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Jenny Sealey

Graeae Theatre Company  
<http://graeae.org>

## Presenter Interview プレゼンター・インタビュー

A leader in the world of performing arts  
for people with disabilities  
The quest of Jenny Sealey

障がい者の舞台芸術界をリード  
ジェニー・シーレイのチャレンジ

Jenny Sealey is a stage director who co-directed the London 2012 Paralympics Opening Ceremony alongside Bradley Hemmings (GDIF) and became the Artistic Advisor for the Unlimited 2012 Festival. She has been Artistic Director and CEO of the Graeae Theatre Company since 1997 and has pioneered a new theatrical language, coining the term “Aesthetics of Access”—the creative integration of sign language and audio description within performance. In addition to winning acclaim in the UK for directing works and running workshops, Jenny has given presentations internationally in Japan, India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Brazil and constantly works to promote the participation of people with disabilities in the performing arts. In 2009, Jenny was awarded an MBE of the Queen’s Honours because of her significant contribution to the development of accessibility in performing arts. Being hearing-impaired herself, Sealey continues her own creative work along with her efforts to help provide access into the performing arts for others with disabilities. This interview explores her unique activities.

Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto, Director of Center for Arts and Culture, NLI Research Institute  
Special thanks: British Council

### Dancing to keep my life going

I would like to start the interview from your childhood. How did you get interested in the ballet?

My best friend started doing ballet. So, when I was six I went along with her and I found out that I really liked it. I liked that our teacher was very playful as well. When I was seven years old, I banged my head on a table and went deaf. My mom had thought I would have to stop going to ballet. Then my dance teacher said, “It doesn’t matter if you can’t hear the music, because ballet is visual.” She taught me to hear music differently, to feel it and to watch the rhythm of the body of the person in front of you, and then music sucks into your own body. So, you develop a musicality.

And later in life, I realized that ballet saved my life because school was so hard. I had to lip-read. I was like a fish out of water at school, but with ballet, I was swimming freely in the pond because I could just be me. I just became deaf overnight, and life just had to continue. I was never taught how to be deaf. I carried on dancing because my teacher said, “No, it’s fine. We will work it out.”

## Presenter Interview

A leader in the world of performing arts  
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障がい者の舞台芸術界をリード  
ジェニー・シーレイのチャレンジ

I didn't know that I needed dancing to keep my life going. I was only seven and I just liked dancing. But later, as I got older, I realized how important it was. It was my time away from school, away from lip-reading. So, ballet gave me a freedom to be who I was.

### Do you have any special memories about dancing when you were a child?

Yes, lots of them. When we did ballet competitions, you have to do your solo ballet in your tutu, your little tiara, makeup, and then everyone does their solo. Then you all get into a semicircle and the judges say who's come first, second or third. And then they kept saying some number. Of course, I couldn't hear. I was just standing there, smiling; because you have to smile. And all the other girls were going, "Jenny, Jenny." I'm like what, "Oh, it's me!" I ran so fast forward, I nearly tripped off the stage. It was my first ever medal. I was so excited.

I was the only deaf person at my dance school. In all of my education, from primary school to junior school, to high school, to university, I was the only deaf person, just me. It was tough, but I developed a whole series of coping mechanisms. So I would always sit next to somebody who had very good handwriting and just copy her notes. Because teachers would wander around the class talking away, I gave up trying to catch their lips.

At college I did dance, but I stopped going to the lectures. So, my tutor would give me a list of the issues in that class and I'd go sit in the library. So, I'm self-taught, really. I felt very isolated at college, but I think it was because I didn't know how to be deaf and I had never really met other deaf people. So, I just became very good at lip-reading, very good at nodding, and pretending I knew what was happening. I still do that now in situations.

When I was studying at the college, I realized that I was a good dancer, but not brilliant. It is a very demanding profession physically, and I don't think I had the discipline to put my body through that. So I became more friendly with the drama students, and the big moment was when one of the drama students directed me for Dario Fo's *Woman Alone* script.

