Broadway 1942 . . .

Arsenic and Old Lace

A Signed Production that Went Ahead of its Time

by Stephen C. Baldwin, Ph.D.

For more than forty-seven years, the legacy of the 1942 Gallaudet University's production, *Arsenic and Old Lace,* withstood the elements of time and oblivion. The reputation of the production thrives solely on its own significance in the chronicles of American Deaf* theatre.

The significance of this production is based on the following distinctions: 1) it was the first time a play was presented by deaf actors and actresses in sign language in a major public theatre and 2) it predated the National Theatre of the Deaf (established in 1967) by twenty-five years.

When the Gallaudet University Alumni Association celebrated its 100th anniversary this past summer, three former *Arsenic* cast members, namely Eric Malzkuhn, Julia Mayes (nee Burg), and Leonard Warshawsky, presented a scene from Act I. By then, three generations of Deaf people had already "heard" about Gallaudet's most famous play in the university's 125 years of history.

The play was presented by Gallaudet's legendary student organization called "Gallaudet College Dramatic Club." The Dramatic Club, which began about 1886, was determined to present another quality production in its long history. Under the leadership of its talented president, Eric Malzkuhn, and a quality membership, including such "cream of the crop" names as Paul Baldridge, Ray Butler, Julia (Burg) Mayes, Richard Mullins, Earl Roberts, Ben Schowe, Archie Stack, and Leonard Warshawsky, the *Arsenic* cast and production staff were certainly prepared for more than a standard college play. With the faculty assistance of Professor Frederick H. Hughes, who coached the students in the use of signs for the play, and Margaret L. Yoder, who assisted with the offstage reading of the play as well as the make-up and scenery, the Gallaudet thespians surely knew how to keep their minds off of World War II. (Incidentally, a year earlier, Malzkuhn was inadvertently drafted and sent to an induction center where his deafness was discovered, and Archie Stack, the student director of *Arsenic,* who was hard of hearing, spent the war as an intelligence clerk.)

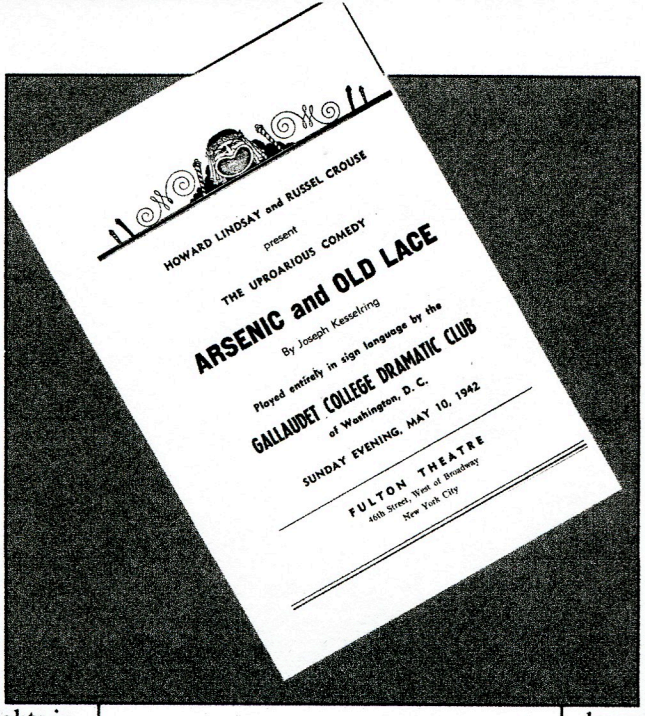
One of the most popular wartime plays was *Arsenic and Old Lace.* The play premiered on January 10, 1941 and ran for a commercially successful run of 1,444 performances. The playwright was Joseph O. Kesselring (1902-1967) who originally wanted to write a tragedy but changed the play into a funny straightforward melodrama. Kesselring was part of Broadway's most successful producing duo of Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse. Lindsay and Crouse produced a string of award-winning

Boris Karloff (seated) struggles to escape the bonds of the other, equally diabolical, Johnathan Brewster, played by Eric Malzkuhn, who together with other Gallaudet University actors, took over the Fulton Theatre for a performance of *Arsenic and Old Lace* in 1942.

By virtue of its performance for a hearing audience on Broadway, the Dramatics Club of Gallaudet predated National Theatre of the Deaf by 25 years.

photo by Eric Malzkuhn

productions, such as *Life With Father (7 years and 7,000 performances!) and The State of Union* (1945). They had Bretigne Windlust (1906-1960) as the director of the hearing version of *Arsenic and Old Lace*. Windlust eventually became known as one of America's most prolific directors of stage, movie and television. Kesselring's play became a moderately successful movie in 1944, with Cary Grant in the lead role and Frank Capra as director (this film is available in closed captions at videotape stores).



