Developing new Deaf screenwriting talent

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Abstract

This paper examines how orthodox approaches to developing screenplays must be expanded when working with emerging screenwriting talent. It explores the particular issues and problems facing those working in Deaf film and TV, where production budgets are modest and training opportunities few. The analysis focusses on an individual case study: the year-long development of a half-hour TV drama between a professional hearing script editor and a novice Deaf screenwriter.

The well-established formulation of the script editor is as a story expert supporting the screenwriter to hone her/his screenplay. Borrowing Gabriel's idea of a 'boundary rider', the paper examines how the script editor works energetically to preserve the agency of the new screenwriter; to privilege experiential learning whilst responding to the demands of an industrial commissioning process and production specification. Drawing on Gramsci's elaboration of the subaltern and the theories of Foucault and Bourdieu, it discusses the creative and cultural complexity of the editor - writer relationship.

Macdonald's proposed framework of the Screen Idea Work Group is employed to explore the lived experience of a dialogical process of shared creation, which expands out to include production team, actors and interpreters via a uniquely adapted Table Read situated at the heart of the script development process. The value of this powerful encounter for the screenwriter is reflected on as well as its cost. Overall it is contended that much greater investment is required to develop assured screenwriting voices that can craft compelling stories to connect with audiences for Deaf film and TV.

Keywords: Deaf, Screenwriting, Table Reading, Experiment

Introduction

My 20-year professional practice as a script editor and producer has focussed on developing new and emerging talent for broadcasters and screen agencies. Work on several projects with Deaf filmmakers led to my engagement as script editor on *Hope,* an original half-hour drama commissioned by the British Sign Language Broadcasting Trust (BSLBT) for broadcast on Film4, Together Channel and the BSL Zone in 2019. The project was notable for three reasons. First, as a ground-breaking collaboration between Deaf director, David Ellington's VS1, a cottage-industry production company and hearing producer, Rachel Drummond-Hay's Drummer TV, a multi-award-winning mainstream independent. Second, it was BSLBT's first commission to deal with a subject still widely considered taboo: the drama tells the story of a Deaf teenager's battle with cancer and how it impacts her family and friends. Third, it was the first time BSLBT commissioned a completely new Deaf writer, Lynn Stewart-Taylor.

The project posed significant challenges: a half-hour script requires significant screenwriting craft and makes substantial demands on a novice writer. When I came on board, the writer had already completed eight drafts of the script on her own – so there was simultaneously an impatience to get on and an exhaustion with the amount of writing that had already been done. The project was also intensely personal, inspired by the writer's niece who had died of cancer aged nineteen. There was an enormous emotional weight on the piece to act as a valedictory as well as reflect real events. In addition, both the writer and BSLBT wished to portray cancer treatment for the Deaf audience as this community is often disenfranchised when it comes to understanding health issues and medical care so there was a risk of this education agenda competing with the dramatic storytelling. Finally, there was an issue of language and the complexity of the translations required. My basic BSL (British Sign Language) required using an interpreter as an intermediary. The writer worked with another interpreter to write the script, as English is not her first language and BSL, a visual-gestural language, does not have a written form. Then, once the script was finished, a whole set of translations was required in reverse, so the Deaf actors could perform in BSL. How, then, to develop it?

Concurrent with the commission, I was offered research time by my Faculty. When I entered the academy from industry a decade ago, Schon's '*reflecting-in-action'* had quickly become a touchstone, helping me to articulate my tacit understanding of how practice works (Schon 1983, 68). Here was an opportunity to use Schon's method of thinking, feeling and reflecting on a problem; to do research by doing creative practice. The study would be 'not just *about* practice, but also *for* practice', with the potential to lead to original insights that could be practically applied (Batty 2016, 63).

Ethnography provided the framework for my dual role as participant observer: as script editor, I would be immersed in the creative development process; as embedded researcher, I would be critically analysing it at some distance (Lewis and Russell 2011, 398-401). As the foundation stones of ethnography are fieldwork and language acquisition, I started learning BSL to gain a better appreciation of Deaf culture. I hoped this would give me a deeper understanding of the story from the writer's Deaf perspective and assist our mutual collaboration, where script development and research project intertwined.

