

VSA International

The Kennedy Center Office of VSA and Accessibility

IRT Theater's Westside Experiment Offers Career Development Opportunity to Deaf Students

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Students participate in a movement activity at IRT Theater's Westside Experiment workshop. Photo credit: Rich Stillwell Photography

In July 2017, New York City's [IRT Theater](http://irttheater.org/) (<http://irttheater.org/>) wrapped up their sixth annual Westside Experiment summer intensive for high school age youth. This two-week career development program pairs experimental theater artists with adolescents working to find to find their identity and voice.

For the first time in 2017, IRT made the Westside Experiment (<http://irttheater.org/programs/westside-experiment/>) fully accessible for students and theater professionals who are Deaf and have hearing loss. Nine students who are Deaf or have hearing loss joined nine hearing students in the program, and they worked side-by-side for the two weeks under the instruction of lead teachers Monique Holt and Luane Davis Haggerty.

American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters were present throughout the intensive, and ASL was incorporated into the workshops through lessons on ASL poetry and storytelling. Students also spent time studying other theater-making techniques, including movement, improvisation, nonverbal communication, mime, mask work, writing, stage combat, and collaboration. There were also opportunities for students to talk with arts administrators, including Julia C. Levy, Executive Director of New York's Roundabout Theatre Company.

IRT producing artistic director Kori Rushton says that, in addition to the inclusive group of participating students, the teaching staff also included several theater professionals who are Deaf or have hearing loss. Rushton points to the diversity of the student participants, who came from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds and with varying levels of experience in the arts and in Deaf culture, as one of the program's strengths. "We had a goal of crossing linguistic and cultural boundaries," she explains, adding, "it was thrilling to watch this cohort embrace the challenge and exceed expectations."

The students called the program a valuable, enjoyable learning experience, with several noting how sad they were to see the two weeks end. One Deaf student commented that he learned many new things at the Westside Experiment, which "...changed my perspective of what I want to become in the future." Rushton says IRT hopes to continue to nurture the young theater artists, Deaf and hearing, and make sure they know that they have an artistic home at IRT.