Almost the whole college came because they wanted to know—and I know this—"I wonder what that deaf girl could do". And, I did very well. I loved doing the solo piece, and I thought from that moment actually, I'm a much better actor than I am a dancer.

### Joining the Graeae Theater and 19 years as the Artistic Director

#### When did you join the Graeae Theatre?

At first, I joined Graeae as an actor in 1987. The audition was advertised in the magazine called *The Stage* and I went there. I walked into the room full of deaf and disabled people, and I have never met such diversity ever. I felt, "Wow!" And then I saw a deaf woman use sign language and speak. So suddenly for me, I felt like, "I've come home." I have met the right community for me to be in.

It was incredible. So that was a whole new awakening, a whole new dawn for me as

## Presenter Interview

A leader in the world of performing arts  
for people with disabilities  
The quest of Jenny Sealey

障がい者の舞台芸術界をリード  
ジェニー・シーレイのチャレンジ

a person. And I got the job. The play we did wasn't a great script but the learning and the joining forces with other deaf and disabled women was one of the best things, and that set me up for the rest of my life.

When the tour finished, I was able to move on to other small companies that worked mainly in schools and youth clubs. That was another very important part of my life in terms of building on the whole idea that theater is political, and that theater can transform lives. I was involved in the education work, and then years later, I applied to become the Artistic Director of Graeae in 1997. And I have been there now for 19 years.

### Why did you apply to be a Director of the Graeae Theater Company?

In 1993, I was pregnant with my son and I was thinking I'm going to have to rethink what I do. It's going to be quite difficult to be a touring actor with a small baby. And I saw an advertisement again in The Stage for a Trainee Director for a very, very small company based in the north of England, a company called Interplay; and their work specialized in creating accessible work for young adults with profound physical and learning disabilities.

So, I applied to go for that training for six weeks and got the position. So I sat watching these people act, watching the director and watching what he was doing and thinking with my big pregnant tummy, "Oh, I don't know why he did that. I would do it like such-and-such." And it was through that process that I just thought, "Oh, I wonder if I could do this."

Then Jonah comes out, my baby, and another small company in the West Midlands came up, asking for a deaf director to do a project for the deaf community. So, I had an amazing training ground. I didn't realise it at the time, but perhaps that gave me the confidence to dare to apply to [be a director at] Graeae. And I got the job.

I think back then, there weren't enough disabled actors. The fundamental issue was that there were very few training opportunities; certainly none of the drama schools were interested in training deaf or disabled people. So, we raised enough money and I did five years of this actor training project called 'The Missing Piece'. Each course was between six and nine months long, and as part of the course they had voice classes, movement classes, Shakespeare, contemporary text, improvisation, workshops. And at the end, they would do a play which would tour in London only.

After that, we started to really work with the drama schools. But, I think we failed, in a way, because they would say, "There are not enough plays about disability. So, we can't train actors knowing that there will be no jobs for them when they leave drama school."

We, as deaf and disabled people, can play many roles. They don't have to be specific to disability. My own quote always is 'Shakespeare didn't say whether Juliet was or was not a wheelchair user. She could be blind. She could be deaf. It doesn't matter. Theater is for everyone.' That mentality has always been the hardest thing to change. It still is. So in 2015, we set up another training program called Ensemble.

## Presenter Interview

A leader in the world of performing arts  
for people with disabilities  
The quest of Jenny Sealey

障がい者の舞台芸術界をリード  
ジェニー・シーレイのチャレンジ

### Experiences in Japan and visions for Graeae

In 2007, Setagaya Public Theatre organized the Japan-UK co-production called “Able Art on Stage.” They invited two theatre directors, John Palmer and you, to conduct workshops with disabled people and actors in Japan for the production. You directed “Blood Wedding.”

I remember everything about Setagaya and the project because it was so brilliant having that group of actors working. We had deaf actors, blind actors. We included our sign language interpreter. I always, always love the energy of Japanese artists. They just go, “Okay, let’s give it a go.” So it was such an artistic learning experience for all of us.