Script Development

Though the academic study of script development in TV and film, is still an emerging field, recent scholarship is providing a better understanding of the practice.

Macdonald conceives of script development as exploring the potential of a 'screen idea' to become a 'screenwork'. (Macdonald 2013). The term can apply equally to the writer working by themselves as to as to a team. The process happens over an extended time-frame, involving iterative drafting of materials. These typically include treatments and outlines, which form the basis for pitching materials (such as, log-line and synopsis) to script drafts and revisions, culminating in a shooting script, often regarded as the 'blue-print' for production. The aim is to progressively improve the idea so that it is 'dramatically satisfying' in a way that makes it appealing to an audience and attractive to funders (Cleary 2013).

This straightforward description belies a much more complex operation. Batty proposes script development as a 'wicked problem' because, though there are no definitive solutions, there are many stakeholders (Batty et al. 2018). Consequently, Bloor defines script development as a 'creative and industrial collaborative process' (Bloore 2013, 9). Cleary explains that the creative idea must make sense in the 'economic and cultural context' of the industry as any investment in script development requires a return (Cleary 2013). This means that, rather than being an activity led by the inclinations of the individual writer, script development is driven by an 'industrial methodology' (Ibid.). At best, this is a productive collaboration but, at worst, it is a battle of competing interests and demands, often described as 'development hell' (Batty et al. 2018, 159).

Bourdieu's 'conceptual framework' of *agents, cultural capital, habitus* and *fields* explores the 'contested terrain' of cultural life (Bourdieu 1977, 1993). Macdonald uses Bourdieu's theories to propose that script development also operates in a 'social framework' where development happens according to 'the habitus of those working in the field' (Macdonald 2004, 10). The 'embedded practices' are in fact based on the 'social and educational histories' of the script developers (Lyle 2015, 66 - 74). Their perception, judgement and taste are 'cultural preferences' rather than immanent knowledge or immutable fact (Murdock 2010, 64). For example, the screenwriting guru, Syd Field proposes that 'good' screenplays conform to a set of 'basic conceptual components common to the form', arguing:

> the style, the way the words are laid out on the page, the way the story is set up, the grasp of the dramatic situation, the introduction of the main character, the basic premise or problem of the screenplay – it's all set up in the first few pages of the script. (Field 1994, 3).

A descriptive/prescriptive approach is the staple of the screenwriting manuals, which largely promote an orthodoxy of practice (Batty, Taylor and Sawtell 2017, 233; Macdonald 2013, 23).

The role of the script editor is to support the writer to successfully tell their story. An important principle is that '*A good script editor never imposes their ideas onto a project, but helps the writer cultivate their own ideas'* (Griffiths 2015, 17). However, script editors, as with all of those involved in the industrial system of script development, are '*conditioned agents'* who have internalised 'the rules of the domain and the opinions of the field' (Csikszentmihalyi 1999, 332). The pressure to deliver to an industrial specification exerts considerable pressure on the creative process, creating a gravitational pull towards developing the script according to accepted codes and conventions.

But does script development with the new writer have to happen in this way? Is there a tension between a desire to nurture emerging talents and the need to develop conventional craft skills; between privileging the individual writer's 'voice' and fulfilling the imperatives of the system? Nash argues it is potentially damaging for new writers to:

> embrace the script rules and structural templates without question, rather than embrace a discovery-driven uncertain process, in search of originality, story and meaning (Nash 2014, 99).

Is it possible or productive to pursue alternative or experimental ways or must a dominant industry methodology be imposed? These are not straight-forward questions in any case. However, in a Deaf context, they throw up a cultural issue of considerable complexity.

Deaf Culture

The requirement to become a conditioned agent takes on profound significance when it is understood that the Deaf have been largely excluded from mainstream culture at the same time as having their own culture systematically oppressed.

