

Sarika: I'm Sarika Mehta, sitting in for Dmae Roberts, and this is Stage and Studio.

Tribes is a British play about a hearing family who conforms to nothing. They have a deaf son, Billy. This is a story about family, communication, and the choices we make about identity. *Tribes* is currently running at the Artists Repertory Theater until March 1st. Today we have two very special guests from the play, Director Dámaso Rodríguez, and lead actor, Stephen Drabicki. Rich Hall is also in studio with us, interpreting. Stephen Drabicki is a deaf actor who came from outside the company, specifically to play the role of Billy, the deaf member of the family.

Dámaso: *Tribes* is a relatively new play. It premiered in 2010 at London's Royal Court Theater, which is a famous great theater for the premiere of new plays. It's by a British playwright named Nina Raine, and it's a play that was quickly buzzed about, one, because the subject was compelling. You just sadly, don't see deaf characters portrayed in mainstream theater very often, so when something like this happens, people take notice. On top of that, the way the play incorporates spoken language, and in the case of the British production, British sign language, as well as super titles.

It was a star play, a hit play. The Wall Street Journal at the time called it basically, one of the best new plays in recent years. It made it to America by 2010 in an off-Broadway production that was buzzing around New York, and then caught on at regional theaters around the country. I don't know what Artists Rep might be. We're going to be producing somewhere between the ten and 20th production of the play. It's a play that really moves audiences. That's why it's caught on.

Sarika: Talk about some of the unique challenges that you experienced with this particular play, that you didn't with others.

Dámaso: You have to figure out how you're going to tell this story. You can't use the regular tools. There are extended sequences of sign language in the play. Sign language, right along with spoken text. We incorporate super titles. We project the interpretation of the sign language onto the set. It can appear anywhere in the physical space. Technically, it's challenging in that way. Additionally, I wanted to make sure that the play has a realistic quality in terms of the story.

Superficially, it's actually a play filled with metaphors, and quite poetic. We thought it warranted being a visual experience, as well; that was right. We have pretty complex projection and video that unifies the play. Oftentimes, the super titles are poetic, and they're abstract in the way that they're presented. It's not just looking up above the stage and seeing the text projected in a little box. We try to tell the story with the way that we project the text.

Sarika: Tell the story of how you came to find Stephen as the actor for Billy.

Dámaso: When you look at casting a play like *Tribes*, it centers around a family. It's a hearing family with three adult children, one child who is born deaf, named Billy; Stephen plays Billy. The character is a masterful lip reader and communicates quite well in his household, although he's often shut out of conversations. I'm sure Stephen will get into that. There's also another character who is going deaf. Looking at how to cast that, the character of Sylvia, who is the character that Billy meets who is going deaf and gets progressively more deaf as the play moves on, as the story moves on or unfolds. We decided that very likely needed to be a hearing actor to go on that journey in our production. The character of Billy, we insisted on casting a deaf actor; an actor who can relate to this character instinctively. We basically set that mandate.

We looked locally; did not have success. We cast the net nationally. We cast the net in L.A., and in New York, and to my great pleasure, there is a whole team of actors, friends; they know each other, who have been doing *Tribes* at theaters across the country. Everyone submitted, almost, for our production. I met Stephen on the internet, got to see him read scenes on tape, so-to-speak, and then we met over Skype. Not only is Stephen a great actor who just gets Billy in a profound way, but he even fits the family that he ultimately was cast in. The rest of the cast are members of our acting company here at Artists Rep. It was just a happy accident. I really do feel like I got my pick of the great actors in the country, who were ready to play Billy.

Sarika: That is very serendipitous, that worked out that way. Stephen, maybe tell your side of how you came to Portland for this role.

Stephen: Gosh. Hi, I'm Stephen. It's ironic that I'm actually doing a radio interview. It's actually my third radio interview in the past year. It's ironic because I never listen to talk radio, myself, because it's just too hard. I don't enjoy it, at all. I'd have to strain to hear it. I have severe, sensory-neural bilateral hearing loss, which means I'm almost profoundly deaf in my left ear, and my right ear, I hear enough to get by. Without hearing aids, everybody just sounds like wa wa wa; that's all I hear. it's a little ironic, a deaf person doing a hearing radio interview.

Sarika: Thank you for coming and doing a hearing radio interview!

