

# ‘WHERE LIES YOUR TEXT?’: *TWELFTH NIGHT* IN AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE TRANSLATION

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In 1998 a team of Deaf<sup>1</sup> and hearing artists set out to translate a full-length Shakespearian play into American Sign Language (ASL). Earlier attempts to translate Shakespeare, most notably those by the National Theater of the Deaf, had resulted in an adaptation of *Hamlet*, entitled *Ophelia*, as well as an hour-long version of *Macbeth* and a series of selected scenes and monologues from Shakespeare’s best-known works entitled *Shakespeare Unmasked*. Deaf schools and theatres around the country have produced dozens of Shakespeare’s plays over the years, but without any coherent methodology of translating his works into ASL and with few archives as examples. The aim of the ASL Shakespeare Project experiment was twofold. First, to translate one play, *Twelfth Night*, by means of a systematic and intellectually rigorous model, using digital technology to record the translation, and further to use the translation for a professional production of the play that was to open in Philadelphia almost two years after the translation process began.<sup>2</sup> The second goal of the ASL Shakespeare Project was to disseminate the play itself as well as information about the process on a website completely accessible to Deaf students in both ASL and English. The result is [www.aslshakespeare.com](http://www.aslshakespeare.com), the first bilingual and bicultural website on Shakespeare on the internet, and a full-length production of *Twelfth Night* (on DVD) performed in American Sign Language with simultaneous English voice-over and optional captioning.<sup>3</sup> Translating one of Shakespeare’s most musical of plays into a visual and manual language has created a new Shakespearian artifact that fuses text with performance and pro-

vides a new perspective on both. This paper not only details the practical and theoretical implications underlying a translation of Shakespeare’s play into a visual/manual text, but also advocates for a re-envisioned definition of text itself.

This new translation by the ASL Shakespeare Project team was not the first attempt at rendering *Twelfth Night* into the language. In 1998, Luane Davis and John DeBlass directed an hour-long adaptation of *Twelfth Night*, for ages ten and up, at the Interborough Repertory Theater in New York. The piece, adapted by Robert Mooney, ‘concentrated on the seven major characters’, removed ‘the long subplot’, and was performed in a style coined by director Davis as ‘Del-Sign’, a new acting technique that combines the ‘basic tenets of François Delsarte’s (1811–71) codified movement technique and the foundations of American Sign Language’.<sup>4</sup> In 1985 an American Sign Language translation of *Twelfth Night* was produced in Los Angeles by

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<sup>1</sup> I follow the convention in Deaf Studies of capitalizing ‘Deaf’ to signify the culture of people who use American Sign Language as their primary means of communication. Lower case ‘deaf’ indicates the audiological condition of hearing loss.

<sup>2</sup> The play was produced by the Amaryllis Theater in Philadelphia. The translation process and the production were both directed by the author but the translation was a collective one owing to the diligence of many, mostly to Adrian Blue (master translator and sign coach), Catherine Rush (dramaturg) and Robert DeMayo who formed the primary translation team, staying together throughout the sixteen months of translation.

<sup>3</sup> Published and distributed by Gallaudet University Press, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Laurel Graeber, ‘Signs of Shakespeare’, *The New York Times*, 20 March, 1998.

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American Theater Arts, directed by Don Eitner and translated by hearing actor, Tom Henschel, and hearing interpreter/actor Lou Fant.<sup>5</sup> Working from Shakespeare's original play, they updated the imagery throughout the translation process, rendering the more current thought or image into ASL. Wanting to create a universal experience for the entire audience, they decided to change Shakespeare's original text by back-translating their ASL translation into English, effectively rendering Shakespeare's original as an English translation of the ASL. Their translation of *Twelfth Night* was never recorded, and there are no published versions of their script, which was written in Fant's own method of transcription, making further study of it virtually impossible. The goal of the ASL Shakespeare Project was to develop a model of translation that could be replicated for future study, serve as a basis for additional translations and productions, and increase the study of ASL language and literature through the emerging field of visual poetics.

The translation of Shakespeare into ASL raises a host of questions about the practice of theatrical translation and forces a reconsideration of almost every standard practice involved in it. ASL conveys meaning by means of the three dimensions of a signer's body coupled with his movement through space. Because it is not fixed or static but requires kinetic movement, it exists in four dimensions, so that any attempt to transcribe this language in the height and width of a written text is not only impractical but ultimately unfeasible. Why bother trying to translate Shakespeare into ASL, some might argue, since Deaf people can always read the original in English. That argument rests on a common misunderstanding that conflates English with ASL and ignores ASL as a primary language. While distinctly American, ASL is nonetheless linguistically a separate language from English, distinct in its grammar and syntax. Many Deaf people in Britain, for example, may also know English, but would find an ASL translation of *Twelfth Night* as incomprehensible as ASL users would find a British Sign Language (BSL) translation. Complicating matters even further than the grammatical, syntactical and four-dimensional differences between ASL

and all other spoken/written languages, ASL is also a performed language. Any performance requires consideration of a dizzying number of variables, since description of even a simple, continuous, linear motion requires a means of plotting both movement through space and movement through time; however, ASL entails movement that is dispersed grammatically throughout the body.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, the structure of ASL requires a whole new consideration of writing, reading and literature itself.

There has been no standard process for ASL translations of Shakespeare. In most cases, individual actors are asked to translate their own lines from English to ASL – a practice that mitigates against any linguistic, stylistic or historical continuity. Even those within the community of signed languages question the possibility of translating a visual/manual language. As late as 2004 Peter Llewellyn-Jones, Programme Director of the Centre for BSL (British Sign Language) Translation Studies at the University of Leeds writes that 'if one distinguishes between translation and interpretation, the former working with written source and target forms and the latter the live interpretation of a spoken message in real time, the works of Shakespeare have never been translated into a signed language'.<sup>7</sup> His definition is too narrow because it rests on the assumption that both the source and target languages must be confined to the traditional notion of two-dimensional writing. There are, as he suggests, many productions of Shakespeare throughout England that are *interpreted* into BSL, a practice that requires great skill in instant manoeuvring between languages and cultures in

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<sup>5</sup> Fant is a Child of Deaf Adults, or CODA, a native ASL language user, and author of books on learning ASL and interpreting.