Foucault asserts that cultures are shaped by the '*political and strategic nature* of…ensembles of knowledge' (McHoul and Grace 1993, 60). When knowledge is regarded as 'naïve' and 'low down on the hierarchy' it is subjugated (Foucault 1980, 81-2). This has been the Deaf experience. Paddy Ladd, Britain's first and only Deaf professor and author of the seminal work *Understanding Deaf Culture* uses Foucault's discourse theory to underpin his analysis that, as a minority group, the Deaf are particularly threatened by 'the discursive system's control of both power and knowledge' because it leads them to devalue their own discourses (Ladd 2003, 76-77). In this way, the Deaf have subordinated themselves; becoming conditioned agents of hearing culture at the expense of their own.

The frame of Postcolonial Studies is also relevant here as it analyses the effects of hegemony on culture and society and how language is central to colonisation (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1998). Deaf communities self-identify as a linguistic minority, rather than a disabled group (Lane 2005, 291-294). In common with other minority ethnic groups, the language of the 'Deaf-World' has been engulfed by larger societies (Ibid.). In this way, Deaf culture has 'undergone *colonisation*' (Ladd 2003, 78-81). Ladd adopts Gramsci's concept

of the subaltern as a strategy to counter this (Gramsci 1999, 2002-8). If subalterns, society's low status, marginalised members, tell their own stories, they can create more authentic histories that redress the record of human experience (Ladd 2003, 86). As sign language cannot be recorded in writing or even photography, filming uniquely captures Deaf culture; in this way, Deaf film and TV has played a vital role by reflecting its 'history, stories, experiences and cultural differences' (Woolcot and Hinks 2014).

Deaf Film and TV

In the US, Deaf Cinema began 1902 with the first known sign language film, *Deaf Mute Girl Reciting the Star Spangled Banner*, followed by Krauel and Marshall's pioneering films documenting Deaf communities in the first half of the twentieth century (Durr 2016, 157). More recently, a growing number of film festivals and production companies, together with accessible filmmaking and distribution technology, has enabled greater levels and variety of production (Ibid.). However, the standard of original content is variable; many Deaf films suffer from 'basic stories', 'empty characters', 'far-fetched plots' and 'false suspense' (Woolcot and Hinks 2014).

In Britain, Deaf film and TV also has a substantial history. The British Deaf Association (BDA) film archive dates back to the 1930's (BDA: "Archive"). The Deaf Broadcasting Council was founded in 1980 and *See Hea*r, BBC's monthly magazine programme for deaf and hard-of-hearing in 1981. In the UK, the problem is one of volume. Broadcasters have a very limited duty to provide programming in BSL. Statutory targets require 80% of content to be subtitled but it is only 5% for signing (Ofcom 2017, 12). The British Sign Language Broadcasting Trust (BSLBT), a charity, was set up in 2008 'as an alternative way for independent broadcasters to meet their regulatory duty to provide programming in British Sign Language' (BSLBT, "About"). It aims to be a global leader in BSL creative content production, reflecting Deaf culture for a wide viewership and to develop Deaf programme-making talent and skills (Ibid., "Our Vision"). However, compared to other UK minority language broadcasters, it only has a modest annual programme budget of around £1.5million (Ibid., "Annual Accounts and Reports").

BLSBT's lack of capacity to support drama production is particularly acute: over its ten years' history, it has commissioned around 250 programmes of which fewer than 10% are dramas (Ibid., "Drama"). In addition, broadcast slots for BSLBT programming are limited. For example, the Film4 slot, which attracts the biggest audience, is at a time when young children might be watching. This presents significance compliance issues, inhibiting the range of content that can be commissioned. This combination of factors means that there are limited opportunities for Deaf filmmakers to be work professionally in their own language and, when they do, they must work within significant constraints. As in America, the standard of content is inconsistent and needs improvement.

However, it is difficult for Deaf filmmakers to develop higher levels skills when a critical mass of experience is so hard to gain.