Stephen: Absolutely. I'm really happy to do this, because I know you're also an interpreter, so I know offhand that you have an awareness of deaf culture, and what's appropriate to say and not. So often, I find myself meeting hearing interviewers who have no idea of what's appropriate to say, and what's not appropriate to say. I always feel the need to stop a radio interview and say, "It's not okay to say that; don't say that. Don't say "hearing-impaired". That's offensive. Say deaf. Say hard-of-hearing; that sort of thing." I feel really comfortable coming into this interview, knowing that you already have that basis of knowledge to go off of.

Anyway, what brought me to Portland? Dámaso offered me the role, and I said, "Absolutely, I would love to come to Portland." It's actually my fourth time doing

the role of Billy. This past year, I was able to originate the role in the Canadian premiere at Canadian State in downtown Toronto, in a 350-seat house. Then we remounted it outside of Toronto, in Hamilton, Ontario Theater Aquarius in an 800-seat house. Then I was lucky enough to book it again in Sacramento, California's Capital H, in a 125-seat house. Then here, how many do we hold?

Dámaso: 220.

Stephen: This is a three-quarter thrust, and it feels really, really good. I imagine my college stage in [inaudible 00:07:30], Kentucky, three-quarter thrust. I'm really enjoying the show and the experience so far. Everything is coming together quite nicely.

Sarika: You mentioned a couple of things I wanted to talk about. You said that you've performed this role in a few different cities. How do you keep challenging yourself? How do you keep the role fresh, and not burn out?

Stephen: It's funny, because some people will be on Broadway. They're in the same role for 20 years, and how do they not burn out? For me, I've been lucky. To work with four different casts. That keeps it fresh, to see what new actors bring to the table, and what new moments we find. It's very much about a family, and it's about falling in love with your family, and then falling out of love with your ... I don't want to reveal too much of the story line,. I have to break up with my family essentially, every time I do this play. Having a group of actors that you love, and then you have to tell them you don't love them, it just hurts.

That's one way that I've been able to keep it fresh, is from playing with new actors. Also, the subject matter is personal; it feels personal. That helps keep it fresh enough for me. The play is smartly written. There's a lot of metaphors. There's lots of things to think about. There's lots of layers. There's lots of things that you can discover, just from doing the play. I've done it over 120 times, and I'm still trying to find new little beats and new little moments. How do I make this moment work, or what isn't working, and what does work. I feel like the play is complicated and interesting enough to be fresh every time. Also, Nina Raine, to put it clear, doesn't give you the sign language interpretation specifically.

Sarika: I noticed that when I read it.

Stephen: Right, exactly. It's open for different translations. In Toronto and Hamilton, they had the same sign language interpretations. Portland has been different from California, from Canada ... even some Canadian American sign language signs are different from American sign language signs. I had to relearn some things for the Canadian selection. There's such a thing as regional signs, so every city, I tried to change it up a little bit for myself. Working with different translators, and different coaches, to try to keep the sign language fresh and new each time.

Sarika: You've performed this role in this play for different audiences. I imagine that the Artists Rep theater audience size ... I felt it was small and intimate, maybe

because of the way it wraps around the theater. Whereas, other audiences might be much greater and grander. Can you talk about your experiences with performing in front of different audiences, and how this one is unique?

Stephen: Absolutely! I feel like this one is really good size for this play. I have never seen the original one in New York, the Bear Street production, which I auditioned for and almost got, but didn't get it. I remember seeing that production and just feeling like it was a great size, because it's very much a play that takes place predominantly in a household. If you're in a small, intimate space and you feel like you're in this house with these people, it gives you that sense of intimacy. I feel like the play needs it. In an 800-seat house, the audience was too far away from us. We had this big orchestra pit in between us.

One audience was full of senior citizens who didn't approve of some of the language in the play. I heard at intermission that 120-some of them got up and walked out of the show. I didn't even notice. I didn't hear them get up. I didn't see them get up. They were way in the back. That was interesting, to hear that. Audiences should be warned that there are some four-letter words in this play.

Sarika: It's a British play. (laughter)

Stephen: Yes, British play. This family has decided that no topic is tab beau, that no word is off limits. They've decided that everything is open, and you can talk about whatever you want. You can say whatever word you want. They just have a freedom of language that some American audiences might not be used to. They should just get on board and go with it, when they come to see this show.

Sarika: You're listening to Stage and Studio. I'm guest host and producer, Sarika Mehta, sitting in for Dmae Roberts. If you missed any of this show, you can hear it again on StageAndStudio.org. In studio today, we have director Dámaso Rodríguez, and actor Stephen Drabicki. Stephen turned our conversation to the importance of authentic casting. Especially in a role like Billy, in which the character is deaf.

