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American Sign Language Brings New Layers to 'American Idiot'

Performed simultaneously in sign language and sung English, a Los Angeles revival of the Green Day musical finds new ways to communicate rage and angst.



Otis Jones IV (signer, on the right) and James Olivas (singer, on the left) perform an excerpt from "American Idiot."



By Gabe Cohn Videos by Chad Unger

Gabe Cohn, a hearing writer, and Chad Unger, a Deaf photographer, spent several days with the artists in Los Angeles.

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Inside the Mark Taper Forum in downtown Los Angeles on a recent Wednesday, the air was saturated with stage fog and preshow jitters. The first performance of a revival of Green Day's "American Idiot" was just hours away, and the choreographer Jennifer Weber had some final instructions for the cast members, who were wearing their costumes — combat boots, eyeliner, enough artfully ripped jeans to fill a Hot Topic — while they ran through dance movements onstage. Weber, microphone in hand, sang the song "Homecoming" as she demonstrated choreography:

"What the hell's your name?/What's your pleasure, what is your pain?"

An American Sign Language interpreter, Maria Cardoza, stood alongside the actors, signing Weber's directions. At one point, Colin Analco, the show's ASL choreographer, was slipped a small flashlight to illuminate Cardoza's signing motions under the din of the fog and ambient lights. Weber kept singing, then started counting the beats:

"'Blew his brains out' ... one! ... two! ... three! ..."

Around the theater, about a dozen other conversations, some in spoken English and some in sign language, were happening among the cast and crew. Their show is the latest interpretation of a set of songs that have had many lives: After all, “American Idiot” is many things. It’s an album that monopolized alternative radio in 2004, but also a present-day staple of nostalgic streaming playlists. It’s a time capsule of Iraq War-era political disillusionment, and a distillation of timeless teenage angst. A musical adaptation of the album debuted in 2009, and made its way to Broadway in 2010. Now, this revival of that show is proving, with gusto, that “American Idiot” can be yet another thing: a near-scientific study of the innumerable ways to give somebody the finger.

Or at least how many different ways the human body can be used to convey the emotions behind a raised middle finger. The production, which opened Oct. 9 and is running through Nov. 16, is a collaboration between the nonprofit Center Theater Group and Deaf West Theater, a Tony Award-winning company that stages plays and musicals that blend American Sign Language with spoken English.

The cast includes both Deaf and hearing performers. Certain lead characters are played by two people at once — one Deaf actor who primarily communicates using sign language, and one hearing actor who sings and talks in spoken English. It’s a well-established method for producing work for audiences of Deaf and hearing people. Deaf West has specialized in it for decades. But as one might expect, “American Idiot,” a fast-paced, loud pop-punk musical filled with wordplay (“alien nation,” for instance) and four-letter words, presented the artists with some novel challenges.

An idiosyncratic musical

Built around rock songs that were not written for the stage — among them “Boulevard of Broken Dreams,” “Wake Me Up When September Ends” and the title track — the “American Idiot” musical is almost entirely sung through, with little dialogue. Its book was written by Green Day’s frontman, Billie Joe Armstrong, and the Broadway director Michael Mayer. Its story, about three teenage misfits named Johnny, Will and Tunny whose lives diverge, is primarily conveyed through the staging.

When DJ Kurs, the artistic director of Deaf West, was approached by Snehal Desai, the show’s director and the artistic director of Center Theater Group, about collaborating on a sung-signed revival, the “first response was fear,” Kurs said. (Like several other interviews conducted for this article, the conversation with Kurs, who is Deaf, was facilitated by a sign-language interpreter.)

A primary concern, Kurs explained, was that incorporating deafness into characters who communicate through snarling punk songs would play into the stereotype that “Deaf people are always angry” at the hearing world, he said. On the other hand, it had the potential to play against some stereotypes, especially, he added, pop culture’s spotty-at-best track record of presenting multidimensional Deaf characters. (For example, a 2022 study co-written by Kurs found that 70 percent of Deaf consumers said Deaf characters in TV and film were often presented as objects of pity.)

Things are different with the headbanging, assertive roles here. Daniel Durant (a star of the 2022 film “CODA” and Deaf West’s 2015 Broadway revival of “Spring Awakening”), a Deaf actor who performs the role of Johnny alongside Milo Manheim, a hearing actor, said that Johnny, a self-described “son of rage and love,” is “the most rebellious and the most anti-establishment character that I’ve ever played.”

The punk-spewing central characters aren't "seeking pity," Durant said.