Mainstream Film and TV

There is no intrinsic barrier to Deaf creativity: research demonstrates strengths in divergent and visual thinking, which are key skills for filmmaking (Stanzione, Perez and Lederberg 2013, 228). There are a handful of Deaf talent working in the mainstream industry. In TV, Camilla Arnold, is a broadcast documentary maker, Cathy Heffernan, an investigative journalist and development producer whilst John Maidens and Louis Neethling are freelance drama directors working for the BBC. In feature film, Ted Evans has been selected as one of Creative England's 'most exciting, innovative' creatives. His debut *Retreat*, funded by the British Film Institute (BFI), will be the 'first ever film in British Sign Language.' (Creative England, "CE50"; BFI, "Retreat"). So why are we not seeing more Deaf talent break-through?

The issue of language adds a significant barrier to accessing the mainstream industry, which requires a high level of written English for a production documents, when BSL users are often not confident in their use of written English (Marchant 2019). In addition, BSL users may need to rely on interpreters to communicate. Interpreters can be funded through Access to Work, a government grant supporting employment, but awards are discretionary (Disability Rights, "Access to Work"). With limited access to training, Deaf talent is hugely disadvantaged when it comes to developing the tacit industry understandings that are second nature to hearing practitioners – or, at least, much more easily acquired. In film education, students may be eligible for Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) but with shrinking budgets, in practice, university is not often a viable option for Deaf young people and, if they do progress, support is likely to be limited (NUS, "DSA Cuts"; The Guardian, "Universities").

However, the major hurdle to overcome is the prevailing culture of the mainstream industry, where inequality is systemic. For example, a UK Film Council report on screenwriters in British films revealed most commissioned writers are white (98%), male (82.5%), over the age of 46 (66%), earning relatively high incomes, established within industry networks who gain work through their agent or personal relationships (Rogers 2007, 7). In other words, elite insiders. The Deaf are captured within disabled rather than minority language statistics. The first *Diamond* report showed that disabled people are significantly under-represented in the UK broadcast industry (Creative Diversity Network 2017, 15-16). Ofcom's *Diversity and equal opportunities in television r*eport evidenced a slight improvement from 3% to 6% of disabled employees, but this is still a significant under-representation, as disabled people constitute 18% of the population (Ofcom 2018, 6). Other research suggests that 'workers with impairments' face 'qualitatively different sources of disadvantage' that leave them 'doubled disabled' as agents within the film and TV industry (Randle and Hardy 2017, 447).

The BFI states that diversity sits 'at the heart of our decision-making' (BFI 2016). Its Diversity Standards are designed to 'tackle under-representation in the film industry'; to remove barriers through a strategy of determined talent development, wider-spread opportunities, career progression measures and an overhaul of skills and training (BFI, "Diversity Standards"). The question is how these initiatives will be implemented in a way that makes them accessible to Deaf filmmakers. This is essential if Deaf talent is to succeed.

Working on *Hope*

Working with a new writer as a script editor is an intensely relational process. As described, the script editor must satisfy the demands of an industrial commissioning process and production specification at the same time as desiring to preserve and, if possible, to privilege the agency of the emerging screenwriter. This work needs an ethical foundation if it is not to be Janus-faced. I have found it useful to borrow the idea of the 'boundary rider' formulated by Lynne Gabriel as a way of describing and managing dual relationships in psychotherapy (Gabriel 2008). The boundary rider works thoughtfully on the 'limit line' to create a safe space for collaboration and creative growth (Gabriel and Davies 2000). The aim is to be mindful of the relational tensions inherent in the wider context; to carefully assess how these might impact the new writer and to facilitate their ability to understand and negotiate them.

Approaching the work on *Hope*, I also wanted to consider potential mis-match of status between the novice screenwriter and expert script editor. Ladd calls for individuals to become conscious of the dispositions generated by her or his social background (Ladd 2003, 220-1). I wanted to keep in mind my *habitus* ('feel for the game') and *cultural capital* (power and prestige) by dint of my industry experience and English-as-first-language so that they did not trump the writer's lived experience. In this way I hoped we could undertake the script development as equal Subjects, 'co-intentional' in our collaboration (Freire 1996, 51).