When Malzkuhn inquired about obtaining the amateur rights in February, 1942, he got more than he bargained for. Not only did Linsay, Crouse and Kesselring give the necessary permission, but they also waived royalties and even offered to assist the Gallaudet production. Furthermore, the Broadway staff asked if the Dramatic Club would like to perform at the Fulton Theatre! They offered to underwrite the Club's entire expenses, not to mention proceeds from the ticket sales the Gallaudet troupe could keep for their Club. Such a rare generosity was more than any amateur theatre group could dream of, regardless of the period of time.

There was one stipulation, however. If the signed production in Chapel Hall at Gallaudet College became an artistic success, then the trip to New York City could be a reality. On May 2, 1942 the play was well received in Washington, D.C., and within five days, the Deaf cast was rehearsing under Windlust at the Fulton Theatre (this playhouse was built in 1911 as the Folies Bergere and is now called the Helen Hayes Theatre).

Windlust changed the typical semi-circle actor placement to a more reasonable blocking. In spite of six months of knowing their lines and so on, the Gallaudet troupe had to relearn the movements and other stage business.

The hearing cast assisted with the make-up, movement, costumes, and other essential matters. Among those who helped the Deaf players to feel at home was the fabled bogeyman of the horror film genre, Boris Karloff (1887-1969). (Karloff was making his Broadway debut too.) As one of the lead players (the evil Jonathan Brewster), Karloff not only loaned his costumes to Malzkuhn, but also lent his lucky shoes which he wore for years. Although a mite too big, Malzkuhn wore those shoes after stuffing them with paper.

May 10, 1942 was the historic Sunday evening when the Dramatic Club made their appearance in the signed version of the *Arsenic and Old Lace.* The reaction of the theatre critics was an academic one. Since the critics knew the script, they could view the signed play in an advantageous way. Most of the Broadway critics enjoyed the performance and gave the Gallaudet troupe good reviews, especially for the effective ensemble.

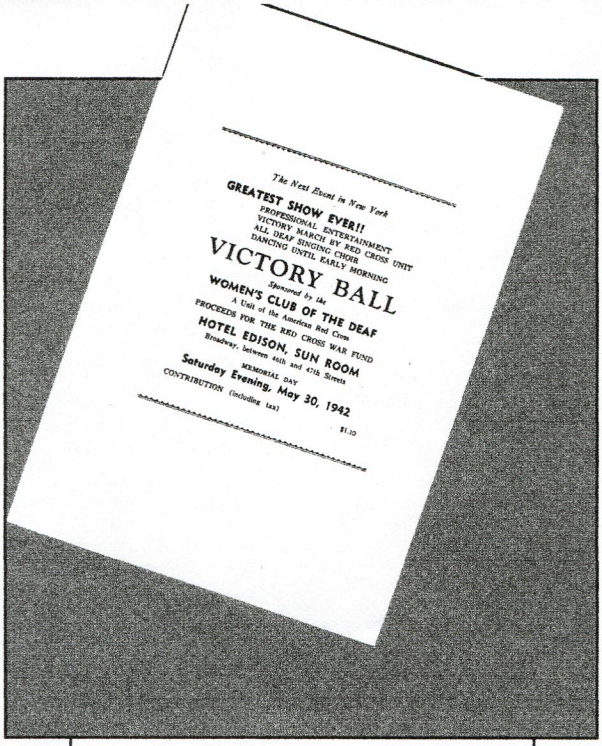
On the other hand, one critic said the Deaf play was longer when compared with the hearing version. Also, the Deaf audience was slow in warming up and laughed mostly at funny situations. At any rate, one prominent critic and theatre historian, Burns Mantle, said the signed performance was a "harbinger of things to come." However, it was not until 1967 when the National Theatre of the Deaf was established.

The non-signing hearing audience also witnessed innovative on-stage devices to assist the Deaf cast as well as Deaf playgoers. There was a flashing light to alert the actors that the telephone was ringing. During darkened scenes, luminous gloves were worn so pivotal dialogues were not missed. Offstage and behind each entrance was a small light bulb that cued the Deaf actors for their stage entrances. (At Chapel Hall, peep holes were used instead.) Of course, all signs were exaggerated, modified and enlarged so that the Deaf audience could follow the play. Although Kesselring's script was followed faithfully, some changes had to be made to suit the Deaf culture; offstage conversations or sounds were eliminated from the Gallaudet version. References to voice or sounds were changed to sign or sight. Only sound the play used was the blaring of the trumpet from "Teddy Roosevelt" Brewster, one of the several likeable harmless mental cases.