Stephen: About the band of Billy, which we call ourselves, there's a group of my friends that I've known for seven years, since I've been in New York. There's five or six of us, Russell hHarvard, John McGinty,... We're all lucky and happy to be able to do this play and get some more work, and get some more exposure. We're hoping that lots of deaf talent will get more exposure. Not only deaf actors, but also, deaf playwrights, and writers, need their voices, or writing, needs to get out there more. Nina Raine conducted a couple interviews to write this play with that subject matter; that was pretty new to her. If this play were written by a deaf person, it would certainly have a different feel to it, but she does give you an introduction to deaf culture, and the topics that we deal with on a daily basis.

Sarika: That's actually a good Segway to another question. I saw a video of her, and she did some consulting with a deaf colleague, whose name is Billy, and he was even saying, "It was hard to not feel like this was my personal story." Especially,

his name is Billy, but then it seems many deaf people from the audience had said the same thing, that "I feel like she was writing my story." Then I've also heard that this is really ... I felt it too, watching it, that this is really a play for hearing people. That's what a lot of people have said. I was wondering if you two had comments about that.

Dámaso: When we had our first real Skype meeting, you said that, and I took that from the very first ... It was months before we started working on the play, and it was a reminder to think of it that way. It's not a documentary. It's not meant to represent deaf culture, or being deaf, or the deaf community, but it is a way to start a dialogue. To the majority of the audience, this is eye-opening. It just forces thoughts, understanding, which the play is really about that, too. It's about language, that understanding, and all the meanings of that word. It's brilliance is that it creates that event, that connection and dialogue.

Whether or not it's perfectly accurate, or capturing all viewpoints, I don't know that she ever intended to do that. I find it interesting that their interviews, talking about ... She didn't have an agenda about deaf culture. It was just about this idea of *tribes* and family, and this was a way, really getting another metaphor in the play, and then you can impose that divider within your family. This could be about other languages. It could be about members of the family who are outsiders in their tribe, and how the tribe responds. That's my take on it. We went in knowing that, but you have stronger feelings on that than I.

Stephen: *Tribes* has been a very, very popular play this past couple of years, since it jumped across the pond from London to Bear Street. All these American theaters are scrambling to produce *Tribes*. Some of them are casting hearing actors. Many of them are seeking authentic deaf actors for the role, but some of them aren't. That just raises questions about, why are you really doing this show, if you aren't even trying? I know plenty of American universities and colleges out there, are scrambling to do this show. That just brings up that conversation again, that we're always having to have about authentic casting in the theater.

I'm watching videos on Youtube of people performing Tribe scenes, and they're written to have sign language, and they're cutting the sign language out, because they don't know sign language. Why are they performing this scene to begin with, is the question I have. It's ridiculous how some people still don't get it. They see this show, and they say, "I'm moved by this, but I don't really have any connection to the subject matter; I'm just going to do it, anyways." That just brings up a question in my mind about what their motives really are for performing this show, if they don't really believe in what it's about.

Sarika: This is a bigger issue, beyond just *Tribes*. There's a Twitter campaign. What happened was that a hearing actress, a Columbian actress was cast as a deaf mother in some TV series, and this sparked a Twitter campaign called *#DeafTalent*, and *#POCDeaf Talent* – people of color. That was really the crux of what I wanted to get to. Dámaso, you obviously went searching for an authentic

actor for this role, beyond Portland. There wasn't one in your company, so you went outside. If you could speak more about the value behind that decision?

Dámaso: I look at it from a couple of perspectives, at least. One is about values. As an organization, what are our values, or as an industry, what are our values? Here's an opportunity to create opportunity for an actor who normally doesn't get to play the lead in stories, on stage. Okay, so why blow off that opportunity? On the other side, just as a director trying to get the most authentic experience, what we do, we don't have a lot of time to do it. Our rehearsal process is about four weeks, and we open. Why wouldn't I go out and cast an actor who already not only knows sign language, but gets this character in his bones? For me, it was an early decision. At some point, it stems from a personal mandate that if you can, you're going to do everything you can to cast authentically, and you're going to be rewarded for it artistically, as well as it just being something that's the right thing to do.

Sarika: Right. All of us are rewarded, actually.

Stephen: Thanks to you guys for providing me with interpreters whenever I've needed them, especially for tech week. Whenever I'm doing a show, that's always the worst time, where I need the most help. If there's just voices out in the dark, telling me to find my light, I don't know what they're saying. Thankfully, I've had Rich and Dot to help me out with that whole process.