If script development is a creative and industrial collaborative process, could we invent a creative, industrial and distinctively Deaf collaborative process? Could we find a Deaf way to tell this Deaf story? Seeking a bespoke solution immediately pointed to a more inclusive, less hierarchical approach that fitted with the principles of subaltern stories. From the beginning, BSL interpreters would be part of the creative collaborative script development team. The writer carefully selected interpreters who understood her as a person – her way of being and her use of language – to support her to express her ideas in written English.

With these in place, we gently set aside the writer's previous drafts and began afresh. We spent a week talking through ideas for the project, exploring potential character arcs, story-lines, themes and meanings for the film. We developed these using orthodox principles of dramatic writing. At this point, the irony of my proposing three-act structure hit home. Aristotle considered the Deaf as sub-human (Ladd 2003, 91). A salutary moment.

In order to harness Deaf creative strengths, we adopted a visual, kinaesthetic methodology. We created a wall of movable coloured post-it notes – of characters, settings, scenes, actions, emotions and motivations - to try to open-up the territory of the film. Nash argues for a 'mysterious and often messy process' to give ideas 'time to ferment' (Nash 2014, 98). The idea was to start the development in a way that might foster 'the screenwriter's connection to expressive form and point of view' (Regan 2018, 78). Though hardly experimental, this approach would at least get us away, at least initially, from the rigidity of the written prose outline and treatment which is so often experienced as inimical to the new writer.

The development of the script then progressed following industry norms from synopsis to step outline, treatment to first draft. The next few drafts were spent whittling away unnecessary material. We jettisoned competing secondary characters and ditched dramatically inert events trading them for scenes with emotional conflict that built the central dramatic journey. As the script shaped up towards a film, in the spirit of continued experimentation and collaboration, I suggested that we do a Table Read. In my mind, this was a natural next move to assist the writer's development. However, the proposal was met by consternation by the writer and the director alike – how could that possibly work in a Deaf context!?

The Table Read

A Table Read is a term for the process that brings together actors and production team to read-through a script, bringing it alive for the first time. It is a tried and tested tool within the film and TV industry, where typically reading the production draft happens just before filming. Veteran TV dramatist Andrew Davies explains:

> All the actors are there in one room and they're all reading their parts. You get a real feel for it… I read the stage directions so that I can control the pacing… It's our best chance to see how it's going to turn out.
> (Andrew Davies: Rewriting the Classics 2018).

In contrast, in comedy animation series, the Table Read is central to the on-going development process. For example, in *The Simpsons* the script is written by a writing team but with 'input from the cast following table readings of draft scripts' (Wells 2014, 160).

The Table Read has been extensively used in the context of emerging talent. In the UK, the Script Factory, founded in 1996, pioneered the use of Performed Screenplay Readings both for screenplay development and talent promotion (Script Factory, "About"). TAPS, The Television Arts Performance Showcase, performed a similar function for television drama scripts for nearly 20 years (Lyle 2015, 69). In the practice-based teaching of screenwriting in the academy, Table Reading is routinely used as part of

peer-learning, where students read and feedback on each other's work as part of the drafting process.

In my experience as a script editor and educator, the Table Read is a transformative experience for the writer helping her or him to identify and solve problems in the script. Invariably, it is a powerful encounter between the writer and their work. The effect of hearing the whole script spoken out-loud by others is qualitatively different from the writer imagining it in his/ her own head or even reading it aloud alone. In the Table Read, the writer is an observer/listener rather than creator/participant. This enables the script to be experienced in a physical and feeling way. What works, what doesn't – previously hidden - is clearly revealed, enabling an effective next stage of script development. This appears to be an intuitive process, responding to the words coming to life off the page.

Based on this widespread practice, I imagined literature on the Table Read would be readily available, but this is not the case. Internet sources abound but their content is shallow; in contrast, there is very little academic literature on the subject. To construct a picture of the practice, references must be pieced together. An initial survey of twenty screenwriting books, from those focussed on the art and craft of dramatic writing to those offering industry and business insights, reveals a basic script reading orthodoxy.

