing, the group has produced two shows, under the unconventional and creative professional direction of Atay Citron.<sup>3</sup> A variety of techniques combine with improvisation to create the theatrical medium of Ebisu. One technique involves repetition of the same sign over and over, until it changes, incorporates actions of the face and the rest of the body, and leads to new but

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<sup>1</sup> The website of Wendy Sandler’s ERC research project can be accessed at:  
<http://gramby.haifa.ac.il/>.

<sup>2</sup> Link to home page of Ebisu Sign Language Theatre Laboratory:  
<http://gramby.haifa.ac.il/index.php/2016-03-13-14-30-57/sign-language-theatre-laboratory?lang=en>

<sup>3</sup> Assistant director Michal Vaknin and Assistant Director and Producer Adva Weinstein are important parts of the team. Gal Belsitzman, research student, has also provided invaluable assistance, as have interpreters Tami Shema and Dana Neria.

related meanings, as the repetitions continue and evolve. Instead of directing the mind to determine what the body does, the experience is one in which the body leads the mind (see Example 3 below).

The actors are an integral part of the creative process, drawing on their own experiences as deaf people in a visual, corporeal world, to create performances that can be appreciated by both deaf and hearing audiences, directly. In this crucial way, the theatre laboratory is unlike other creative endeavors in which deaf people have participated. In the Ebisu Sign Language Theatre Laboratory, under Citron's professional guidance and training, deaf actors create their own art form.

The impact of the Ebisu theatre begins the moment the audience enters the theatre. Deaf people warmly greet friends and anticipate a rare evening of visual theatre. Hearing people undergo a transformation – understanding through experience, usually for the first time in their lives, that there is a community made up of deaf people, with their own vibrant language and culture. Hearing people belong to the minority group here (whether or not they are numerically in the minority in the audience), making an effort to grasp what is going on around them, and experiencing the evening with a sense of enjoyment and awe.

The group chose the name 'Ebisu' for the theatre laboratory. It is the name of a god of prosperity in the Japanese Shinto tradition -- one of the only deaf deities in the all world's religions. Having chosen this unusual name for the group, they named their first show, "It's Not About Ebisu". The second show is called 'Their Language' [sfat hahem] – a Hebrew play on words with [sfat ha'em], 'Native Language'. Below we describe each of the two shows produced so far, and explain what we have learned from them about the significance of sign language for deaf people, and about the grammar of the body.

## 2. FIRST PRODUCTION: 'IT'S NOT ABOUT EBISU'

'It's Not About Ebisu' takes the form of a fable, in which a child is born in the forest and raised by animals, eventually learning from a four-armed shaman that he is deaf. The shaman grants the protagonist the magical gift of sign language. This gift enables him to conquer evil, in the form of a gyrating dragon composed of the other actors' bodies. This show has been performed in Tel Aviv and Haifa, at festivals in New York City and Reims, France, and at the Rochester Technical Institute for the Deaf. Beyond the simple fable, audiences are captivated by the remarkable ensemble work of the actors who use the language of Ebisu to develop the story, and by the imaginative development of

the play from scene to scene. Figure (1a) shows the four-armed shaman, and (1b) shows most of the original troupe, configured as a tree in the forest.



**Figure 1. (a) Four-armed Shaman: Lee Dan<sup>4</sup> and Ella Okhotin. (b) Tree of actors (left to right): Golan Zino, Lee Dan, Alon Zenou, Shoval Ben Zeev, Ella Okhotin, Nurit Shalom, and Ilya Markov. Roots: Adis Tesffa Sibhat. Photo by Yair Meyuhas.**

### 3. SECOND PRODUCTION: ‘THEIR LANGUAGE’

The second production is very different from the first, warranting the name ‘laboratory’ for the group. Ebisu is not set in a single mold, but is constantly evolving, reflecting the world through deaf experience in a different way in each creation.

‘Their Language’ plunges head-on into the clash between sign language and speech, with the focus on deaf education. The show places the audience in a classroom in the deaf education system. The actors are all dressed in blue and beige as school children, sitting among the audience. The play proceeds from home room, to speech therapy, recess, bible, Hebrew language, and more. But this seemingly benign progression is anything but benign.

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<sup>4</sup> Lee Dan is a well known sign language interpreter – the only hearing member of the group.

Using the performance method of Ebisu, the production is improvisational and personal, and the experiences portrayed are actually taken from the childhood of the actors. They convey widespread emphasis by hearing teachers on speech – a system that is not directly accessible to deaf people, one that is grueling to learn, and never natural. In ‘Their Language’, the gift of sign language – use of the hands, face, and body for self expression -- is misunderstood and repressed by educators, who favor instead motions of the mouth and vocal cords to create sounds that the children cannot perceive. With this bias, oral education becomes a form of oppression. Discussions with audiences after performances confirm that the message comes through, viscerally.