"We just rage together," Manheim added later. "We let our rage out."

They usually let it out, at least — some situations call for holding it in and buttoning it up. Landen Gonzales, a Deaf actor who plays Tunny, discussed how he shifts his signing style when he's signing as Tunny, who joins the military.

"I like to make jokes, I like to play with people and just kind of be that jokester in the room," Gonzales said of his typical way of signing. "But my character, you have to sign a little bit more firmly."

New territory for Deaf West

Weber, who was brought on as the show's dance choreographer, said the team had an important question to puzzle out: "What does it mean to be physically loud? Because ASL is not sonic, right? So how do you create loud visuals?"

One strategy was to choreograph abrupt physical shifts. "If you have a moment onstage where people are doing different things and then everyone is suddenly in unison, that feels louder," she said.

Another technique was what Weber described as onstage "multiplication" — having a move begin with a single performer then be repeated by an increasing number of dancers.

"We physically echo," she said.

Onstage captions also help. Putting most subtitles to shame, the captions in this "American Idiot," prominently and clearly displayed at every performance, are packed with visual flair reflecting the tones of the songs. Words literally shake

with intensity. Typefaces get wild. Projected letters stretch and drip down the set as characters get high.

It's important to note that these characters are not simply all hearing characters whose lines are expressed through sign language. In this production, many characters, including the story's three central friends, are portrayed as Deaf themselves. This gave cast members who are Deaf some extra room to introduce that aspect of their perspectives into source material written by hearing artists.

Not that the original script didn't give the team plenty to chew on. The blistering source material introduced its own set of hurdles for Analco, the ASL choreographer. He took the lead on translating every song into sign language, working with Weber to fuse the signing movement and dance choreography.

"When we think about punk rock, it's very edgy, it's dangerous, it brings elements of risk," he said.

No pure translation is ever possible, which is both a challenge and an artistic opportunity. As Analco put it: "How do we create the intention and evoke the same type of feeling that the hearing audience is getting from listening to the lyrics?"

One of the trickiest lyrics came midway through the number "Holiday," an anti-authoritarian anthem that manages to turn the line "I beg to dream and differ from the hollow lies" into a catchy hook. On the original recording, Armstrong shifts into a voice dripping with mockery as he sings, "Sieg Heil to the president Gasman." For obvious reasons, it's language that needs a particular kind of sarcastic, sneering delivery to work. So Analco worked that into the ASL translation, blending two opposing signs: one that is an expression of honor, another a rough equivalent to saying "take a hike." The result is tonally similar to saluting somebody while giving them the middle finger.

Cue the lights, and light the cues.

Several cast members take advantage of an elaborate system of colored lights, visible to the performers and manually controlled from offstage, that give cues for when certain actions need to be performed, or sung lines signed. These are used alongside subtle physical cues by actors, both hearing and Deaf, that allow the cast to stay in sync.

During shows, the cue lights, which hang above the seats, are blocked from the audience's view. During another recent rehearsal, this one after preview performances had begun, a production assistant, Abby Peterson, demonstrated how the lights worked.

Peterson was seated at a table offstage right, hovering over a rectangular black box covered in chunky metal switches that would not have looked out of place in the cockpit of a jet. Each switch corresponded to a colored cue light, and each actor who relied on the system had been assigned a unique color. (As it happened, that day an additional actor was being added to the system — the actor had been relying on a cochlear implant, and the device had broken. The culprit was thought to be sweat. The cue light system would help compensate.)

Also on the desk was a tablet computer displaying sheet music that had been marked up with color-coded lines indicating when each switch was to be flicked on or off. When the light changed, that was the actor's cue. Peterson pointed out Durant's color: blue.

At that moment, Durant was onstage wearing his costume of plaid, denim and Converse. He and other cast members were finessing moments in "St. Jimmy," a particularly raucous number.

The song's energy called to mind something Durant had said earlier, about his relationship to music. Growing up, he reflected, "I didn't enjoy or even experience music, as a profoundly Deaf person. But one thing I've always enjoyed is rhythm. I love a pounding bass. I love the throb. It could be a ticking clock, it could be a heartbeat, it could be the rhythm of a person's breath — those are all beats in our lives."

"This show," he went on to say, "is rock and punk. It's heavy bass."

When audience members arrived that night, they might have noticed that there is no preshow playlist, no music in the theater before this performance. Instead, as people take their seats, something else is played out of the speakers: the low, percussive thumps of a beating heart.

Gabe Cohn is a Times editor who writes about arts and culture. [More about Gabe Cohn](#)