Beyond the triumphant return to Gallaudet as campus "celebrities," there was no serious professional interest by a theatre producer in having a Deaf troupe. American theatre was not yet ready for anything "unconventional."

Sign language as an artistic medium for the stage was not a favorable perception of society at the time. In fact, the countercultural side of theatre didn't take place until two decades later.

More interestingly, Black theatre experienced its most crucial breakthrough in 1959 when Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* broke down the barriers. It is often agreed that after the Black Americans pave the way, other minority and ethnic groups follow through with their own causes. But in the case of the 1942 *Arsenic and Old Lace* production, the Gallaudet troupe was indeed ahead of their time. In spite of the unique performance, there was not immediate impact on American theatre, except in the minds of Deaf community at large.



The real academic question centers around the social and economic conditions and circumstances of the time. Among the contributing factors were WWII, the socio-economical disadvantages, poor employment opportunities and training, paternalism, tokenism, and the plantation mentality that were commonly prevalent in those days. Furthermore, the career goal of professional acting was considered rather unrealistic. Either you were a school teacher, linotypist, housewife, or blue collar worker.

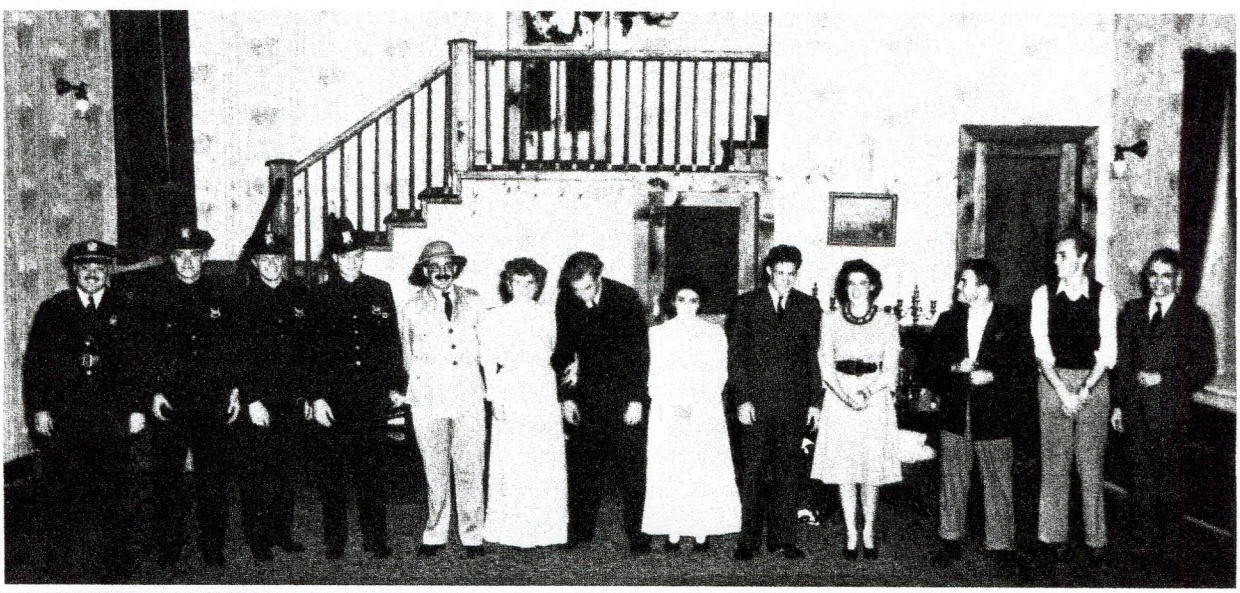
Beyond Gallaudet, there were a few theatre or literary societies for the Deaf. But for the Deaf cast of *Arsenic and Old Lace,* it was a love of theatre and a touch of Broadway glory that forged ahead of time and earned them a significant chapter in American Deaf theatre.

*

(The author wishes to thank the following people for their valuable assistance in more ways than one: Eric Malzkuhn, Ed Carney, Richard Mullins, and Nancy Tadie.)

*

* The word "deaf" has been capitalized to "Deaf" to indicate a Deaf culture/way of life as opposed to the audiological version of the word.



The original cast of *Arsenic and Old Lace* takes a curtain bow on May 2, 1942 in Chapel Hall at Gallaudet University, eight days before their historic performance on Broadway. From left to right, Alan Adams, Arnold Daulton, Richard Mullins, Paul Baldridge, Leon Baker, Julia (Burg) Mayes, Eric Malzkuhn, Frances Lupo, Ray Butler, Arlene Stecker, Leonard Warshawsky, Robert Sampson, and Ben Schowe.

(Photo courtesy: Richard Mullins)