The play is not about speech/oral education per se. ‘Their Language’ is about the fundamental nature and role of sign language for deaf people. The production uses oral education as a microcosm to reveal misconceptions of hearing people the world over. Today, in the era of the cochlear implant, it provides crucial material for reflection.

#### 4. EXCERPTS FROM ‘THEIR LANGUAGE’: SIGN LANGUAGE, PHYSICAL THEATRE, AND POETRY

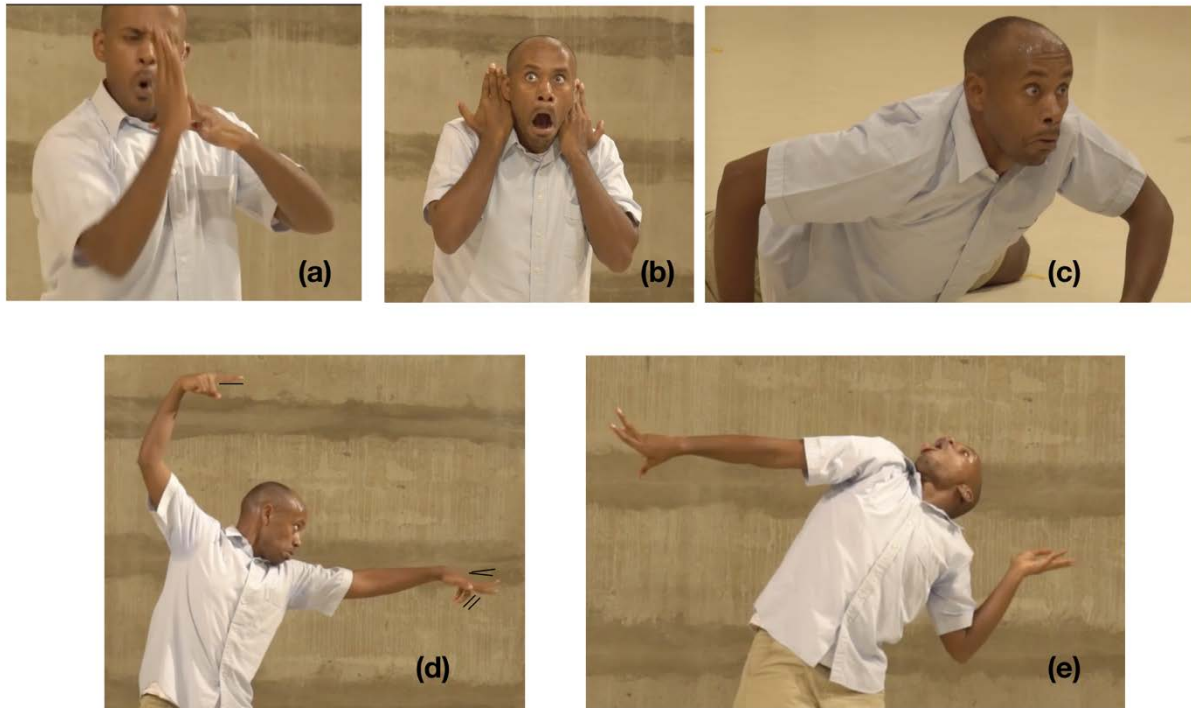
The examples pictured below provide a taste of the second show, ‘Their Language’. They show the creative technique of intertwining sign language and physical theatre to convey meaning, each example in a different way. The first example shows a sequence in vernacular Israeli Sign Language, performed in a theatrical style that reveals the flexibility and communicative power of the language. The second example shows physical theatre, with simultaneous intertwining of elements from sign language. The third example is excerpted from a sign language poem. Here, the signed words on the hands are the focal point, and they are manipulated artistically, to create poetic form. Figures 2-4 below are excerpted from a film of the play recorded by Ophir Ben Shimon.

4.1. Theatrical Israeli Sign Language. In Figure 2, a student tells the biblical story of Creation in expressive ISL. 2(a-c) are ISL signs, conveyed in theatrical form with body involvement and facial gestures and expressions. In telling of the sixth day (d), she mimes the act of taking a rib from Adam.