We played around with really being maverick with some of it. A blind actor named Keiji Arai played the bride’s father and deaf actress Asako Hirokawa was our bride. When she was near her dad but knowing that he is blind, she would get out her phone and text-mails her boyfriend. So, that for the audience was shocking, but that’s real life.

*Blood Wedding* is a big, and devastating love story. And that in itself is a very important message. We, as deaf and disabled people, have a right to love, to get married, to have children. But so often, we are sidelined. So, the fact that we were actually on that main stage in that beautiful theater meant, I think, that that group of artists were making history in Japan’s cultural history through *Blood Wedding*. It was amazing.

We took what we learned on to when we did *Romeo and Juliet* at Saitama in 2011. So, they made ‘Able Art’ and made that happen. We did that about three or four years, twice a year meeting as many Japanese disabled artists. We ran a whole series of workshops of one or two weeks and then, from that we started to really identify a group of disabled performers to stage the production.

**What are the most important values or the vision of Graeae? Could you name your major productions?**

I think the most important thing is excellence, accessible and inclusive theatre. I also feel we have a responsibility to develop talent and to keep pushing the boundaries of possibilities for them. We have done a lot of work, but always at the heart of it is excellence, accessibility and inclusion, always.

An early production was *The Fall of the House of Usher* based on the short script written by Edgar Allan Poe. In this play, the actors spoke the stage directions out loud as a form of audio description for blind people. (\*1) We also pre-recorded all the sign language. It was the first time we’d done this, so that set Graeae on a whole new journey of discovery to really embed the “access” element as a core part of the production. We didn’t have to have any sign language on the side or an audio describer. Everything came from the play and our performers, and that has developed as a practice over the last 19 years.

*Peeling* in 2002 was a play by a disabled woman and she wrote the audio description into the narrative, so the characters used it as part of their dialogue. And then *Blasted* by Sarah Kane was a real journey of discovery. Again, we use audio description in a

\*1 Audio description: An audio guidance system enabling visually impaired persons to understand what is happening on the stage.

## Presenter Interview

A leader in the world of performing arts  
for people with disabilities  
The quest of Jenny Sealey

障がい者の舞台芸術界をリード  
ジェニー・シーレイのチャレンジ

\*2 Candoco Dance Company: A professional dance company founded in 1991 by Celeste Dandeker and Adam Benjamin, co-creating productions by disabled and non-disabled dancers.

\*3 Ramps on the Moon: The pioneering project awarded £4.88 million by Arts Council England for six years. Seven theatres throughout the UK co-produce and tour the production staging disabled artists. Graeae Theatre becomes a strategic partner with New Wolsey Theatre, Ipswich, Birmingham Repertory Theatre, Theatre Royal Stratford East, Nottingham Playhouse, West Yorkshire Playhouse, Liverpool Everyman and Playhouse and Sheffield Theatres.

way that used all the words of the playwright; the stage directions were spoken by the characters creating the access for the blind audience members.

### Performing arts activities by deaf and disabled people in the UK

Could you explain the general history of performing arts by disabled people in the UK?

In the 1980s, when I was just leaving college and finding out about Graeae, I realized that there was a whole political movement taking place to create the Disability Discrimination Act. What was happening alongside that was that artists started to support the movement.

And then, in the 1980s and 1990s, many companies started to emerge. The 'big five' companies that were set up around the same time were Graeae, Candoco Dance Company (\*2), Mind The Gap, Oily Cart, and later Extant, which is a company led by visually impaired artists. Also emerging were Heart & Soul, a company making music by learning disabled artists; Blue Eyed Soul, an inclusive dance company; and Neti Neti, a theatre company who published their scripts with sign language pictures, making them more accessible for deaf people who don't read. Other companies were Show Of Hands, Theatre Workshop, and Birds Of Paradise, which were up in Edinburgh.

