

Written by Mike Schulz
Friday, 25 March 2011 06:00

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Nearly everyone who was of TV-viewing age in 1963, it seems, remembers where they were on the day President John F. Kennedy was shot. For writer/performer/instructor Arlene Malinowski, that day is especially memorable, because as she recalls, it was one of the first times that this hearing child of Deaf parents had to act as her parents' translator.

"I'm six, I'm in the first grade," says the Chicago-based Malinowski, "and I remember coming home from school, and they're in a dark living room watching the television, and they're crying. And my father says, 'Tell me what's on the TV,' and my mother says to my father, 'No, no, no, leave her alone – she's a kid.' But I'm like, 'No, I can *do* this!'

"So I'm listening," she continues, "and the man on TV is using a lot of big words. Words I don't understand, like 'assassinate' and 'motorcade' and 'depository.' I figured out that 'assassinate' was 'killed,' but I couldn't figure out what 'depository' meant. And then I remembered that Daddy deposits money into the bank, so it must mean 'the bank.' So I told my father, 'The president man has been shot, he's dead in his car, and a bank robber killed him.'

"And here's the coda to it: They never [definitively] figured out who shot the president. So I am *not necessarily wrong*
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It's this kind of autobiographical blend of poignancy and humor that Malinowski has brought to her acclaimed, multi-character solo pieces – performed in both voice and American Sign Language (ASL) – since her *What Does the Sun Sound Like* debuted in 2001. And as a Quad City Arts Visiting Artist, it's this connection between the hearing and Deaf worlds that Malinowski will continue to explore when she stages that production's one-woman follow-up, *Aiming for Sainthood*, at Augustana College on April 9.

"I realized through writing that I occupy this third space in the world," says Malinowski during our recent phone interview. "For a long time, I felt suspended between the hearing world and the Deaf world, until I realized I occupied a *third* space, which was the *bridge* to those two worlds. I am the conduit, the connector, and it's in that place of honor that I actually get to tell my story."



A Different Language

Born and raised in Patterson, New Jersey, Malinowski says that as a child, having parents who couldn't hear didn't seem altogether out-of-the-ordinary.

"If you're raised in a bi-cultural household," she says, "you know who to speak what language to. You know, in my family, I always knew who to speak [English] to, and who to kind of talk a little Polish to, and so, to me, it [ASL] was just another language. Not, 'They're Deaf,' or 'These people can hear and these people *can't*.' It's just that I spoke a different language with them."

(There is a distinction made between lowercased "deaf" and capitalized "Deaf." In the simplest terms, "deaf" generally refers to a person who suffers a loss of hearing as an adult; "Deaf" refers

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to someone who lost his or her hearing at a young age, and whose primary language is American Sign.)

As Malinowski admits, her household wasn't exactly like those of other children she knew. "You rang the doorbell in my house," she recalls, "and the entire house would strobe on and off, and on and off, and on and off." (Visiting friends, she says, "thought they were in a *disco*, for God's sake.") Yet she adds that hers was still a mostly traditional upbringing, albeit one with its own specific traditions.

"Because of the language barrier," she says, "they have a very close-knit Deaf community, and so we would go to Deaf Club. Deaf Club was like our meeting hall, our union hall, our church It was the place where, when my parents went through the doors, they were no longer Deaf – they became, you know, 'the mechanic,' or 'the accountant,' or 'the mother of five kids.' So that's where we saw subtitled movies, it's where we had all the parties, and it's where all the hearing kids of Deaf parents could run around screaming our heads off, 'cause no one there ever said, 'Shhh! Be quiet!'"

There were, of course, also hardships in her young life; portions of *Aiming for Sainthood* describe its author's occasionally intense rivalry with her sister, and the health scare that arose when, during Malinowski's childhood, her mother was diagnosed with cancer. (Malinowski tells me that her mother did recover, "which is the happy coda to the story.")

Still, as she says, "for the most part, the world was very kind to me, especially in the way of my parents. There were pockets of people who didn't understand, especially during the '60s and '70s. People who were concerned that Deaf parents – quote-unquote 'handicapped' parents – were raising a so-called 'normal' kid. But really, it was great. It was just lovely."

After high-school graduation, she says, "I went the teacher route," but while pursuing her education doctorate at UCLA, Malinowski's strong interest in performing eventually led to a different career.

"I told all my friends that I was going to get a Ph.D.," she says, "and they were like, 'Oh, that's *exactly* what you should do.' And then I told my

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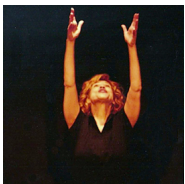
really

close friends that I was going to also do the freshman track of acting at UCLA.” She laughs. “And they were like, ‘Oh my God, don’t leave the [Ph.D.] program!’”

While in Los Angeles, she played several intimidating stage roles – Elizabeth Proctor in *The Crucible*, Ouisa in *Six Degrees of Separation*, Bella in *Lost in Yonkers* – and also, from 1998 to 2002, landed parts on *ER*, *The Practice*, *The X-Files*, *Diagnosis Murder*, and *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, with three of those roles listed on the Internet Movie Database as either “Interpreter” or “Sign Language Interpreter.”

“I was lucky,” says Malinowski of her Hollywood credits, “as a lot of my roles were deafness-related. If the hands had to go up somewhere in a TV show, I was there.”

