

NTID's student actors sink teeth into challenges

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What: The Passion of Dracula, stage production in sign language and with actors' words voiced for the hearing.

Where: Robert F. Panara Theatre at Rochester Institute of Technology's National Technical Institute for the Deaf.

When: Thursday through Saturday, 7:30 p.m.; Sunday, 2 p.m.

Tickets: \$7; \$5 for students and seniors, available at the door, by e-mail at ntidtix@rit.edu or by phone at (585) 475-6254 (V/TTY).

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Staff writer

(October 25, 2005) — Some people may think the Rochester Institute of Technology is just for students who want to learn computer science or engineering.

But costumed actors in makeup who take to the stage six times a year on campus are "Rochester's little jewel," says Jim Orr, an outreach coordinator for RIT's National Technical Institute for the Deaf.

Orr this week is directing *The Passion of Dracula*, a play featuring deafstudents who use sign language as hearing actors simultaneously voice their lines.

"We are literally one of a handful of theaters worldwide that do this art form," Orr said. "You don't have to know one word in sign language. The show will be fully accessible."

NTID, which has about 1,100 deaf and hard-of-hearing students, offers courses in set design, stage lighting, special effects and costume design.

But the experience of acting on stage is something that attracts students such as James Cooley, 19, of Fredonia, Chautauqua County.

As a young boy, Cooley imagined himself as characters he saw on television or in a movie. "I was often caught daydreaming because I was too busy imagining myself playing a role from TV," he said.

Three years ago, while a student at St. Mary's School for the Deaf in Buffalo, he saw a stage performance by visiting NTID students and was asked to join them for a small part.

"At that moment, I knew that was what I wanted to do, to become an actor," Cooley said.

Now Cooley, a second-year student at NTID, is in his fourth production here, playing the part of a prisoner in this week's play. He says acting allows him to think clearly and relieve stress, despite the flying bats, bloody neck bites and impaled bodies in this plot.

"I like to be on the stage because I can feel good about myself," Cooley said. "I'm all about art. ... When I'm not on the stage, I get bored and just think about when's the next time I'll get on the stage. There are days when I just want to pack up and go right into the field of acting, but it's not as easy as I thought it would be."

Jeff Pratt, 24, who is finishing his last quarter at NTID and RIT, plays the title role of Dracula. He tried out his custom-made fangs in a dressing room before Monday's first dress rehearsal. A bottle of denture adhesive was nearby.

"I really love to play different characters, and it's my hobby to be an actor," said Pratt, who would like to pursue an acting career in

Austin, Texas. "Sometimes it can be difficult, but it's worth it. I'm proud to be an actor."

Julie Kramer, 23, an interpreting student from Indianapolis, is one of the actresses who voices for another character in the play.

"It's a great way to improve your skills," she said. She has no desire to become a professional actress, although she may use her sign language skills to interpret on stage in the future.

There are very few accommodations that need to be made for deaf actors. Orr made sure they faced him and were watching when he gave directions in sign language before the rehearsals.

Cooley, who has Usher Syndrome, which progressively diminishes his field of vision, benefits from glow-in-the-dark tape on stairs. Stagehands also are there to physically guide him through the darkened backstage, allowing him to find his way.

"People often think because I have loss with both my hearing and vision that acting seems impossible," Cooley said. "Individuals are allowed to have a dream, and if they can believe in them, then they can achieve them. I may be deaf and become blind, but it doesn't limit me from performing on stage. Acting is who I am and what I will do for the rest of my life."

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