<sup>6</sup> See H.-Dirksen L. Bauman's 'Getting out of Line: Toward a Visual and Cinematic Poetics of ASL', in H.-Dirksen L. Bauman, Jennifer L. Nelson and Heidi M. Rose, eds., *Signing the Body Poetic: Essays on American Sign Language Literature* (Berkeley, 2006), pp. 95–117.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Llewellyn-Jones, 'Interpreting Shakespeare's Plays Into British Sign Language', in Ton Hoenselaars, ed., *Shakespeare and the Language of Translation* (London, 2004), p. 199.

the moment. However, interpreting is very different from translating and the differences between the two processes have profound implications for the final products. An interpretation is as ephemeral as the performance itself, but a translation remains stable and fixed and therefore promotes further study as a 'literary' document in and of itself. Rather than privileging written language, as Llewellyn-Jones does, I wish to subvert traditional notions of text by considering filmed or videotaped ASL as a 'written' text – fixed in time and space. This claim, prevalent in Deaf Studies, does not designate any film as text, but rather as the specific documentation of American Sign Language through video-graphic means.<sup>8</sup> This has major implications for the study of literature, challenging the very terms of writing, text and literature by re-framing the critical discourse in terms of bodies, presence and performance.

This practical distinction between the two processes, interpreting and translating, also forces a reconsideration of the performance products that these processes generate. Most often interpreters stand to the side of a stage and Deaf spectators must constantly shift their attention from the action on-stage to the adjacent interpreters, forcing a constant split-focus. Other interpreted performances incorporate both character and interpreter through 'shadow signing', in which interpreters, usually dressed in black, follow behind individual characters and sign the spoken dialogue. This second theatrical style allows Deaf spectators to see the action on stage and the ASL simultaneously without too much shift of focus, but both approaches privilege hearing audiences and the English text by making ASL secondary or peripheral to the spoken word and performance. A different technique, one pioneered forty years ago by the National Theater of the Deaf, makes ASL the primary performance language on stage by having all the characters use ASL while hearing actors 'voice' the spoken English text for hearing members of the audience. This technique eliminates the need for interpreters and makes English a secondary, though simultaneous, 'oral and aural' text that exists in tandem with the ASL translation. This was the target performance

method in translating *Twelfth Night*. Coupled with that choice is the assumption that the target audiences for this translation would be both Deaf and hearing. Two other assumptions were made explicit at the outset of the translation process: first, that all of the characters in the play would be Deaf, which creates not just an ASL translation, but an entirely Deaf theatrical world of Illyria; and second, all actors would only use ASL while other actors voiced the lines – no hearing actor would be allowed to voice and sign simultaneously as is often the case in other ASL-based productions.<sup>9</sup> Making the characters Deaf allowed us to translate sound-based images and stage directions into analogous visual images that are more appropriate to Deaf culture. The method also created unique and challenging translation cruxes. Separating ASL from English helped maintain respect for the language and simultaneously corrected the frequent error that supposes ASL to be a derivative form of English – simultaneous signing and speaking furthers that bias.

The translation team was careful at all times during the process to make sure that voiced English remained subservient to the ASL. That is, the ASL translation was not beholden to the vocal expression of the same lines. It is often easier to render an image more succinctly in ASL than in English. Moreover, sometimes the signs take longer so that

<sup>8</sup> See for example 'The Camera as Printing Press: How Film Has Influenced ASL Literature' by Christopher B. Krentz, and 'Textual Bodies, Bodily Texts' by Jennifer L. Nelson in *Signing the Body Poetic*, pp. 51–70 and 118–29.

<sup>9</sup> The bifurcation of character through separating voice and body elicits numerous additional critical vantage points: what emerges from the performance of this translation is a series of different but simultaneous texts, juxtaposed as sound (temporality) and presence (physicality), ASL and English, hearing and Deaf, each distinguished by the composition of the audience. The performance provides the Deaf audience with an ASL text, readable like any other, completely interpreted through the physicality of the performers. The hearing audience, on the other hand, hears Shakespeare's text at the same time as it sees the ASL translation. This conjunction creates for them a visual and aural dissonance at times – a recognition that they are hearing one language and seeing an altogether different one.

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the spoken text is finished long before the ASL. Throughout the translation process the hearing members of the team would voice the text while another signed it, testing the timing of voice to sign, but the translation was never altered for fear that the hearing audiences would be bored by periods of silence. The exact timing of matching the voice to the sign must be worked out in rehearsal, not in translation. Indeed, in the performance of this translation, the speaking actors always attempted to match the signing actors, increasing or decreasing tempo and rate to match the ASL as closely as possible, not the other way around. Throughout both the translation and the rehearsal periods, however, the translation team vigilantly privileged sight over sound, approaching the play from a Deaf epistemological centre rather than a hearing one.

Transcribing a four-dimensional visual/manual language into two dimensions is the ASL translator's eternal dilemma. Resolving just one issue resulted in hydra-like growth of new ones. The translation itself took approximately eighteen months of work and was revised during the rehearsal period that followed. Primary was how to document the initial translation since ASL is impossible to transcribe in the two dimensions of written text, without special knowledge of the systems that some linguists have developed to write it. Numerous methods of notating three-dimensional movement have been attempted throughout the centuries, with varying degrees of success. In the 1970s linguist William Stokoe began his method of transcribing sign language on paper in an attempt to record the complexities of the language and to offer a method of reading ASL. However, none of the translators on this project was trained in Stokoe Notation or any other form of writing ASL, and to complicate matters, each one had a different method of glossing English words, ideas or sentences for themselves in ASL. Usually, the words that serve as glosses of ASL are written in English, providing another reason why many people wrongly consider ASL a reduced version of English. Others include short code in their glosses, like 'CL', which designate a specific type of handshape known as classifiers and then follow that code with descriptions of move-

ment. The following example of Sir Toby's first line that begins 2.3 shows Shakespeare's language on the left, followed by one translation team member's gloss on the right:

<p>Approach Sir Andrew; Not to be abed after midnight is to be up betimes; and <i>diluculo</i> <i>surgere</i>, thou know'st – (2.3.1–3)</p>	<p>come, good night, prepare to 2CL LH, 'C' CL RH-(don't complete sign) (almost in bed) now past midnight – RH stand up(jump out of bed), good morning. f.s. 'diluculo surgere', your turn</p>
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This brief example cannot adequately convey the meaning of the ASL, which shows the sun setting and rising on the right hand, a sign that then resembles the bedcovers that Sir Toby 'almost' climbs into with a different classifier on his right hand. Translating the Latin interspersed throughout the play was also a challenge. In this example, Sir Toby supplies the beginning of the phrase *diluculo surgere saluberrimum est* (to rise early is very healthy) from William Lily's Latin grammar (1513).<sup>10</sup> The translation team decided not to translate the meaning of the Latin, since the phrase was incomplete, but rather to create an equivalent experience for Deaf spectators and hearing audiences, the majority of whom would know neither the Latin nor the phrase itself. Instead, the gloss reveals 'f.s.' which means 'fingerspell' (spelling the word with handshapes that represent the alphabet), and thereby providing the Latin for Deaf audiences who might know the original reference.

