

'Our language is the heart of what we are': Tamyka Bullen is putting deaf culture centre stage

New play *After the Blackout* is breaking down barriers for both its artists and its audience

This is Tamyka Bullen's first interview. It's also my first interview with a deaf performer.

We spent a lot of time coordinating with interpreters, speaking through email, figuring out our conversation and balancing what each of us would need for us to understand each other. I even learned some basic ASL to get our conversation started. In the end, I was too timid to sign, but none of that mattered anyway. That's because meeting Tamyka Bullen is like walking into a room full of sunshine. Her smile, humour and ease, even through her nervousness, communicate more than any verbal greeting could have.

Tamyka is used to breaking down barriers. As a social justice advocate, she has volunteered and worked with youth, deaf women, immigrant and LGBTQ communities. In 2015, she performed her poetry for the first time at a Toronto subway station — an experience which gave her the confidence to perform in [RARE Theatre](#)'s latest production *After the Blackout*. Created by Judith Thompson — winner of the Governor General's Award, Order of Canada and Amnesty International Freedom of Expression Award — the play brings together a cast of artists who are deaf, blind or living with brain injury or lost limbs.

Born from a testimonial workshop and blossomed into a full length production, *After the Blackout* interweaves the personal histories of the performers with those of the fictional characters they play. Communication between the actors has been one of the most challenging aspects, such as figuring out how Prince Amponsah — an actor who recently lost his arms in a fire — would communicate with Tamyka or the other deaf actress Catherine Joell Mackinnon. To accomplish this, they used a combination of interpreters or voice-to-text through iPads in rehearsal and then developed a series of cues to prompt each actor during performances.

In the above video, go behind the scenes with Tamyka as she, Catherine and Judith work through a scene told entirely through sign language. The scene looks at deaf culture from opposing perspectives, challenging any myths of a monolithic culture.



Tamyka Bullen. (CBC Arts)