Reading Screenplays (Scher 2011) considers in depth how readers should produce script reports ('coverage') for companies as well as give feedback to writers in writing or face-to-face. Reading is proposed as part of the re-writing process that the writer undertakes at the end of a writing stage to review of an element of the screenplay, especially dialogue. A 'skim' is a reading aloud of the script that leaves an 'impression' of what the film is about (Weston 1996, 165) and this is 'enormously helpful' for writers (Ibid. 2003, 67). Writers should take a break from writing before such a reading to ensure objectivity whilst readers must bring a fresh pair of eyes. The whole script should be read in one uninterrupted sitting and notes must be made on the script in preparation for feedback to the writer. American screenwriting manuals particularly encourage writers to join a group that facilitates peer-to-peer read-throughs and feedback on work in progress. Writers are encouraged to listen non-defensively to listen to suggestions (Dancyger and Rush 1995, 253). In the UK, *Introduction to Screenwriting* offers a robust rubric for such activities in education settings (Parker 2003, 109 – 112).

However, only four of the books reviewed mention Table Reading explicitly and then only in passing. Grove's page and a half of practical advice on how to undertake a Table Read is the most expansive account (Grove 2001, 87-8). There is very little qualitative analysis of the power of table read for the writer; how it operates 'affectively' to provide insight that assists the next stage of writing. Epps' advice is typical: 'Don't just read it, feel your screenplay' (Epps 2016, 23).

Macdonald's theorised approach to Screenwriting Studies proposes the broader idea of the 'screen-reader' working within the '*Screen Idea Work Group*' (SWIG) whose '*discourse*' facilitates the formation of 'the screen idea' and the Table Read could be placed into this framework (Macdonald 2013, 11). Could articulating this industry practice as a collaborative conversation offer the different perspective that would help us to find a more culturally appropriate way to use the process in a Deaf context?

The Experiment

The writer and director's initial scepticism about the idea of a Table Read seemed to be in response to the framing it as a hearing experience. How could a Deaf writer - who cannot hear - access a spoken reading? If it was interpreted, where would they look: at the character speaking or the interpreter signing? Surely there were bound to be difficulties for the Deaf participants working from a script written in English, which would involve reading in a second language, whilst simultaneously undertaking a translation into BSL.

There were other questions about when the Table Read might take place. To be useful for script development, the Table Read should happen within the development process before pre-production proper. However, in Deaf filmmaking, the translation of the written English script into signed BSL is central to the interpretation and effectiveness of the drama and so must be undertaken by the actors who are cast in the roles. This process usually happens during a workshop involving the actors, director, dramaturge and a BSL coach, who facilitates the translation as part of rehearsals for filming. However, a Table Read at this point would mean that the script was largely resolved.

For me, these questions were totally unexpected and underlined how little I understood the Deaf perspective and how powerful my hearing assumptions were. However, the interrogation of the process turned out to be a gift. Schon talks about problem setting as a way of exploring practice (Schon 1983, 18). The writer and director had problematised the practice in a way that I could not because of my tacit knowledge. Intuitively, I know a Table Read works as part of the development process but how?

As we explored these questions and issues, the idea of the trying out a Table Read took hold. We decided it would be a 'productive and purposeful *experiment*' (Gibson 2018, viii), offering the opportunity to make a shift in understanding through the process of 'handling materials in practice' (Bolt 2007, 27). As the Deaf have been so often forced to adopt hearing ways, it was vital to ensure the method was collaboratively developed. We took a dialogical approach, inspired by *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire 1996) and Conquergood's approach to ethnographic research 'a shared process of knowledge production' (Hartblay 2018, 158).

We agreed to undertake a reading of draft 4 of the script – roughly half way through the script development process. The objective was to test whether the Table Read could be a useful tool in a Deaf context and to answer the main question: what are the qualitatively measurable benefits to be derived from this process for a new Deaf screenwriter? We would also consider:

- What are the challenges in translating a Table Read into a Deaf context?
- What adaptations need to be made to the traditional process for it to work?
- In what ways is a Table Read an effective strategy for a Deaf writer?
- How does it work within the wider context and processes of script development?

