Minnesota's Threads Dance Project reaches out to deaf community with 'To Hear Like Me'

A Minnesota artist set out to create a show for "someone who hears differently than I do."

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Hands speak volumes in Karen L. Charles’ new dance work, “To Hear Like Me.” As the dancers bend, reach, leap and turn to songs by Algiers, Fantastic Negrito and Meshell Ndegeocello, their hands form some of the lyrics in American Sign Language (ASL).

Charles, whose Minnesota-based Threads Dance Project will perform at the O'Shaughnessy next weekend, isn't the first choreographer to include ASL in her dances. But her reasons, methods and results are her own.

“This idea has been in my head since I taught deaf dancers 20 years ago, when I was a high school dance teacher,” Charles said after a rehearsal in late October. “I'm always thinking — how can I raise people's awareness? How can I make people more empathetic and caring toward each other?”

Charles' son has a deaf girlfriend. “Over the last year, she said to me, 'I've never seen your show.’ That made me think — is there a way to really try to be more inclusive of someone who hears differently than I do?”
Charles founded Threads in 2011 “to examine, expose and celebrate the threads that connect us.” The name came from her grandmother, who used thread to join mismatched fabric scraps into colorful quilts. The push to start her company came from her father, a postal clerk who left her $10,000 when he died from colon cancer. Near the end of his life, he revealed that he had always longed to be a doctor. Charles didn’t want to someday tell her children why she never followed her dream. She quit her day job.

Her mission goes beyond “just dancing” to embrace weighty themes including race, death, slavery, injustice, societal violence and gender roles. She translates them into choreography of beauty and soulfulness. She believes that boosting awareness and building empathy through dance can make us better people and our world a better place.

For “To Hear Like Me,” Charles wants deaf/hard of hearing people to experience a dance performance in all its fullness and artistry. She wants hearing people to think about the deaf/hard of hearing community and “instead of just avoiding them, which is often what we do, be brave and get to know someone. Put yourself out there.”

Dancing with ‘deaf hearts’

Early on, Charles gathered a team to help her get it right. Guest artist Canae Weiss is a choreographer, dancer and actor who has been deaf since birth and dancing since she was 5 years old. She has trained and worked with Ballet Arts Minnesota, Ethnic Dance Theatre, James Sewell Ballet and others. Terryann Nash is an ASL interpreter and teacher. Rebecca Demmings, Nash’s business partner, is a deaf artist and activist.

All are linked by a common thread: Patrick Scully, dancer and founder of Patrick’s Cabaret, which closed earlier this year (http://www.startribune.com/patrick-s-cabaret-prepares-to-bow-out-of-twin-cities-performance-scene-it-built/481949611/).

Charles was serving on a panel with Scully when he asked her what she was working on. “I said I was looking for an interpreter and would love to have deaf dancers in the piece,” Charles said. “He said, ‘Oh, I know some people.’”

Weiss is a former student of Scully’s. “I’ve grown up all my life with him as a mentor,” she said, speaking through Nash. It was Scully who told Weiss about Nash, and Nash brought in Demmings as a specialist. Together, they’re helping Threads create what Nash calls “deaf hearts.”

“Let me give you a really good example of the value of me reaching out to these ladies,” Charles said. “When I had this idea, I could have just read. I did read. I did some research. I visited Gallaudet [the university for the deaf in Washington, D.C.], which was really eye-opening.

“She’s not the point,” Weiss explained. “There are different levels of hearing loss. Some...
people have a little bit. Some people have a cochlear implant or a hearing aid. You can't really know. The point was creating a visual experience, a visual explanation, all of it integrated in the art and involving the dancers.”

‘They can become dancers’

For the Threads dancers, signing while dancing was a challenge. They had to learn new choreography and the basics of a new language, all at the same time. When Charles first described the project to the dancers, their responses “went from really excited to really scared,” she said. “But as the process has gone on, I think they are proud of the fact that we’re sharing and raising awareness. They’re really wanting to get it right.”

In rehearsal, when Demmings noticed a mistake in the signing, the dancers were intent, focused, willing to do it over.

Charles wanted deaf dancer Weiss “to feel a part of things. I know what it feels like to be the only person like me in the room.”

Weiss describes her experience as “wonderful. It’s exciting to be open-minded with open-minded people.”

Demmings hopes other deaf/hard of hearing people will see Canae dance with Threads. “I'm not a performer,” she said, again through Nash, “but I can feel how important it is to watch her as a deaf person, and I want other people to have that experience. To know they can become dancers and performers and connect.”

The performances will also include projections: visual representations of the music, some with lyrics, designed by composer and musician Peter Morrow. ASL interpreters will be present. So audience members who are deaf/hard of hearing can look at the visuals, the lyrics, the ASL interpreters and the signing being done by the dancers. “It’s all there, and it’s right there, and you can enjoy it because it’s all integrated into one,” Weiss said.

“To Hear Like Me” is the first part of an evening-length program called “In the Margins.” For the second half, “Femthology,” Charles drew from her company's repertoire of works about women, another group often marginalized. One of the dances is “Mistresses’ Lament,” from Charles’ 2014 piece “Secrets of Slave Songs.” Another is “Sacred Feminism,” inspired by words from poet and playwright Ntozake Shange, who died in October (http://www.startribune.com/obituary-ntozake-shange-pioneering-playwright-poet-and-novelist/498795391/).

The evening will end with “Bootyful,” a playful exploration of a female body part that often gets way too much attention. “It started from a serious place, about how women are forced to be so self-conscious about their bodies,” Charles said. “But it’s a fun piece, and hilarious. We want people to leave feeling uplifted, especially in these times.”

This part of the program has also been made more accessible, with visualizations and ASL woven throughout. Hearing people: If you watch closely, you may learn to sign
Peaches and Herb’s “Shake Your Groove Thing.”

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