The translation team quickly realized that it was impossible to delay the videotaping by even a single day. Without recording a few pages at a time, immediately after translating them, even the glosses became difficult to decipher the following day. As a result, the team digitally videotaped the entire translation and analysed it as they progressed. Often, the translators would find a more appropriate translation for certain words or phrases later in the process, making earlier translations of the

<sup>10</sup> *Twelfth Night*, ed. J. M. Lothian and T. W. Craik, p. 42.

same word or phrase inconsistent with the new translation. Repairing the inaccuracy required re-filming and re-editing the earlier digital text, a time-consuming and complicated process.

Since sign language cannot be recorded effectively in writing, the resulting text is of necessity a visual one, greatly enhanced by advancements in recording and digital technology. The rapid expansion of ASL literature has arisen partly because of the proliferation of inexpensive digital video equipment that provides high-quality video for very little cost, a phenomenon that Deaf scholars like Christopher Krentz compare to the increase in written works after the advent of the printing press.<sup>11</sup> The final product was compiled on four CD-ROM disks that served as the base translation for the actors to use in rehearsal. Rather than a traditional read-through on the first day of rehearsal, the cast met for a 'watch-through' of the translation. Actors then used the CD-ROMS on a bank of computers outside the rehearsal hall to gloss and memorize the lines for themselves. Unlike hearing actors who read and then interpret a text, these actors quickly realized that some elements of interpreting a character have already been established in the ASL translation because ASL is a performance-based language. A key issue for the translation team throughout the process was to ensure that it was not completely 'performed', in order to afford the actors the freedom and flexibility to create the characters for themselves. The rehearsal process refined the translation even further by making corrections or emendations to the base translation and creating a unified whole through the performances of the actors. Like any text that progresses through stages of development, both the initial (or base) translation, as well as the final translation can be studied as separate literary documents to see where they diverge from each other.

The use of signed language in the United States can be traced back hundreds of years.<sup>12</sup> The Deaf population that inhabited Martha's Vineyard at the end of the seventeenth century, for example, used a sign language significantly different from that used in the US today, yet there is no recorded history of the language – which stifles any idea of ren-

dering historical sign language in the translation of Shakespeare.<sup>13</sup> The focus of research then shifted towards an investigation into the historical use of gesture as it related to Elizabethan acting. Since there are few illustrations of Elizabethan performance practices, research was culled from various museums and catalogues from the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries and from a variety of sources: from John Bulwer's *Chirologia: or the Natural Language of the Hand* and *Chironomia: or The Art of Manual Rhetoric* published in a combined work in 1644, to 'the passions' of painter Charles Le Brun in 1702. Over sixty visual images were consulted in the research phase of the translation, including paintings and renderings of *Twelfth Night* itself.<sup>14</sup> Johann Heinrich Ramberg's (1763–1840) painting *Malvolio before Olivia* from the Boydell Collection of Shakespearian images was on display at the Yale Center for British Art during the translation process and served as the basis for an experiment. As we began to translate 3.4, where Malvolio first appears before Olivia, cross-gartered and in yellow stockings, the team replicated the gestures of the painting to see if it might have any influence on the translation.

<sup>11</sup> Christopher Krentz, 'The Camera as Printing Press: How Film has Influenced ASL Literature', in *Signing the Body Poetic*, pp. 51–70.

<sup>12</sup> See Nora Ellen Groce, *Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language: Hereditary Deafness on Martha's Vineyard* (Cambridge, MA, 1985). By the mid nineteenth century one in four inhabitants of the island was deaf. Oliver Sacks visited the island and found vestiges of sign language in older hearing members of the population who often subconsciously still use signs in conversation. See his *Seeing Voices: A Journey into the World of the Deaf* (New York, 1990), pp. 28–30.

<sup>13</sup> The 1985 production discussed above located all of the action within a church on Martha's vineyard. It included a prologue for Lou Fant who played a minister who spoke about 'love and morality'. The remaining cast became members of the congregation: the hearing actors sat in the pews onstage and voiced for the Deaf actors downstage.

<sup>14</sup> For the connection between Bulwer and the Deaf, see Jennifer L. Nelson, 'Bulwer's Speaking Hands: Deafness and Rhetoric', pp. 211–21. Sharon L. Snyder, Brenda Jo Brueggemann and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, eds., *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities* (New York, 2002).





6 *Malvolio: Possibly a Self-Portrait in the Role*. John Boyne, c. 1750–1810.

Building upon the idea that all texts are related and surrounded by earlier and future texts, those still images of Shakespeare's plays were attempts at creating a visual intertextuality of sorts, much as other translations do when culling examples from known works. Although these images served to provide historically and visually for a dramaturgical understanding of the play, they had no impact upon the translation either for theoretical or practical reasons. Use in practice predicated the primacy of a static visual history over and above the linguistic complexity of movement in ASL by imposing two-dimensional images onto the translation rather than allowing organic images in ASL to emerge from Shakespeare's original text. Paintings and illustrations of dramatic literature present an individual artist's ideas about the scene (often separate from any theatrical production of it). They may provide more valuable information for a director,



7 Adrian Blue introduces the namesign for his character Malvolio. Video still from the Amaryllis Theater production.

designer or actor than for a translator since such paintings and illustrations are themselves interpretations of *Twelfth Night*. Therefore appropriating their movements, postures or gestures would have been a third or fourth remove from the original source.