The aim of the study would be to address a gap in knowledge about the operation and power of this practice phenomenon and, therefore, its value to the script development process. It would also contribute to Deaf filmmaking practice by creating an original methodology.

The Table Read experiment was agreed by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee. The participants would be a mix of hearing and Deaf: cast actors and stand-ins, members of the production team and BSL interpreters. A participant discussion about the script and the experience of the event would follow; this would be filmed to produce an audio-visual record for analysis. We agreed that in order for the writer to have a fresh experience of the script she needed to be an observer rather than a participant. The director would also watch rather than take part in the reading. I would occupy my dual role – as script editor and researcher.

Deciding how to read the script, so straightforward in the hearing world, was challenging. Potential solutions for Deaf participants were complicated by the fact that many of the production team had no or limited BSL. We needed to find an equitable solution to accommodate everyone's needs. Questions of whether the screen directions would be signed in BSL and then voiced over in English by an interpreter or spoken first and then signed by an interpreter as well as whether the hearing characters would speak or sign their dialogue were difficult to resolve. Whilst the hearing participants could easily access a script in hand, for the Deaf participants this was impracticable. For this reason, we decided to project the script onto a large screen. Rather than sitting around a table, the cast sat in a semi-circle facing the screen. The screen directions were read by the producer who sat to one side of the screen whilst an interpreter standing by the other side did a live signed translation. When it came to any dialogue, this interpreter pointed to the character's lines on the screen. When a hearing character spoke, this interpreter translated this dialogue into BSL. A second interpreter sat with cast and voiced the dialogue delivered in BSL for the benefit of the hearing participants. This complex triangulation of components evolved slowly without certainty that it would deliver the desired experience. But, to coin a Deaf expression, we decided to 'give it a go!'

Findings

Stanley Kubrick, reflecting on his writer-director role, talked about the value of rehearsal:

However carefully you think about a scene, and however clearly you believe you have visualized it, it's never the same when you finally see it played (Kubrick 1982).

This also sums up the benefit of the Table Read.

For the director, the read-through brought the story and the words 'to life'; he was able to see the character journeys 'in real life' and 'how things fit together' (Development Table Read 2018). He valued the Table Read as 'a kind of practice arena' where he could start to visualise the film for production and in the edit (Ibid.). For the producer, the balance of humour and sadness communicated in the read-through in a way it hadn't on the page, comforting her that the script would resonate with its intended audience. However, for the writer, there was a 'bit of disconnect between people verbalising and people signing' which meant the experience didn't produce the 'total immersion' she was hoping for (Ibid.). For her, the discussion following the Table Read was much more fruitful. This feedback was 'vital' to understand 'the bits that worked and the bits that didn't work' and the collaborative input boosted her confidence to undertake revisions that would make the script 'run much smoothly' (Ibid.).

As we discussed the script, the '*Screen Idea Work Group'* whose '*discourse*' facilitates the formation of 'the screen idea' came to life (Macdonald 2013, 11). The creative collaboration, previously focussed on the writer and script editor expanded out to include production team, actors and interpreters. Together, the group thoughtfully considered key issues: were there too many stories for the length of the script, and if so, what could be cut; were the character arcs clear and the relationships credible, did the medical scenes depicting the cancer treatment enhance the drama and were they feasible? The discussion produced valuable insights, such as this exchange between the actor playing the protagonist, Hope and the actor playing her mum, about the balance of dialogue and visual storytelling:

Mum: I feel a lot of it's in the signs, in the visual… when I'm with you (points to Hope) …I don't think we need words for some of that… you can just drop them.
Hope: Yeah, that's really interesting… It's not really about the words when I am having dialogue with my [real] mum. It's about facial expression and the mood really.
Mum: It's the touch, isn't it and the look… that's very powerful, I think.
(Development Table Read 2018).

The process also enabled team members give voice to individual concerns, such as the producer's long-standing worry about the plot timeline in relation to the conflict between two characters, the teenaged Hope and her friend Naomi. The discussion between the actors playing those roles helped to resolve how this would be taken forward in the script.