Some of them were luckily funded by the Arts Council and some of them were project funded. Arts Council England started to fund the theatre companies like Graeae or other companies for disabled people. The Arts Council has a civic responsibility to really make sure that their work reflects society, to be inclusive and to be diverse in who they fund, because traditionally in England the arts are for white middle class men, posh people. So, they had to really rethink their policy and they started funding us.

Just before I started in 1997, Graeae finally became an Arts Council portfolio organization but before that, it had been project funded.

Recently we started a project called 'Ramps on the Moon' (\*3). Along with Graeae, seven theatres including main stream theatres joined together. They joined forces to create a big show once a year. So, this year they did *The Government Inspector*. Next year, they're doing a big rock musical *Tommy* by The Who. Drake Music will join us, making music and musical instruments accessible to disabled people.

When the Discrimination Act was enacted in 1995, any building had to be made accessible. So suddenly, we had more theatre spaces to perform in; so we started like spiders, crawling out, reaching out for everywhere, and that became a development for the whole disability arts movement.

So, this will change things. I think drama schools will see that the mainstream world is employing deaf and disabled people. So, the drama schools now will see the value of training people.

### Methodology of production and Educational programme

When you say disabled, it varies a great deal and their degrees vary as well. So,

## Presenter Interview

A leader in the world of performing arts  
for people with disabilities  
The quest of Jenny Sealey

障がい者の舞台芸術界をリード  
ジェニー・シーレイのチャレンジ

does your company let all of them join your production?

Yes, if there's a right actor for the right part, yes. It doesn't matter if you have no legs or you're deaf or you're blind, it doesn't matter. We work with such a wide diversity of disabled people with various different impairments. They are actors and all actors want a job. So, at Graeae we employ people through audition. I've just auditioned 45 people for the *House of Bernarda Alba* by Lorca, which I'm doing next year. So, it is competitive for them to get through auditions, but that's healthy.

Within the disability art sector, there are new companies being born and there are more jobs, but in the mainstream there's still not enough. And I think the Ramps to the Moon Project and other theatres around the country are like, "Oh, wow! You can do that; well maybe we can do that, too." So hopefully, it means there will be more jobs over time.

I'm still interested in how you make your productions with the different types of disabled artists?

I just do. We make sure that the sign language interpreter is at rehearsal, so deaf actors have full access. For the deaf actors, we project the text on things so that they don't have to hold the script while they're signing. We like to have the words captioned on stage, but not all deaf people read, so we always have to think about whether we need a show to be signed.

If there's a blind actor, we make sure the script is in Braille or large print and we also have headsets so that we can line-feed to them in rehearsal. We have a wonderful team of access support workers who make sure rehearsals are accessible for the whole company.

Graeae's rehearsal space is fully wheelchair accessible so anybody who's a wheelchair user has got full access, and we have a green room with a day bed so actors with mobility impairments or fatigue can stretch and rest

I have always worked with very good musical directors because for blind people sound is very, very important. Sound can locate where someone is on stage or what the set is now; through sound you can tell whether we are in a forest, or a motorway, or wherever. Sound and music are very, very important.

The process of making a show is always fueled by that desire to try to be as accessible as we possibly can be. We make a lot of mistakes. I don't know whether you can be all things to all people, but for us, we will always try, and we want to. It's what keeps us going.

It's hard to explain the process because it's different every time, based on the performers involved. But the process is always, 'We've got to make a good play'. All directors just get on mainly with directing a show and getting the best performance out of their actors. So, that is the main part of my job.

Do you have children programmes in Graeae

We have a team of young advisers who are aged 8 to 16 years old, and they're called the Rollettes. Many of them are power-chair users and they whizz around. Every year, they tell us what they want and what they think Graeae should be doing.

## Presenter Interview

A leader in the world of performing arts  
for people with disabilities  
The quest of Jenny Sealey

障がい者の舞台芸術界をリード  
ジェニー・シーレイのチャレンジ

We have an extensive programme of work in schools. We take shows into schools and run education programmes alongside our productions. Some schools ask for something very specific, so we will create something for them. So, we are very, very active within education, but always our workshop leaders are disabled. That creates a good role model for disabled young people and non-disabled young people.