Only two images of the sixty that were consulted in research had any effect on the translation. The first, a painting titled *Malvolio: Possibly a Self-Portrait in the Role* by artist John Boyne, (c. 1750–1810) depicts an effete rather than prudish characterization of Malvolio. The painting served as a visual prompt for the namesign of Malvolio, a gesture made as if brushing crumbs off the shoulder, or of brushing away an annoyance of some kind.

Namesigns are designated signs that serve as an individual's name in ASL and must be introduced first through fingerspelling. Namesigns often serve the same purpose that some of Shakespeare's character names do – they establish a physical trait or specific attributes of the individual character. Sirs Belch and Aguecheek provide good examples



8 Reproduction of three namesign drawings included in the programme of the American Theater Arts production of *Twelfth Night*.

as their namesigns reflect their respective traits of drinking and cowardice. Sir Toby's namesign is made by mimicking the enlargement of the oesophagus, and Sir Andrew's is made with the index finger that pushes up the side of the cheek to make it quiver. In production, each actor introduced his or her character's namesign at the very beginning of the production so that the Deaf audience would be familiarized with the invented namesigns that are specific to this translation. Simultaneously, the character name was projected as text onto the cyclorama upstage so that spectators equate the namesign to the person playing the character. The 1985 production of *Twelfth Night* at American Theater Arts used a different method. They introduced the audience to the specific namesigns by including artistic renderings of them in the programme for reference (see illustration).

Each of these names above was used by creating the first initial of the character name with an accompanying movement, 'V' for Viola, 'TB' for Toby Belch and 'M' for Malvolio. But these namesigns share iconic resemblances to other signs in ASL. Viola's name looks almost identical to the sign for 'VIRGIN', Toby's is an iconic representation of a belch, while Malvolio's namesign resembles the sign for 'STRICT'. All three names were conscious choices to reveal identity traits of the characters in the production.

In ASL, namesigns are only used when one is referring to a character who is not present; characters never use someone else's namesign in direct

address, or to get someone's attention.<sup>15</sup> Instead, ASL users will point or index to a person to whom they are referring. Unlike the hearing population who call out a name to get that person's attention, Deaf people usually wave their hands to make a visual impact on the other person's peripheral vision. In some circumstances (when a person is turned with his back to another or is exiting the stage) a person may stomp on the floor to create vibrations that signal the interlocutor (or intersigner?) to turn around. These cultural methods of communication were added into the translation as often as possible, even though the blocking was yet to be solidified in the rehearsal process.

The second visual image used in the translation helped to solve a translation dilemma that was created by an idiomatic phrase spoken by Sir Andrew early in the play:

SIR ANDREW

Fair lady, do you think you have fools in hand?

MARIA

Sir, I have not you by th' hand.

SIR ANDREW

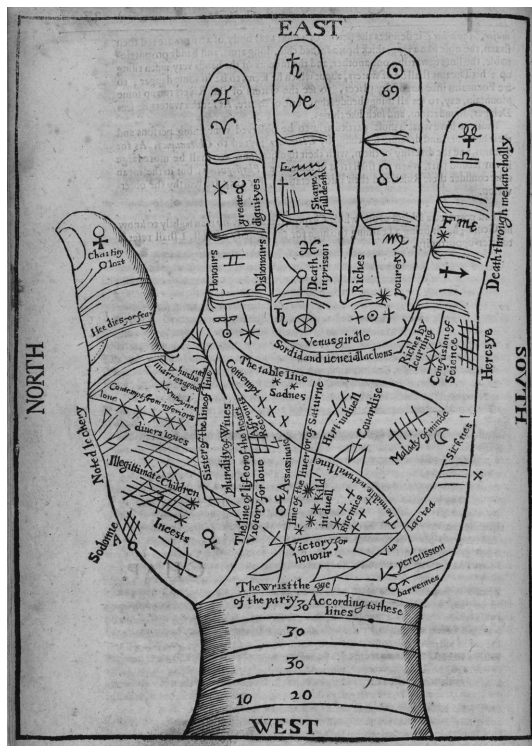
Marry, but you shall have, and here's my hand.

(1.3, 61–5)

The lines include implicit stage directions as Sir Andrew presents his hand for Maria to bring to the 'buttery-bar' a few lines later. It was the phrase

<sup>15</sup> Samuel J. Supalla, *The Book of Name Signs: Naming in American Sign Language* (San Diego, 1992).

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9 Untitled woodcut illustration in Richard Saunders (1613–75), *Physiognomie, and chiromancie, metoposcopia, the symmetrical proportions and signal moles of the body* (London, 1635), p. 38.

‘fools in hand’ that presented the difficulty. The idiomatic phrase in English has no equivalent in ASL and roughly translates to ‘Do you think you are dealing with fools?’ (yet another idiomatic phrase). Translating the line this way, Maria’s next line, ‘Sir, I have not you by the hand’ makes little sense. Instead, the translators chose a common practice in Elizabethan England, that they derived from an image in Richard Saunders’s book, *Physiognomie and chiromancie, metoposcopia, the symmetrical proportions and signal moles of the body*, 1653. This illustration depicts the art of ‘chiromancy’ or palmistry, foretelling the future through the study of the palm.

Incorporating this practice into the translation, these lines read something like, ‘Fair lady, does my palm say I am a fool?’ Maria responds by saying, ‘Sir I cannot see your palm’ and Sir Andrew presents

it for her to read, maintaining the implicit stage directions and the following business that the scene requires.

Chiromancy was but one manifestation of ‘reading the body as text’, a prevalent theme throughout *Twelfth Night* that is not merely a critical conceit but is rather manifestly literal in the ASL translation, where body and text are identical, and mis-readings of the body have significant implications. Malvolio’s punishment, for example, is a direct result of his misreading Maria’s ‘hand’ (i.e., handwriting) for Olivia’s. American Sign Language is a performed language and as such, the physical body is always required to convey semantic content. Semioticians like Keir Elam attempt to differentiate between a dramatic text (written *for* the theatre, i.e., the script or written translation) and the performance text (produced *in* the theatre).<sup>16</sup> This distinction is untenable in the study of the ASL translation of *Twelfth Night*. The performance-related elements of the translation cannot be separated from purely literary ones for they share a dialectical relationship. The ASL translation reveals a new definition of the textualized body. It also provides a new area of visual critical theory for the study of Shakespeare, which is based on the understanding of the ASL performance as literature *and* performance simultaneously.<sup>17</sup>