The read-through also played an important role in cementing the new collaboration between the Deaf director and the hearing producer. Development

can be disadvantaged when the director arrives late to the process '…after the themes of the story [are] developed in detail' by the script development team (Bloore 2014, 47). In contrast, good development ensures the core creative team are ''on the same page' to tell the same story', saving 'time, creative energy, conflict and…money' later down the line (Batty 2015, 115). In this instance, the Table Read brought together the Deaf director and hearing producer, galvanising them to engage with the project in a way that they hadn't been able to before. The shared experience was a milestone in their on-going collaboration and a good basis for negotiating story decisions later on in pre-production and the edit.

However, there were challenges around the methodology. It took a considerable amount of time to negotiate the sight-lines of communication to enable all participants to access the reading, so we ran out of time to try an alternative format where the cast, rather than sitting down, would stand up to deliver their lines. As the actor playing Hope's brother explained: 'Hearing actors can mumble through but Deaf need to move and feel'; 'when you stand up, that's when the fires start' (Development Table Read 2018).

Nevertheless, the experience was sufficiently successful that the writer and director persisted with it in the Rehearsal Weekend working with draft 6. Here, they adopted a hybrid of the industry norm, working around a table with script-in-hand, but also using a white board to capture the key script moments as a bullet-pointed outline. The BSL facilitator working with the young actors encouraged use the traditional method: 'Hearing people do this, so you need to learn how to do it' (Rehearsal Table Read 2019). With the everyone reading around small table, this seemed to create a greater sense of intimacy and connection and, overall, a more immersive and fruitful experience.

We also ended pre-production with a read-through of draft 7, the day before shooting began, as per the industry norm (Production Table Read 2019). The actors either signed or spoke according to their character. An interpreter voiced the dialogue of the Deaf characters and signed the dialogue of the hearing characters. By this time, as everyone was more familiar with the script, this method solved the mix of communication needs. The staged directions where signed by the director whilst another interpreter voiced the text for the benefit of the hearing crew. This worked much more smoothly, confirming that a BSL-led reading is a better basis for Deaf production.

Conclusion

The Table Read experiment was a partial success. It certainly proved to be an effective script development strategy. Together, the read-through and discussion promoted a greater ability in the writer and script development team to judge the work in process and a deeper level of understanding about what to do to solve the script problems so as to enhance the drama. The Table Read enabled new knowledge and transformed practice through its sensory, 'embodied and enacted'

methodology (Austerlitz 2008, 17-19). In the traditional method hearing the script brings about an emotional, feeling response but for Deaf, a kinaesthetic approach is required to produce an analogue experience. Ideally, further experimentation with a standing rather than sitting Table Read will be undertaken to test this further. With more development, this could offer an expanded, culturally appropriate and, therefore, more effective method of using this industry practice.

However, there were challenges in translating a Table Read into a Deaf context. If BSL-led it is possible to adopt the traditional round-the-table script-in-hand format, though the challenge of live translation from English written script to signed BSL remains. However, there is value for Deaf filmmaking talent to be able to operate within the industry norm, especially if they want to work in the mainstream. In this experience, the mix of Deaf and hearing communication needs meant the adaptations required to make the process work were rather unwieldy and resource heavy. The potential costs of securing a suitable room and assembling appropriate readers might make this form of Table Read difficult to implement as a regular part of the Deaf script development as budgets for Deaf projects are usually modest. A more financially viable way of achieving similar benefits could be to implement Writers' Groups, precedents for which exist in the industry and the academy, where writers can support each other through reading each other's work and offering peer feedback.

According to McNamara the 'defining gesture' of ethnography is to give 'to give voice and presence to the disarticulated or silenced subject' (McNamara 2018, 104). I hope this study contributes to the case for greater investment in new Deaf talent. We need to enable the development of assured screenwriting voices that can craft compelling stories that will powerfully connect. How vital it is for these stories to be seen and heard – not only for the Deaf community but for us all.

Final Notes

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