### The social value of performing arts by deaf and disabled people

I would like to ask about the social value of your company?

I think the social value is a very simple message: disabled life matters, and an inclusive environment is a rich environment, and we should all be part of it.

I think the theater world is much richer now that they are including more deaf and disabled people. There was always a fear from directors, if they worked with disabled people that audience would be put off, that audience wouldn't like seeing disabled people on the stage. I mean, how insulting, how wrong and how rude, and how discriminatory. But the more we have disabled people on stage, the more audiences get used to it and it's a reminder that everyone somewhere is connected to disability. Disability is part of all of our lives, and we need to be reminded of that and to embrace it.

Now, Rufus Norris is putting disabled people on the stage of the National Theatre for the first time. My Associate Director, Amit Sharma, directed a young disabled man in a play called *The Solid Life of Sugar Water*, which is about a stillbirth. It is a harrowing play. We took it to Edinburgh Festival and it sold out and then Rufus decided to make it on the National Theatre. So, Graeae, after 35 years, finally had a show at the National Theater.

So, we've been doing the grassroots work, and now with venues like the National Theatre and Ramps On The Moon partners sending out the message of access and inclusion from the top down, hopefully it'll all spread across the middle and we will have a nice inclusive society. That's the plan.

### Vision of the Opening Ceremony at the Paralympic Games

How did you get involved in the Opening Ceremony of London 2012 Paralympic Games?

I went to see the Head of the Ceremonies, because I knew that a non-disabled theater company had been asked to direct the Paralympic Opening Ceremony. I said to him, "I think it's really important that that opening ceremony is led by deaf and disabled people. There are a lot of really good artists within our disability community in the UK. So, please respect our skills".

When I was in Japan, in February-March 2011, just before your tsunami, I got a text from Martin, the Head of Ceremonies, saying that he would like to interview me and Bradley Hemmings to be co-artistic directors of the Opening Ceremony. We had a whole series of interviews, and we got the job.

## Presenter Interview

A leader in the world of performing arts for people with disabilities  
The quest of Jenny Sealey

障がい者の舞台芸術界をリード  
ジェニー・シーレイのチャレンジ

\*4 Ian Dury: English rock musician who had paralysis of the left side of the body caused by the polio he contracted at the age of seven. "Spasticus Autisticus" was written in 1981 as a protest against the International Year of Disabled Persons. Radio stations denied it airplay because of offensive lyrics. He was a patron of Graeae at the beginning.

\*5 Dr. Steven Hawking: An English theoretical physicist of worldwide fame. He experienced an onset of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis when he was in university. He uses synthetic voices automatically produced by computer programming. He appeared at the Opening Ceremony of Paralympic Games and made the following statement.

"We are all different, there is no such thing as a standard or run-of-the-mill human being, but we share the same human spirit. What is important is that we have the ability to create. This creativity can take many forms, from physical achievement to theoretical physics. However difficult life may seem, there is always something you can do, and succeed at. The Games provide an opportunity for athletes to excel, to stretch themselves and become outstanding in their field." (excerpt)

\*6 Alison Lapper: An English artist who was born without arms. During the Opening Ceremony, a huge sculpture titled "Alison Lapper Pregnant" was displayed at the center of the stadium. Made by Marc Quinn, it represented the artist's eight-months-pregnant body.

\*7 Unlimited: A performing arts festival presenting productions by disabled people during the London 2012 Cultural Olympiad.

What they did appreciate is that we are good theater makers, and also we're very good with money, because we've never had a lot of it. The Paralympics Ceremony doesn't have a lot of money, so they knew that we'd be very resourceful.

The biggest challenge was that we were the only deaf and disabled people in the whole of the ceremony's team. We needed to make sure that we had full and equal accessibility. We would be employing and working with a wide range of deaf and disabled people. So it was hard to try to shift their perception, but we got there.