An ASL translation is bound, however, by the practical considerations of how the source text (Shakespeare) will be performed on the stage. Indeed, the translation required that blocking, stage directions (both implicit and explicit) and actual production values (costumes, scenic design and lighting) had to be decided in advance of, or in the process of translation. For example, when Malvolio signs, ‘I frown the while, and perchance

<sup>16</sup> Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theater and Drama* (London, 1980), p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> Some of these observations and analyses are drawn from my previous work. See ‘Shakespeare in the Fourth Dimension: *Twelfth Night* and American Sign Language’, in Pascale Aebischer, Nigel Wheale and Ed Esche, eds., *Remaking Shakespeare: Performance Across Media, Genres and Cultures* (London, 2003), pp. 18–38.



wind up my watch, or play with my – some rich jewel' (2.5.57–9) several questions needed to be answered. Would there be an actual watch? Where does Malvolio keep it? Is the jewel a part of the watch or separate from it, part of his chain of state as steward of the house? Where is it worn? By suggesting that the jewel might hang around his waist, the translation of these lines took on enormous sexual significance. As the translation progressed, Malvolio's language was revealed to be the most bawdy and sexually objectifying of all the characters, and in fact became a key to creating a Malvolio whose inner concupiscence always broke through his prudish exterior. Indeed, ASL manifests a much more physical relationship with Shakespeare's ribaldry and provides the Deaf spectators with a greater understanding of bawdy detail in performance than most hearing audiences understand through listening alone.

American Sign Language requires an almost architectural rendering of space. Signers create a spatially constructed world around themselves and are framed much as a camera frames a medium to medium-wide shot. Within that frame the signer drafts, on a smaller scale, the space that surrounds him and his relationship to that space, or to other objects, or between objects. Signers can manipulate that space as well as all the objects within it, literally creating illustrations of relationships to people and events by means of a moving mimesis. For example, if an actor points upstage, and gives that area a name, 'the coast', then that space upstage will remain as 'the coast' until the scene changes to another location, or when the signer changes subject or re-identifies that space. The signer can then illustrate another character entering from the coast, moving perhaps drunkenly along the street into town, and confronting other characters. From the beginning of the process then, the scenic elements of the play's production were necessarily dependent on the translation and how we established the physical location of the dramatic world and its inhabitants. Each entrance and exit, whether up, down, left or right, as well as the entire dramatic world of the play had to maintain a spatial logic consistent with the ASL translation.

Illustration 10 is a rendering of both the scenographic design for *Twelfth Night* and architectural elements of the Prince Music Theater in Philadelphia where the translation was produced. Three main playing spaces helped ground the translation in a three-dimensional reality. Two raised areas that flanked the stage in front of the proscenium became the household domains of Orsino and Olivia. The centre playing spaces were continuations of their respective houses as garden spaces, and as the sea-coast or street. Maintaining an intense scrutiny of space was difficult to accomplish within the videotaped translation of *Twelfth Night* over the eighteen months of translation, owing to the extended period of time and different locations and conditions under which we videotaped. However, the final production maintains a spatial logic consistent with the requirements of the language.

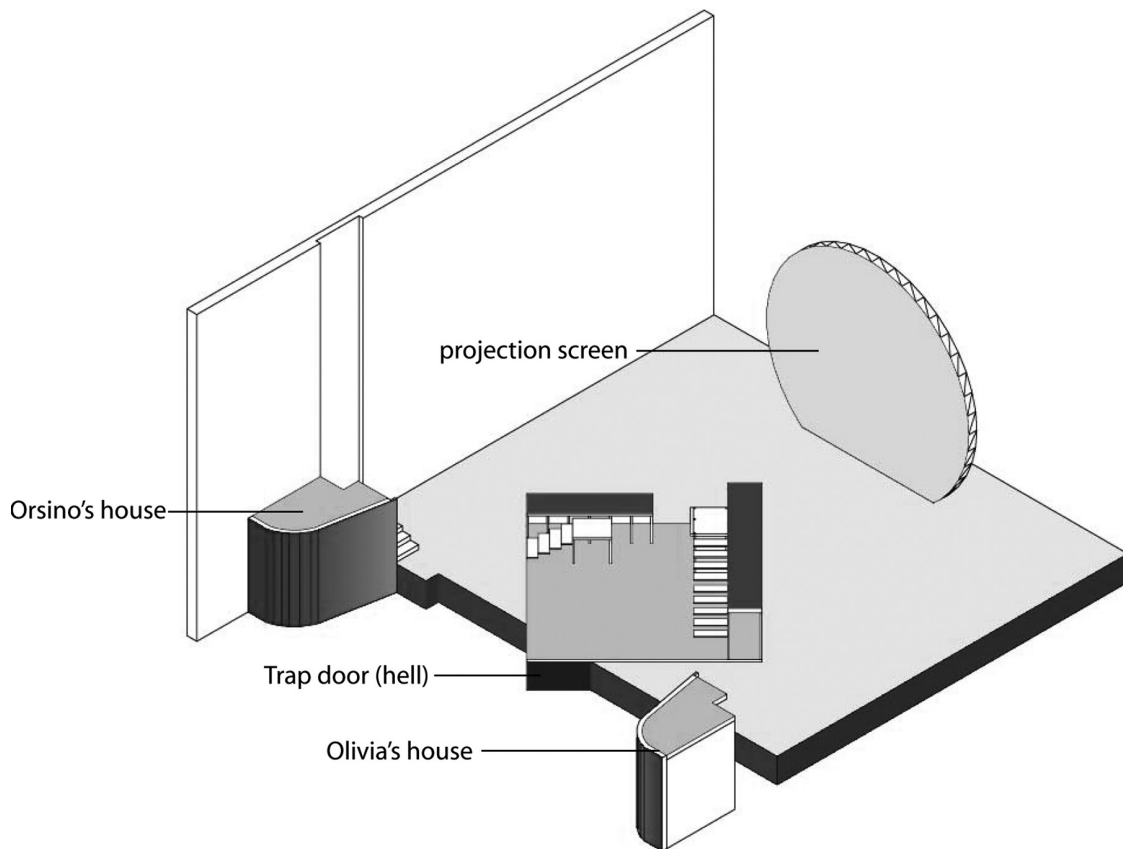
Some scenes, though, created some enormously complicated problems specifically because of stage directions, but likewise compelled creative solutions. The dark house scene presented the most serious obstacle in the ASL translation. The stage direction from the First Folio, '*Malvolio within*' (4.2.21) indicates that he is most likely off stage, heard but unseen. Because ASL is a visual language, the spectators will not understand him if he is not visible to them. Complicating matters further, Feste appears at the dark house in disguise and Maria says 'Thou might have done this without thy beard and gown, he sees thee not' (4.2.64–5), suggesting that Malvolio and Feste cannot see each other, an impossibility in ASL communication. The disguise *is* necessary, therefore, so Maria's line was eliminated from the translation; but how to make Malvolio understood without being seen?