Sarika: There is something else I wanted to ask about language, specifically. This was quite an undertaking, because like you were saying, there's about four weeks of rehearsal time for all that goes into any given show, but in the case of the character Sylvia, she also had to learn another language in four weeks. Did she share any experiences with you, that you might be willing to share?

Dámaso: Amy Newman who plays Sylvia ... Amy had more time. That is a byproduct of the fact that she's a member of the company. As a resident artist ... We call our company members resident artists ... She was cast in the summer, and then immediately set to work. She took a pretty intensive class, and then we got her working with Dot Hern who was our adapter interpreter, translator. She started working with Amy right away. That was the approach there. That, we couldn't have pulled off in the amount of time that we had.

The challenge with Sylvia, it's also just an incredibly complex role. You're not only looking for the specialized skill set; you're looking for this great actor that you trust with this extremely complex journey. Additionally, we did make bold choices about how her voice changes late in the play. We knew at the time, we weren't looking for a deaf actor. We were looking for a hearing actor, preferably, one who knew ASL. Right alongside that was the right chemistry. You're also looking for an actor that matches up with your Billy, that you buy that relationship. It's a complicated process, but we benefited from the fact that Amy's one of the best actors in Portland, and incredibly disciplined, and a

member of the company, was willing to dive into what is a pretty tough ask.

Stephen: Some of Sylvia's lines, she talks about being in between both worlds. Some of her experiences feel more like my own life story than perhaps Billy's. Just the whole thing about, she could still hear, but it just doesn't make sense. Some of her lines match up with my own personal story. That's one thing that a deaf person with some hearing in a hearing world, so often I get overlooked, because I'm not completely deaf. Hearing people are like, "He's fine. We don't have to do anything to accommodate him, because he's not completely deaf, and because he doesn't sign all the time." That's not necessarily the case. So often, I'm misunderstood as a deaf person who appears to assimilate easily into hearing culture. That's definitely a conversation that needs to happen more often. There's just so many different experiences and perspectives on these issues.

Sarika: You were talking about how your life story and Sylvia's have some similarities. What about with your character, Billy?

Stephen: Oh, became myself, absolutely. I feel so much connection with Billy growing up, and my own personal life experiences. They feel a lot like Billy. You get that sense, when you come and see the show. In the past year, I've had some ... really lucky to play him four times, and just wanted to really separate who Stephen is from Billy is. We're very much alike, but we're very different, too, at the same time.

Sarika: I think that's everything. Is there anything else you both wanted to add?

Stephen: We keep talking about the *#DeafTalent* thing. We keep talking about authentic casting. I'm lucky enough to be working with a couple of organizations in New York that have this same mission. The Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts is one organization that I've worked for, which advocates for authentic casting, whether it be ethnicities, whether it be abilities, whether it be finding a deaf actor. If you're out there looking for deaf talent, they need to get in touch with this organization, the Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts, as well as New York Deaf Theater, Deaf West, Cleveland Sign Stage and Tour. Get in touch with Gallaudet, if you're looking for deaf actors. If you want to produce *Tribes*, have a reason to do it. Have a Billy, please. Go for authentic casting.

Sarika: Dámaso, do you have anything else you wanted to add?

Dámaso: I agree. It's very challenging to get outside of your comfort zone, no matter what you're doing. It takes a lot of work to step out of your comfort zone. It's been a learning experience for us to do this play for our organization. We can tell, the whole run is going to be like that. We had our first ASL performance on Sunday night. We only have four during the run. It was basically like a second opening night. There was an entire community of people, not only just in the audience to see the show, but to help us interpret, to greet, and to give feedback on how we present ASL for this particular play. I just wanted to add, I'm grateful for the

learning experience. Any time you do something outside your comfort zone, you risk offending or making a mistake. It's very rewarding, and in the end, we'll trigger that kind of thinking in the audience, I hope.

Sarika: I appreciate you talking about authentic casting and appropriate casting. Dámaso, Stephen, thank you so much for joining me here at KBOO, and Rich Hall, thank you for interpreting.

Dámaso: Thanks for having us.

Stephen: Thank you for having me.

Sarika: That was director Dámaso Rodríguez, and actor Stephen Drabicki. Rich Hall also joined us to interpret in studio. *Tribes* is currently running at the Artists Repertory Theater until March 1st. That's it for Stage and Studio. Thanks to KBOO engineer Janet Anderson. If you missed any of this show, visit StageAndStudio.org. You can also download shows at Itunes, and don't forget to like us on [Facebook.com/StageNStudio](https://www.facebook.com/StageNStudio). Or tweet us @StageNStudio. I'm Sarika Mehta sitting in for Dmae Roberts. Thanks for listening.