

NTID  
News A



# The sight of sound

Interpreter Steve Nelson signs dialogue from the film *The Deep*, shown last Friday at Ingle Auditorium on the RIT campus.

David Cook Democrat and Chronicle

**By Stephen Wigler**  
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Nancy Baran and Steve Nelson go to the movies several times a week and talk right through every film they see. But no one complains.

Baran and Nelson are interpreters for hearing impaired students at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT).

Sitting with headphones on about 15 feet from the edge of the screen, Nelson and Baran interpret each film's soundtrack with sign language. The headphones eliminate distracting noises from the hearing audience.

Neither Baran nor Nelson liked *The Deep*, which was screened last Friday night at RIT.

"I was bored to death," said Steve. Nancy agreed. "I couldn't see very good interpreting for a film like that."

*The Deep* is known more for its visual effects — among them Jacqueline Bisset in a wet suit — than for its replete. More than half of the *The Deep's* action takes place in the ocean, eliminating dialogue in those scenes. And even when the action takes place on land or on a boat, there is little verbal interaction among the characters.

Ironically, this is the reason most hearing impaired people like a film like *The Deep*, says Mike Rizzolo, who is a lead interpreter in the Department of Interpreting Services at RIT, which employs Nelson and Baran.

"The action explains itself," says Rizzolo.

**BEFORE THE** screening, Rizzolo, Nelson and Baran talked about why interpreting films in sign language is hard work.

An interpreter usually runs about seven words behind screen dialogue. He must be sure he's accurately signing what he heard a few seconds before, while simultaneously concentrating on immediate screen dialogue and other sound effects.

## Hearing impaired movie goers prefer captioned films, but they are rare; so in their place are interpreters whose hands 'speak'

"It's not just listening and signing," said Rizzolo. "We have to process what we're listening to. You have to *understand* what's being said and give it out in an appropriate language."

Baran talked about the difficulty of signing Bette Midler's singing in *The Rose*.

"When she screamed 'Take a little piece of my heart,' I had to go like this." Baran squished up her face in an ecstatic grimace and held her fists over her heart. Her thumbs and forefingers made little cutting gestures.

But Nelson said movies like Woody Allen's, with their emphasis on delicate word play, are usually the most difficult to interpret. An interpreter must have the ability to sign one word several ways.

"Think of a 'simple' word like *run*," said Nelson. "You can run a computer. Your nose can run. You can have a run in your stocking. You can have a run on a bank. Or you can run a race."

**MOST OF THE** interpreters at RIT rarely see a movie before they interpret it, so they continually make split-second decisions. A car honks its horn. Is it important or just background noise? Is film music merely adornment or is it essential to understanding?

"In *Blazing Saddles*," said Nelson, "you see Cleavon Little riding through the desert. You hear jazz music, but

you don't really pay much attention to it. Then all of a sudden he rides by Count Basie and his band in the middle of the desert. It's funny, but you need the auditory lead-in to realize the humor."

In *Blazing Saddles*, Nelson had to sign to the audience — even before the appearance of Basie — that jazz music of the big band era was in the background.

**BECAUSE FILM** interpreting makes strenuous mental demands, interpreters relieve one another every 40 minutes.

All three are members of the group known as "campus life" interpreters. Employed by RIT, they interpret religious services, dance classes, refereeing decisions at sports events, the television evening news — any part of campus life that's non-academic. The other members of the Department of Interpreting Services concentrate on academic situations in the colleges of RIT.

And much as they enjoy interpreting movies, it's a part of their activities they wish was no longer necessary. Most hearing-impaired students, Rizzolo explains, prefer captioned movies, such as foreign films with subtitles, to interpreted movies.

Without captions, hearing-impaired students continually have to shift their attention from the interpreter to the screen.

**ALL 7:30 P.M.** screenings in the Talisman series on Fridays and Saturdays are interpreted. NTID also screens two captioned English language films every week at NTID's theater. There are also captioned films shown by the Rochester Recreational Club for the Deaf on St. Paul Street. And the Dryden Theater at George Eastman House is equipped with an Induction Loop Amplification System. By activating a telephone switch on his hearing aid, a hearing impaired person can get an amplified version of the sound track.

## The sight of a film's sound at RIT

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"The problem is that it (captioning films) is very costly," said Nelson. "And it takes quite a while before captioned movies are made." (Captioned films are made available to NTID and to the Rochester Recreational Club for the Deaf.)

There are 14 million hearing impaired people in the United States. And Rochester, with a hearing impaired population of 90,000 in its metropolitan area of 900,000, ranks as the highest per capita hearing impaired population in the country. About one-third of the audience of last Friday night's screening of *The Deep* was hearing impaired.

"I rarely go to the movies with interpreters," said Jackie Schertz, a 22-year-old who has just graduated from NTID with a degree in social work and who is working this summer in the department of interpreter training. Schertz answered questions excitedly and fluidly in sign language interpreted by Nancy Baran.

"I prefer captioned films or foreign movies with subtitles," said Schertz. "... If an interpreted movie involves a lot of dialogue then I won't go. It's really difficult because I find myself trying to decide whether I should watch the movie or watch the interpreter."