John H. Astington traces the production history of this scene and its staging in his essay, 'Malvolio and the Dark House'. 'Malvolio's prison is, literally, simply a dark place, but figuratively it is a hell . . . a fitting location for one possessed of the devil and given over to spiritual darkness.'<sup>18</sup> Throughout

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<sup>18</sup> John H. Astington, 'Malvolio and the Dark House', *Shakespeare Survey 41* (Cambridge, 1988), p. 60.

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10 Rendering of scenographic design of *Twelfth Night* and architectural elements of the Prince Music Theater, Philadelphia.

the production of the play, all references to hell and the devil were directed at the furthest point downstage centre, foreshadowing Malvolio's figurative hell by linguistically ostending it in the spatial syntax of ASL (see illustration 11). It was Jacques Copeau who first staged the scene in a trap under the stage in a 1914 production, and the tradition prevailed throughout the century.<sup>19</sup> The ASL translation stages the scene with Malvolio's hands and arms emerging through the trap door. The staging is more than a dark place for Malvolio – it is a linguistic hell.

ASL requires the body and face to produce meaning and so without them Malvolio's vocabulary is restricted to those signs and gestures that

create meaning independent of the body. Having only his hands with which to communicate, Malvolio is trapped in a linguistic prison. The signs for 'my lady', for example, are created by touching the thumb of the open-handed 5-classifier to the chin and then to the sternum. Without his body, Malvolio's desperation to prove that he is not 'mad' is a frantic search for language conducted in physical improvisation. But his desperation only compounds his situation. Rather than making the sign for 'my lady', as he has throughout the play, he instead renders the term through the objectifying

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<sup>19</sup> Astington, 'Malvolio', p. 55.



11 Peter Cook as Feste taunts Malvolio (Adrian Blue) who communicates in ASL from under a trap door underneath the stage.

and stereotypical hourglass image of the female figure, outlined by his hands. It is basis enough for Sir Topas (the disguised Feste) to accuse him of lechery and possession: ‘Out hyperbolic fiend, how vexest thou this man! Talkest thou nothing but of ladies?’ (4.2.26–7).

Having failed at his attempt to prove his sanity, Malvolio tries another tactic with Feste who has returned to the prison in his own ‘voice’. Malvolio calls to him, ‘Good fool, as ever thou wilt deserve well at my hand, help me to a candle and pen, ink and paper’ (4.2.82–3). Lacking a fully realizable vocabulary in ASL, Malvolio answers the original letter with one of his own in the hope that writing will provide a body for his words that his hands alone (i.e., his presence) cannot. Maria’s forged letter is countered with his own, which argues to Malvolio’s claim to the truth. When Feste performs

the letter in the last scene of the play, he tries once more to perform Malvolio’s madness by impersonating a mad ‘voice’ or, in ASL, an over-articulated and exaggerated signing. Once he is released from the dark room, Malvolio confronts Olivia with the forged letter, and she recognizes Maria’s hand immediately. The written artifact remains the textual proof, something Malvolio’s imprisoned body could never convey through a temporal and physical language.

When we are attempting to envision exchanges that occurred in Early Modern English, ASL translation is extremely useful because it draws attention to cultural and linguistic differences that contemporary usage of English has abandoned, as well as foregrounding the ability of ASL to resurrect and re-code those usages for contemporary Deaf audiences. Take for example, the you/thou dichotomy

## TWELFTH NIGHT IN AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE

that pervades Shakespeare's work and has little bearing on today's casual listener to Shakespeare. ASL maintains the formal and familiar form of 'you' and can replicate that structure when characters shift from one form to the other, either to establish familiarity or some sense of distance. Likewise, ASL spatially locates those with higher status on a visual plane above those with lower status, making it easy to recognize status more clearly in ASL than in English, providing several ways literally to 'incorporate' materialist feminist or Marxist interpretations of power structures and status throughout the play. Throughout the ASL translation of *Twelfth Night*, Orsino's rank remained the highest of all the characters, while others like Malvolio jockeyed to change their status in relation to others. Olivia always located Orsino in space above herself, emphasizing her lower social standing to him, incorporating the paternalistic and oppressive social structure for women that permeated Elizabethan culture but that also reinforced Sir Toby's line that Olivia will 'not match above her degree, neither in estate, years, nor wit' (1.3.105–6).

The persistent problem for any translator of Shakespeare's plays is the issue of verse structure. French translations might use the Alexandrine line as an appropriate cultural and literary substitute for iambic pentameter; a choice suited to the rhythms and history of the language. Yves Bonnefoy criticized André Gide's translations of *Hamlet* for rendering the verse sections into prose. He viewed the translation as 'Shakespeare décorporé' or Shakespeare 'disembodied', because it lacked the power of verse to incarnate the words.<sup>20</sup> While ASL lacks the power of verse as an aural/oral function, it certainly embodies elements of verse structure through its own linguistic structures. In *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare varies his use of language significantly between and within scenes, including blank verse, rhymed verse, song lyrics and extensive puns or plays on words. Each of these modes of language presents different challenges to a visual translation of the play and is translated using a variety of linguistic strategies, while maintaining appropriate cultural considerations in the target language.

In English, verse metre is essentially a convention of patterned stresses. Stress is a natural aspect of the sound of individual words. Metre, however, is an artificial construct imposed upon language. Verse metre entails co-ordinating a set of formal relations with the natural sound patterning of words. The task is whether or not one can find repeatable functions that can provide some co-equivalence to Shakespeare's patterns in the target language. While sound is what establishes the natural stress of a word in English, and some other spoken languages, sound cannot be the basis for word stress and therefore metrical structure in ASL. As an aural construct, metre has no parallel in Deaf culture or in ASL. Imposing an artificial rhythm onto the ASL as a means of approximating blank verse is neither linguistically nor culturally correct. ASL does, however, have a significant arsenal of methods to create visual rhyme, removing it from the oral/aural realm of production into a purely visual and performative model.