She admits, though, that she eventually found herself frustrated with her film options. “I didn’t want to fight for a role where I just pick up a knife and say, ‘Look, here’s a weapon, and there’s blood on it.’ You know? I was working in theatres for 500 people, but in L.A., unfortunately, you are much more rewarded for the one line you get on TV than for the hour-and-a-half show you do.”



You Have a Story

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Faced with what she calls “a dearth of work” in Los Angeles, Malinowski says, “I started writing. A wonderful woman said to me, ‘You have a story,’ but I never knew what the form of that story was gonna be, whether it was a short story or what.”

One of her two earliest inspirations in finding her form, says Malinowski, was solo artist Wendy Hammer, whom Malinowski first saw in the one-woman production *Undressing New Jersey (& Other States of Mind)*. “She took me on an amazing journey in 60 minutes,” she says. “Her show helped me realize that a solo format was perfect for me as an actor, *and* as a way to tell my family’s story.

“And luckily,” she says of her second influence, “I also found this spectacular teacher [Mark Travis] who had just helped Chazz Palminteri do *his* solo show,” the semi-autobiographical *A Bronx Tale* that found its author, during its off-Broadway run, portraying 18 different characters. “So I started writing with him. Just little 15-, 20-minute pieces that grew into my first solo show.”

What Does the Sun Sound Like details its author’s childhood experiences with her Deaf parents (and numerous others), and Malinowski says the piece was designed to be performed “in sign language *and* voice, because that’s the life of a CODA – Children of Deaf Adults. There’s a whole organization of CODAs that share a language and a history and a *culture*. ... CODAs will see my show and say, ‘That’s me.’ What I like people to walk away with from the work is not only understanding a culture, but recognizing themselves *in* the culture.

“You know, parents all have the same concerns,” she says. “And I think everyone goes through a search for identity. And that’s what *What Does the Sun Sound Like* is really about: the search for identity. That, and finally kind of getting an ‘A-*ha*!’ about what my parents go through.”

As writers frequently will, Malinowski quotes (and acknowledges) Dorothy Parker when she says of the process, “I hate writing. I love having written.” She continues, “When the writing is

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rolling, it is *fantastic*. But I'm a slow writer. There are some people who write, and what comes out of their fingertips is beautiful – perfectly formed sentences. And then there are people like me who write and write and write and write, and throw it up on the wall and see what sticks. I usually write 250 pages of material for a 50-page script, and I go through three serious re-writes.”

Based on the reviews for *What Does the Sun Sound Like*, the effort appears to have paid off, with *L.A. Weekly* calling Malinowski's show “stylish and provocative” And the praise has been echoed for such subsequent, deafness-related Malinowski works as her short plays *Kicking the Habit* and *'Til Deaf Do Us Part*, and her 90-minute solo piece *Aiming for Sainthood*, which its author completed after she and her husband moved from Los Angeles to Chicago.



“It's a great fit,” says Malinowski of her 2004 move to the Windy City. “It's *such* a great fit. I belong to this amazing theatre company named Chicago Dramatists. There is no place else in the world like it. It's a playwright's theatre, and the jewel in their crown is that every Saturday they do what is called ‘Saturday Series’ – the resident playwrights have readings, and there is a packed house with 50 to 75 people that give you feedback on your work. It's *astounding*.”

She also relishes the opportunity to teach all levels of writing – both private and group instruction – through Chicago Dramatists. “One of the greatest gifts of my life is the teaching aspect of my solo work,” she says. “I feel honored to help people find their voice and tell their story. It is a lost art in this culture. ... When we get to know people's stories, it makes the world a smaller, sweeter place.”

(The pleasure Malinowski gets from her students appears to be repaid; one of the testimonials on her Web site actually comes from noted Quad Cities performer/playwright Melissa McBain,

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who raves: “I’ve driven six hours through a blizzard so I wouldn’t miss a writing session with Arlene. She asks the most provocative and productive questions. She creates a disciplined community of artists in her studio. And, oh yeah, since meeting her, I have had two of my solo shows produced.”)

Plus, Malinowski adds, she’s grateful for the chance to continue both writing and performing her solo pieces, and to occasionally participate in residences for organizations such as Quad City Arts, which will find her performing not only *Aiming for Sainthood* but shorter, more lighthearted theatrical works for students at numerous area schools.

“Whenever I go to theatre,” says Malinowski, “I just think it is a triumph of the human spirit. Because when you look at a culture, the two things we take from the culture, I think, are their art and their war. Those are the only two things that survive. And we really have a strong drive to *create*. Whether it’s a play, or whether you decide to cook a dish in an interesting way, or to decorate your house

“I mean, I look at people in war-torn countries, and they’ve got *cute curtains* up in their homes, you know? That’s *in spiring*. That wherever they are, people create *art*. There is just something in our DNA that makes us want to draw on walls. And I don’t know what that is, but I do know that my cat has never decorated her litter box.”

She laughs. “You can quote me on that.”

Quad City Arts Visiting Artist Arlene Malinowski performs Aiming for Sainthood in Augustana College’s Wallenberg Hall on Saturday, April 9, at 7 p.m. Admission is free, with donations accepted, and more information is available by calling (309)793-1213 or visiting QuadCityArts.com

A Third Space in the World: Arlene Malinowski Creates a Bridge Between the Deaf and the Hearing, April 9

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For more information on Malinowski, visit ArleneMalinowski.com.