

Tony award-winning play portrays struggles of the deaf

By LESLIE MEEDS

Boy meets girl, a common theme. Yet the commonality is lost in the newness of the concept in the Tony Award winning play, *Children of a Lesser God*. The drama portrays the love, courtship and marital conflicts between a deaf woman and a hearing man. For the deaf, it brings the problems of the rich world of silence to an ignorant, hearing public.

Boy, Jim Leeds, meets girl, Sarah Norman at a school for the deaf—Jim, a young speech teacher and Sarah, a deaf student. Together they attempt to resolve their conflicts until Sarah must choose between two worlds.

Children of a Lesser God, the first Broadway on tour production of the season, will be performed Nov. 21 and 22 in Memorial Hall. Jonathan Lee directs the seven-member cast of the touring company with Phillip Reeves and Freda Norman as Jim and Sarah. The company will give two evening performances and one Saturday matinee.

The seed for playwright Mark Medoff's *Children* came from the dilemma of Phyllis Frelich, an accomplished deaf actress and founding member of the National Theatre of the Deaf. Frelich was born the oldest of nine deaf children born to deaf parents and attended Devil's Lake School for the deaf in North Dakota and Gallaudet College in Washington, a liberal arts college, where she became interested in theatre.

Frelich met Medoff through her husband, Robert Steinberg, a hearing actor and scene designer who was doing the sets and lights for one of Medoff's plays, *The Conversion of Aaron Weiss*. Inspired by the interplay between the couple, Medoff promised to write a play for Frelich. After all, Frelich was right; there were no roles in "hearing" theatre for deaf actors.

Medoff kept his promise. The first production of *Children* starred Frelich and Steinberg in the lead roles at the New Mexico State University (Medoff was the chairman of the Drama Department).

A notable aspect of this play is its movement from the regional theatre and a workshop production to a Broadway production. As many of the new plays are originated and

nurtured in environments outside of New York, the commercial theatre is reaching greater levels of decentralization.

Later that year, *Children* snuck into the repertory at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. Director Gordon Davidson (Tony award winner for best direction of *The Shadow Box*) chose the more experienced John Rubinstein for the male role. Rubinstein, who speaks both roles in the play, learned to sign fluently in three weeks.

The Los Angeles production was a success: *Children* went to Broadway in March 1980.

Despite the producers' initial apprehensions about staging a play in which one of the leading characters never speaks a word, *Children* broke even after its second week in New York.

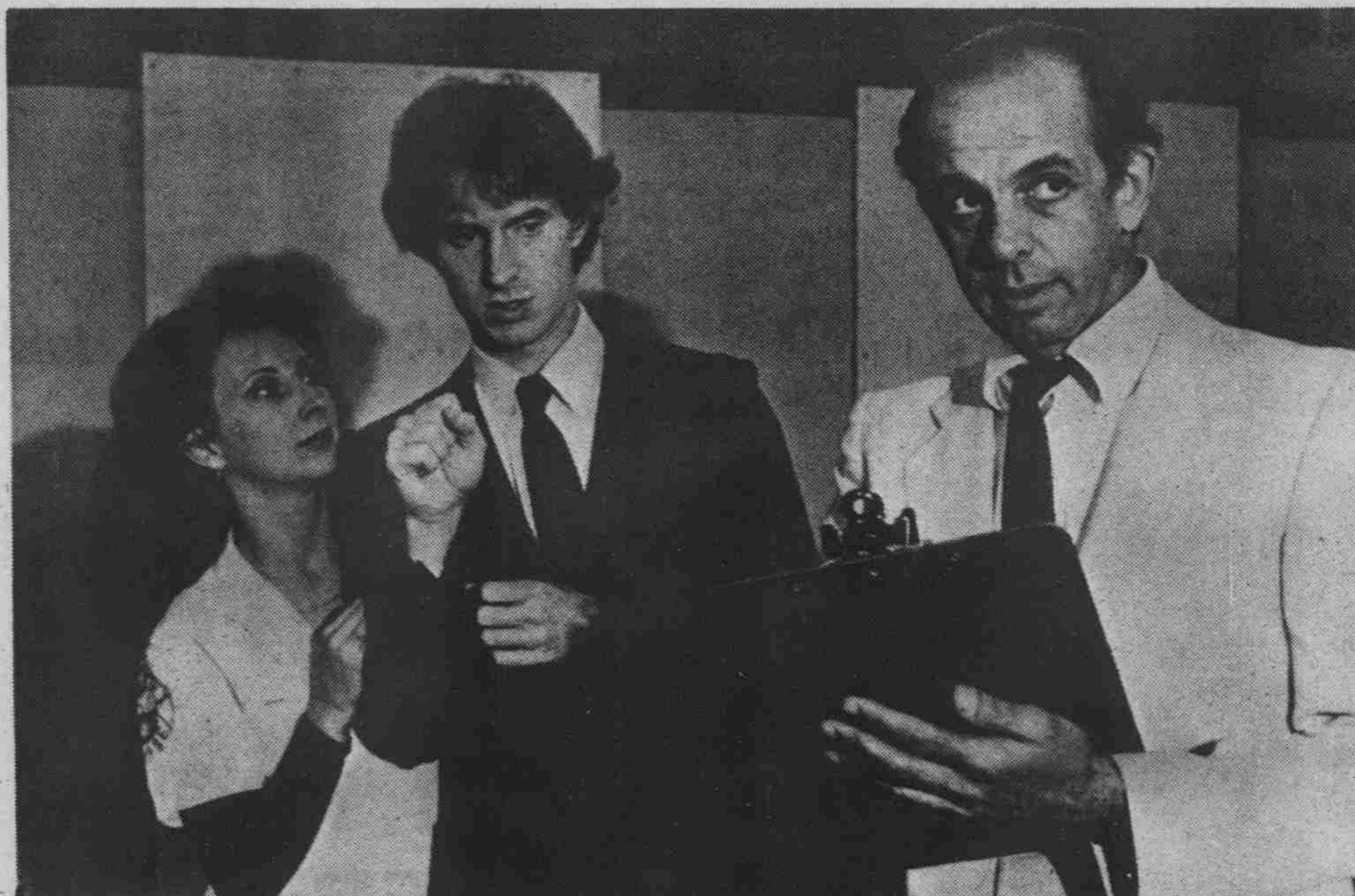
Children gives its hearing audiences a glimpse of the sound of sign. The hearing impaired can also hear the sounds, for the touring company utilizes a portable Infrared Listening System. The system converts sound into infrared light, then back to sound inside individual wireless headsets worn by audi-

ence members with as much as 75 percent hearing impairment.

Children of a Lesser God brings newness to a common theme. Through the relationship between a deaf woman and a hearing man, the difficulties of the deaf shine through. These realistic difficulties of the deaf are metaphors for the difficulty of all human communication.


For ticket information check the Box Office in the Carolina union or call 962-1449.

Leslie Meeds is a contributor to Spotlight.



Freda Norman, Phillip Reeves and Herbert DuVal in a scene from *Children of a Lesser God*, ...play brings newness to the common theme of boy meet girl.

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