Every sign can be broken down into four basic components: hand configuration, location, movement and orientation. If two signs have identical hand configurations, movements and locations, then they have a strong visual rhyme. If they have a similar hand configuration only, the visual rhyme is weaker. However, if an entire story is told with the same handshape used for different signs, it has a strong rhyme. Because of its visual/manual modality and lexical and semantic use of space, the translation of Shakespeare into ASL took advantage of movement, location, and handshape in order to establish patterns of rhyme throughout *Twelfth Night* and used other registers and forms of ASL to create equivalent features of Shakespeare's varied uses of language.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Romy Heylen, *Translation, Poetics, and the Stage: Six French 'Hamlets'* (London, 1993), 97.

<sup>21</sup> See poet Clayton Valli's definitions of ASL rhyming structures according to a visual and kinetic model rather than an auditory and written one in his essay, 'Poetics of ASL Poetry', in *Deaf Studies IV* (Washington, DC, 1997), p. 253. Valli differentiates among six separate manifestations of ASL rhyme

The most easily identifiable of these elements of individual signs is handshape, and ASL has a category of signs known as ‘classifiers’, that are commonly defined as a set of signs that are made with a specific handshape and represent a noun’s shape, size and location as well as other defining physical characteristics. Classifiers do not have precise counterparts in English, and transcribing them is often difficult because of their specific movements. They can represent individuals, vehicles or animals, and inanimate objects; they ‘represent some mimetic elaboration to convey, for instance, a more precise description of an event or of a quality’.<sup>22</sup> Classifiers can be used in an infinite number of ways (within circumscribed boundaries), providing ASL users with enormous creative flexibility.

See, for example, how ASL elucidates an obscure meaning of the word ‘revolve’ by articulating it on the body, with the specific example of the 1-classifier. When Malvolio finds the letter that ‘gulls him into a nayword’ (2.3.130) he reads: ‘If this fall into thy hand, revolve’ (2.5.138). The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites Shakespeare’s obscure usage of revolve in this sentence to mean ‘to deliberate or consider; to meditate or think upon’ (*OED*, v. 10). Editors of the recent Oxford edition of *Twelfth Night*, Roger Warren and Stanley Wells, provide a textual note believing that *revolve*

may be intended to sound like an affected novelty. The word is a great temptation to actors to gain an easy laugh by slowly revolving; but it is funnier if instead of this gag the actor points to what the line means. In Peter Hall’s 1991 version, for instance, Eric Porter glanced up after revolve as if to say ‘What an odd way of putting it’ (thus neatly reflecting *OED*’s evidence), shrugged, and continued reading at once.<sup>23</sup>

Their description of Porter’s performance relies again on the sound of the word, and the character’s response seems more of confusion than clarity. In the ASL translation of the play, Malvolio reads his own body in order to fully understand the meaning of the word. He uses a 1-classifier for the word ‘revolve’ and watches his hand turn in a circle. As he begins to imitate that movement with

his full body he stops, realizing that the sign is correct, but in the wrong area of space – it is not his body that should turn. The three other characters behind him (Toby, Andrew and Fabian) see him sign ‘revolve’, and immediately think he will rotate and see them ‘eavesdropping’ behind him. They immediately run and hide. Malvolio then moves the same sign closer to his head to indicate ‘to think about it, to revolve it in one’s mind’. Throughout the translation there are these moments that foreground (and I use this word because of its spatial connotation) the visual/manual against the oral/aural narrative, as when the purely kinetic and physical action reveals aspects of historical meaning, production history, or cultural and linguistic complexity that are not present in contemporary productions or critical analyses.

The physical relationship of the signer to the world around her creates a discourse of narrative action that is purely visual, almost filmic. The characteristics of ASL narrative structure are not linear in function, giving the discourse a spatial logic comparable to the action of a camera. It’s possible for the signer to ‘cut from a normal view to a close-up to a distant shot to a close-up again, and so on, even including flashback and flash-forward scenes, exactly as a movie editor works’.<sup>24</sup> The advantage of ASL as a performative language over more diegetic narratives is that it can easily manipulate proxemic relations between individuals and objects. Noted Deaf poet Bernard Bragg first created the phrase ‘Visual Vernacular’ as a label for an acting/signing technique that exploits the cinematic properties of ASL structure: ‘The performer remains all the time within the film frame, so to speak, presenting a montage of cross-cuts

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based on visual perception, defining rhyme as a repetition of ‘handshapes, movements, non-manual signals, locations, palm orientation, handedness, or a combination of these’.

<sup>22</sup> Edward Klima and Ursula Bellugi, *The Signs of Language* (Cambridge, 1979), p. 13.

<sup>23</sup> Roger Warren and Stanley Wells, *Twelfth Night, or What You Will* (Oxford, 1994), p. 149.

<sup>24</sup> William Stokoe quoted in Oliver Sacks, *Seeing Voices: A Journey into the World of the Deaf* (New York, 1990), p. 90.





12 Sir Andrew, Fabian and Sir Toby watch Malvolio ponder the word 'revolve'. Video stills from the Amarylly Theater production.

and cutaway views.<sup>25</sup> Both film editors and signers maintain a similar spatial logic in their construction of narrative, but ASL must also abide by grammatical and syntactic rules that films do not possess. ASL has linguistic complexity over and above images, even those that move.

ASL provides a signer with the ability to 'direct' her own narrative cinematically. In the context of the dramatic world of the *Twelfth Night* translation, individual characters create and direct their performances like film, aware at all times of an implicit, if not literal, audience. This cinematic narrative structure opens an enormous field of critical questions and perspectives. Does the gaze of the speaker have the power to objectify like a camera lens? How is the subject constructed visually? How do interlocuters function as audience within

these self-constructed performances? Finally, how can the translator use these strategies when translating into ASL?

