

Working with Interpreters in Film and Television

The participation of qualified interpreters is crucial to the success of nearly every production utilizing a Deaf or hard of hearing performer. The interpreter's role is to facilitate communication between individuals representing two different languages and cultures. As with two individuals of differing nationalities, communication between a Deaf/hard of hearing person and a hearing person requires the assistance of a qualified/certified third party. If, in the absence of interpreters, the intentions of the casting director, director and author are not sufficiently communicated and understood in the audition room, the producer/director/ casting director will not be able to see the full potential of a given actor who is Deaf or hard of hearing, and the actor will not have had a fair opportunity to give their best audition.

Actor Troy Kotsur: *"Auditions are our floor to give what we've got, but without a comfortable flow of communication, we are not able to give a hundred percent and show casting directors and directors the range of what we can do. When I had an appointment to see the casting director for a callback, I saw other Deaf actors waiting for their appointments, too. When it was my turn, I wasn't sure if they would have an interpreter for us. I went into their office for the interview and felt awkward at the moment I learned that there was no interpreter at all! The casting director just spoke directly to me as if I could hear her or could fluently read her lips. After it was over, I left the audition without saying anything. It was the worst audition I ever had."*

Actress Missy Keast: *"When I was in the audition room, the interpreter signed **everything** that the casting director said. It gave me more confidence to just do my work as an **actress**. So, the issue of being 'Deaf' was erased in the eyes of the audience in the room. I liked that. The only issue in that room was my work as an actress."*

The performing unions have their own rules regarding hiring an interpreter. While you should check with the specific union and contract which has jurisdiction over your production, generally, if you are specifically seeking to audition Deaf actors, it is the responsibility of the Producer (and, by extension, the casting director) to provide interpreter(s). If the interpreter's role is established properly in the audition, the rest of the process is more apt to flow smoothly.

Hiring interpreters directly enhances the success of the audition process, rehearsal and production. If the creative ideas of the director and writer are not understood by the actor and

therefore, not carried out, the production will ultimately suffer. **It is completely, totally, absolutely in the interest of the producer to hire interpreters from the beginning – we cannot stress this enough.** The hiring of qualified interpreters is also an indication of the producer's seriousness and professionalism.

Once hired, it is the actor's responsibility to make his/her needs known to the producer right away, including the use of interpreters. Common sense dictates that if the producer initiates the query, it sets the most productive tone for the process to follow.

The interpreter should be outside the audition room with the other waiting actors. Then, the interpreter should accompany the actor into the audition or interview for the express purpose of facilitating the communication between the Deaf actor and the producer/director/casting director. When the audition or interview has concluded, the interpreter leaves with the actor, and then enters again with the next actor. This should be done regardless of how many actors are auditioning. It is improper to make the interpreter privy to the discussion that occurs between casting director and director regarding actors between auditions. By requiring the interpreter to follow the actors, their role as communicator is firmly established.

The interpreter ideally should be experienced in the performing arts setting. An interpreter not only serves to communicate the director's expectations to the Deaf actor, but also to effectively convey the actor's communication to the director. The ability to interpret from ASL to spoken English, sometimes called "voicing", can be a complicated process. Lapses in this process can make the actor sound awkward or non-fluent. Sometimes a production may hire an actor who is not qualified as an interpreter but who knows some sign language to function as an interpreter. This is akin to hiring an accompanist who knows only some of the notes and chords. Beyond being unprofessional, this ensures that the decision-maker will not see the best work from the actor. **Interpreters know that their role is to facilitate communication between the producer/director/casting director and the Deaf or hard of hearing actor, period.**

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