



A SHORT HISTORY OF A SHOW OF HANDS

by GARY FRIEDMAN

This is a story of a group of performing children called A SHOW OF HANDS. This talented ensemble spread the concept of sign language to hearing audiences across the country by incorporating precision signing with superb singing and dancing.







In its 5-year span from 1981 to 1985, A SHOW OF HANDS became media role-models and made hundreds of performances across the country, promoting sign language in a non-threatening way to hearing audiences everywhere.





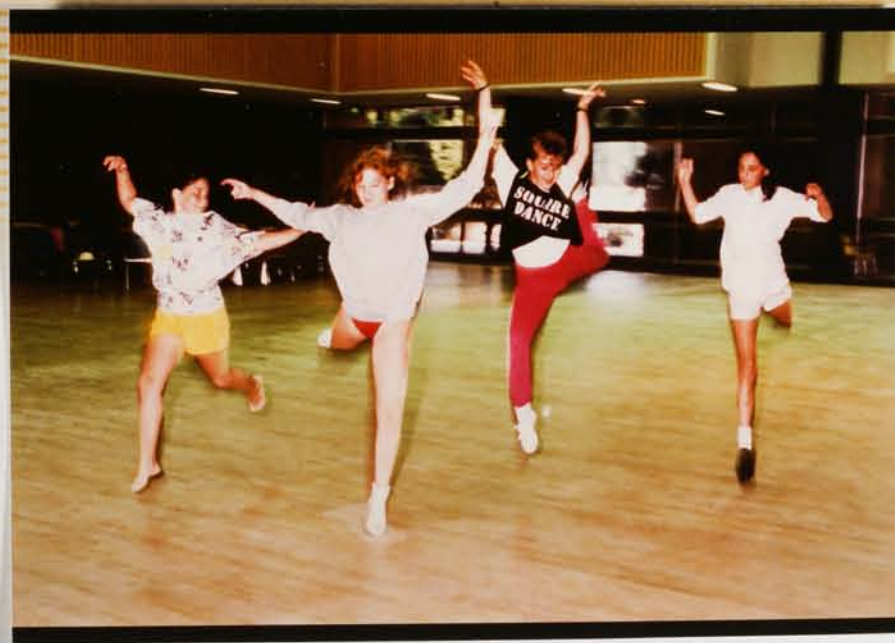


My travels with them took me to hundreds of places, including The Hollywood Bowl, two Macy's parades in New York, Dodger Stadium (where they got more applause doing the National Anthem than the entire Dodger lineup), The Los Angeles Olympics, dozens of studios for syndicated and cable shows, and a two-week tour of Switzerland.





The group consisted of about 24 non-professional hearing kids who, with the staff's professional coaching, were proficient in sign language, 2- and 3-part harmony, musical abilities, and choreography.





In New York, when they were to participate in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, they worked alongside seasoned Broadway dancers when preparing to sing and sign for the Rainbow Brite float.

At the beginning of the parade, A SHOW OF HANDS was spotlighted when they taught the world how to sing "Jingle Bells" in sign language.









In addition to their numerous public appearances, A Show Of Hands also received community recognition and awards for their work. Mayor Tom Bradley even named May 28, 1982 A SHOW OF HANDS DAY in the city of Los Angeles. Benefit performances also supplied a scholarship fund for interpreter training at California State University, Northridge.



In the Spring of '84 we were invited by an agency of the Swiss government to come and perform for 2 weeks. All we had to do was raise the money for airfare and the rest would be taken care of. Six months later, we were off!

To our astonishment, the first indication of our popularity came before we even got there in the form of the morning paper, which was presented to us on the plane. There, emblazoned across the front page, was a BIG headline celebrating our arrival!





Switzerland was a unique experience on many levels. First, sign language was virtually unheard of amongst the population. To them, singing for the deaf was such a curious idea that people literally packed the performance houses to experience "The Hands That Sing". The children's voices, harmony, dancing, and precision sign language amazed and captivated the audiences, resulting in standing ovations and multiple encore demands at every performance. The Mayor of Geneva, after experiencing the show, called the group's mission "pioneering work", and soon after our departure signed into law a provision for sign language interpreters in all university classrooms that require them.



7/11/77



If this incredible reception was all that had happened to us, that would have been great. But early on the tour, we met with another performing ensemble, also comprised of kids of about the same age. This theatre troupe, whose French acronym is pronounced AFAT (Ateliers Formation Actions Theatre) put on a show that blew us away! They utilized dance, physical theatre, mime, and original music to tell a story dealing with things kids don't usually deal with: loneliness, prejudice, acceptance, and peer pressure.





We were so impressed with their show, and they were so impressed with ours that the two groups instantly became the best of friends and started teaching each other their crafts. Within two days the Swiss kids picked up finger spelling, and later the Americans had the pleasure of participating in their theatre exercises.

The two groups together toured all of Switzerland as a double bill, and packed the house at nearly all performances. Their popularity posed an unexpected problem: a new device was needed to satisfy the inevitable standing ovations and encore demands at the show's end. The solution came spontaneously one evening when, after the finale, the American kids pulled their Swiss counterparts onstage and had them try to sign along with the last number, "It's A Small World". They couldn't keep up, but that didn't matter!

During the time they had together, despite the language barrier, you never saw so many kids get along so well...





A Show Of Hands and Ateliers Formation Actions Theatre





And whoever said that Switzerland was beautiful...was right!

1982



When it finally came time to say Goodbye, we all made plaques for the families that hosted us, and we gave the Swiss kids our stylized suspenders as mementos.



AFAT came back to Los Angeles in 1985 for a similar tour. The reunion of the two groups was literally an explosion of happiness....



About the Photographer

(whose writing skills, by the way, should not be judged by these captions which are, after all, only captions.)

Gary Friedman has been a part-time free-lance photographer since he started attending Cal State Northridge in 1978. Although most of his work dealt with portfolios for aspiring actors and with student films, many of his photos have been published in Daily Variety, TV Guide, Peterson's Photographic magazine, and several newspapers. (Although on many occasions a certain unnamed photographer employed by the L.A. Times inadvertently takes credit!) His work with A Show Of Hands also encompassed brochures, press kits, and directing a promotional video. In addition, he has written several technical articles in international journals on new computer applications, and has just released a book which covers the subject in greater detail.

Although he keeps busy with music, technical inventions and the Big Brothers program, he has actively been seeking a photojournalistic experience similar to that of A Show Of Hands since that group disbanded in 1985. Peace Child seems to be a natural progression, since it too combines the stimulants of travel, theatre, photography, and working with hyper-intelligent kids.

Currently employed as a computer engineer at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, he has recently acquired a U.S. patent, and has been published in NASA Tech Briefs, and is listed in the Guinness Book of World Records for having built the world's smallest telephone.