Actually, Bradley and I wanted to start off a really important narrative because it was too good an opportunity to miss, to make a big political statement about human rights. I think the big thing is that we are equal. We are fed up with not being equal, not being seen as equal, not being part of society. And the message also was that human rights are everyone's responsibility.

Ian Dury's *Spasticus Autisticus* (\*4) was my idea. When we went for the job, we knew we had to do it. It's a big political disability anthem. It was so important to the Ceremony.

We knew we wanted Stephen Hawking to be presented at the Ceremony. We disabled people have contributed so much to the world and it gets forgotten. If we didn't have Steven Hawking (\*5), we wouldn't know about the black hole. If someone had told Beethoven that he couldn't compose music because he was deaf, we wouldn't have the Ninth Symphony. If someone had said to Frida Kahlo, "You're too disabled to paint", think what we wouldn't have! We wouldn't have the most amazing art of Frida. In the same way with Alison Lapper (\*6), it is a reminder that we disabled people are here, we are present and we are important.

Because the Opening Ceremony of the Paralympics was the third ceremony after the Opening and Closing ceremony of Olympic Games, they left it very much to us to get on with it. We had a lot of freedom to create the show that we wanted to create.

**Has there been any big change or impact by Unlimited or the Opening Ceremony of the Paralympic Games in regard to the public attitude concerning disabled people or the general situation of the performing arts by disabled people?**

I think in the performing arts world it's definitely changed. Unlimited (\*7) is still going on. That's a fantastic testimony of success. So, that in a way has changed some of the work that I have been making at Graeae. We made a big production called *The Limbless Knight*, which had a cast including ex-soldiers who have had their legs blown up. So, it was about the sacrifices the soldiers have made. It was about the sacrifice that we as disabled people are making because of all the government budget cuts.

And then we went on to do *The Threepenny Opera*, which is all about those who have and those who haven't got. It's all about society and having to just survive.

In 2012, we organized the Olympic and Paralympic Games and I think the whole nation was proud of what we achieved in terms of our medals. We did it and the world was looking at us. We were fantastic. But now, within the UK, it's been a mess with Brexit. It's just that we are in a horrendous political mess. We don't know the full extent of the impact that will have on everybody and we don't know what the impact will

## Presenter Interview

A leader in the world of performing arts  
for people with disabilities  
The quest of Jenny Sealey

障がい者の舞台芸術界をリード  
ジェニー・シーレイのチャレンジ

be for deaf and disabled people. But the arts are still there working together, so if the arts are still there, I always think there's hope.

### Toward Tokyo 2020

Do you have any suggestions or advice regarding the 2020 Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics?

I have been talking many times with people in Japan. Everyone was saying there is no real disability arts infrastructure in Japan. Okay. But don't talk about it, make one happen. You don't need to be afraid.

I think we have to have real commitment from the government to get some money to those theatres. Find some disabled artists. Start building a group of excellence, and get those artists to work together to find out what's possible. Start. Do it. And then we'll start finding our way, what it can be. But sitting around talking is not going to get us anywhere.

We need positive action now, because there's a huge amount of talent here. I know this from the work that I've done here in Japan, but not enough people know about it. Create more opportunities for more people and those people become a very active, vocal and visible part of the Ceremony at the Cultural Olympiad. Those people will become leaders from now and way beyond 2020. And that's so important, the legacy.

I was so proud that our government had allowed a deaf and disabled person to lead [at the 2012 London Paralympics] and I want that for Japan. I want the real visibility for disabled people because we've got to push the agenda. I really feel Tokyo has to choose to take responsibility to get that message out there again.

Some of the institutionalized ways of working or old habits are so ingrained, and people don't like change. But, because you've got 2020 coming up, it's a really good way of saying, "This is going to be a change for the whole country, and certainly for Tokyo. How can we use this as a catalyst for more change and not be scared of it?"

Lastly, I would like to ask you for a message for the disabled artists in Japan.

Get out there and do it.