Just as Shakespeare varies his use of language from prose to blank verse and from rhymed couplets to lyrical songs, the translation incorporates several different methods of signing. ASL itself has a wide variety of registers and forms within it: 'In communicating among themselves, deaf ASL signers use a wide range of gestural devices, from conventionalized signs to mimetic elaboration on those signs, to

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<sup>25</sup> I am indebted to H-Dirksen L. Bauman's article, 'Line/Shot/Montage: Cinematic Techniques in American Sign Language Poetry', in *Conference Proceedings of Deaf Studies VI: Making the Connection* (Washington, DC, 1999), pp. 137-49.

mimetic depiction, to free pantomime.<sup>26</sup> Everyday ASL is quite different from ASL on the stage which is naturally larger, more ‘pronounced’, and often more mimetic. Each of the songs in *Twelfth Night* was translated by taking advantage of this mimetic and also cinematic form of ASL poetry known as Visual Vernacular. Poet and performer Peter Cook, who worked on the translation for three weeks and played the part of Feste in the production, is known for his elaborately physicalized and visual metaphorical performance style, often repeating a sign several times to create a rhythmic effect. Cook is not nearly as bound by linguistic rules of ASL as other poets, enjoying instead the freedom and flexibility that visual and cinematic effects provide him. Peter’s style is significantly more physical than other Deaf poets in that he makes use of his entire body, and often his voice, in his poems. Many people are attracted to Cook’s physical style because it includes more mimetic features than most ASL poetry. Cook’s vocabulary is based more on visual perception and physical context than in traditional ASL poetic narrative.

Songs often present difficult transitions in productions of Shakespeare’s plays. In *Twelfth Night*, the song ‘Come Away, Death’ that appears in the middle of Act 2, scene 4 is intended to remind us of Orsino’s craving for a lyricism that love elicits. In production, Feste is accompanied often by a lute or mandolin, and the song takes on a light and romantic mood for the Duke and Viola who are Feste’s intended audience. While the lyrics of the song may be ‘old and plain’ (2.4.42), they do not dally ‘with the innocence of love’ (2.4.46), as Orsino suggests. Because ASL cannot present the tune that underlies the song, only the lyrics to the song are rendered visually, creating a picture of death and decay enhanced by unrequited love. Dark and deeply disturbing images of Death personified, a decaying corpse and deep isolation and loneliness are most present in this visual depiction of the song, showing both Orsino’s distance from reality as well as his infatuation with the idea of love.

The songs were never voiced for the hearing audience during performance. Instead, Shake-

peare’s text was projected behind Cook so that the hearing audience was forced to read super-titles. Rather than depicting some sort of physical equivalent of music in ASL, which is essentially imposable and serves the hearing audience more than the Deaf spectators, the intention was to create the opposite of sound and music – silence. Except for the noises made by Cook’s abrupt vocalizations and body movements, the songs were the only completely silent moments in the play, creating a purely visual and kinetic experience for every audience member without the intrusion of spoken text.

With an emphasis on the Visual Vernacular style, the base translation of ‘Come Away, Death’ takes two minutes and thirty-nine seconds to perform and contains approximately seventy different edits, creating a stunning montage of images. The translation also presents a darker undertone to the song than is traditionally interpreted on the stage. Cook begins by offering his heart to an ‘off-screen’ lover. The lover, whose gender is never specified throughout the song/poem, rejects the offering, and Cook returns his heart to his chest. His facial expression indicates that he sees something and the first edit is a reverse-angle cutaway to the image of Death, marching toward him. Moving back and forth between shots, we see Feste’s reaction to Death’s plodding march towards him. Death finally stops marching and stares down at the signer, and for the first time we realize how large and powerful the figure of death really is, looming over him. He reaches his giant hand towards the signer and throws him down a vast abyss showing the legs dangling in the air and then a close-up of the body’s fall. The rhythmic relationship between camera shots changes throughout the poem/song. Rhythm changes by the number and speed of the edits, ending the first series of images with the poet’s death at the bottom of a long tunnel.

Cook makes use of reverse-angle shots, incorporating cutaways and close-ups throughout the song for different effect. There are also two ‘special

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<sup>26</sup> Klima and Bellugi, *The Signs of Language*, p. 13.



13 Peter Cook performs the beginning of 'Come Away, Death'. Video stills from the Amaryllis Theater production.

effects' in the song that create temporal shifts in the narration. The first depicts the poet's friends marching in single file to the grave. They collectively sigh and throw a flower on the grave, which the poet then rejects. As he throws the flower back to them, the film rewinds, depicting the same movements in reverse motion. Cook shows the reverse elements also in a reverse rhythm, illustrating the artificiality of movement that indicates a film in reverse motion.

The second special effect depicts a corpse decomposing in the grave. Cook begins by depicting the bulging of eyes from their sockets and then proceeds to illustrate the emaciated cheekbones, the bared teeth, articulation of ribs and finally clawed, skeletal feet.

The body decomposes before our very eyes as though the camera were recording the event through time-lapse. The song ends with the poet's decline into the bowels of the earth, towards his



14 Peter Cook depicts a decomposing body in 'Come Away, Death'. Video stills from the Amaryllis Theater production.

eternal rest. These effects create a more chilling image of death and loneliness than traditional stagings of this song allow. Coupled with Cook's signature style of signing and the cinematic effects of Visual Vernacular, the songs are noticeably more elevated in presentation and style than other segments of the text. But the base translation of this song, and the final performance of it are quite different. Cook eliminates many of the editorial back-and-forth in the final performance of the song, reducing the rhythmic effect. Both 'versions' of the song are available for study – the original base translation can be found on the website [www.aslshakespeare.com](http://www.aslshakespeare.com) (under the Project and Challenges portion of the website, page 9) while

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the final translation in performance exists on the DVD of the production.

The ASL translation of *Twelfth Night* required a constant shifting – a simultaneous and delicate balance between cultures and languages, hearing and Deaf, presence and absence, sight and sound, time and space. From the initial translation through the filmed performance of the final translation, the ASL *Twelfth Night* has become a cultural product and a literary text fully documented for future

study and critical analysis. This ‘literature of the body’, affording as it does a combined visual, kinaesthetic and textual perspective on the play, rather than the commonly employed literary and theatrical perspectives, enables a more broadly conceived definition of text itself. The materiality of the actors’ bodies as a textual element, and the four-dimensional structure of the language, brings a visual poetics to bear on the study of Shakespeare never before seen.