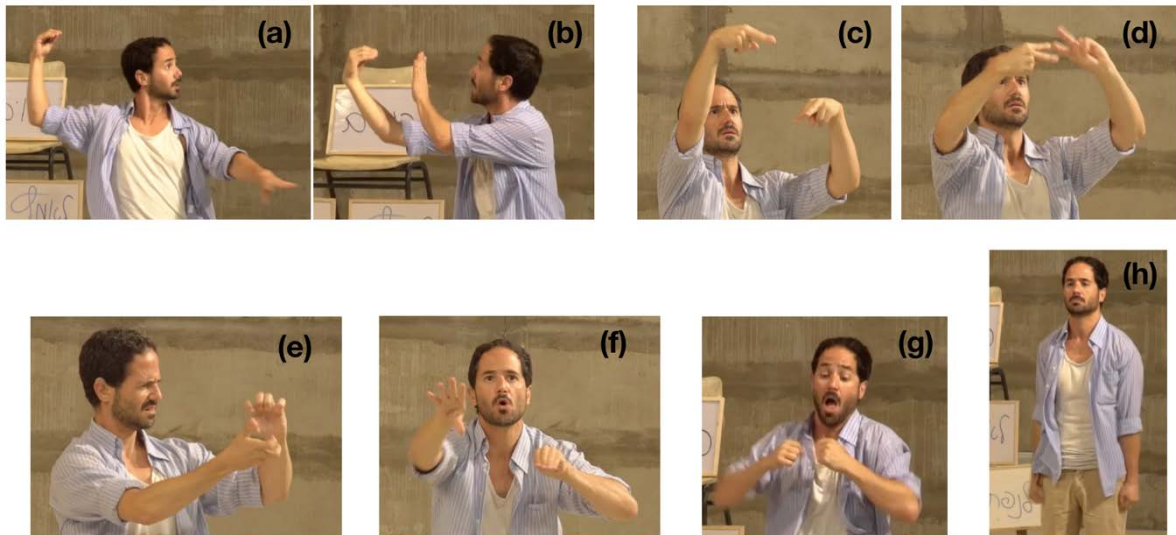
**Figure 2. Expressive vernacular ISL of Ella Okhotin, mixed with theatrical facial expression and gestures. (a) chaos, (b) emptiness (of the earth), (c) (God) see-emptiness, (d) pull-out-rib.**

4.2. Physical theatre with sign language elements. Not accepting the biblical version, another student tells the story of evolution starting with the big bang. His performance relies much more heavily on physical theatre and mime, but he also incorporates certain elements of sign language (general ‘classifier’ handshapes that stand for the shape of entities), which he combines with movements of the whole body and face. In 3 (a), the two hands as flat object classifiers present the first emergence of a life form above the surface of the sea. In (b), the hands are fins, and the facial expression conveys the (personified) amazement of the creature viewing the earth above water for the first time. In (c), the actor embodies an early lizard-like land creature, with his whole body. Later in this evolution enactment, (d) shows an early human hunting a running animal, in which the actor’s body is that of the hunter, one hand is configured like a spear, and the other hand is the running body of the hunted animal. In (e), we see the wounded animal, manifested in the actor’s entire body.



**Figure 3. The big bang in Adis Tesffa Sibhat’s explosive language of physical theatre, incorporating sign language devices. (a) ISL classifiers show a creature rising above the surface of the water; (b) sea creature’s first look at the earth above water; (c) lizard-like land creature; (d) hunter in pursuit of a running animal; (e) the mortally wounded animal.**

4.3. Sign language poetry. At the end of a Hebrew lesson, in which students show the teacher the ISL equivalent of roots and derivations, a student synthesizes the concept in a poetic monologue. Throughout the entire poem, in a kind of signed alliteration, the signer selects from all the possibilities of sign language (i) only expressions involving both hands together, and (ii) only two groups of fingers: all five fingers, or index plus middle finger. The handshapes are altered and manipulated creatively, with different kinds of movement, to evoke events and relations, and they are connected aesthetically in this poetic form. The face and body convey focus, attitudes, and emotions.



**Figure 4. Excerpts from Golan Zino’s poem artistically manipulate handshapes and movement patterns to create a sequence of interactions leading to communication shutdown.<sup>5</sup> (a) speakers pass by deaf man unperceived (b) (deaf man) addressing a speaker (in an attempt to communicate) (c) look-down-on, (d) interact, (e) distort, (f) copy speech (g) breakdown (h) shut-up.**

In the book *A Language in Space* (Meir & Sandler 2008)<sup>6</sup>, we show that Israeli Sign Language is a fully expressive linguistic system with grammatical structure and rules. We explain that the visual nature of sign language makes it naturally accessible to deaf people, and that sign language is therefore essential for the earliest communication and development of deaf children in the home and at preschool. Through the creations of the Ebisu Sign Language Theatre Laboratory, we are able to understand that sign language is more than all that. For deaf people who sign in their daily lives, sign language is an inseparable part of who they are.

<sup>5</sup> The excerpts are chosen to illustrate the technique. The full poem presents a much richer chain of experience that includes a series of frustrating attempts to communicate with hearing people, and the restriction of free expression experienced after the ultimate attempt: a cochlear implant.

<sup>6</sup> Meir, Irit and Sandler, Wendy. 2008. *A Language in Space: A Window onto Israeli Sign Language*. Mahwah, NJ. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. (English version of 2004 Hebrew book published by University of Haifa Press.)



**Figure 5. Members of the Ebisu ensemble before a performance (left to right): Golan Zino, Alaa Sarsour Siyaad, Nurit Shalom, Shoval Ben Zeev, and Adis Tesffa Sibhat. *Photo by Yair Meyuhas.***