

Jeska Duckworth is fair-skinned, full-lipped, wild-haired and fashionable. She is a playwright, a teacher, an actor and queer. She is expressive and determined. Jeska Duckworth is isolated and oppressed. She is deaf.

Duckworth's autobiographical play *Who Am I?*, premiering in February, delivers insight into her reality as a minority within a minority, torn between worlds of hearing and deaf, straight and queer.

"Finding a community who accepts who I am can be challenging. The play is about the emotional journey," says Duckworth, a 34-year-old Portland resident, through an interpreter.

Duckworth, who was born deaf, realized early in life that doors would shut in her face. She has been turned down for many jobs because she does not speak or read lips. She found lip-reading frustrating because of misinterpretations and misunderstandings.

According to Duckworth, jobs for the deaf are often limited to teaching and labor.

"I'd go to the job interview and they'd ask me if I read lips. I felt completely degraded and oppressed. I thought, 'Why can't they learn to sign or hire an interpreter?'" says Duckworth, explaining that employers are legally required to accommodate most other disabilities or language barriers. "We're at the bottom rung. We're all looking for opportunities, and I'm banging that door down. I can't hear. That's the only thing I can't do."

Duckworth worked on a factory assembly line and taught American Sign Language in the United States and Japan before deciding to take her career into her own hands.

With a passion for promoting understanding

LISTEN TO HER HANDS

Deaf playwright promotes understanding

by Jaymee R. Cuti



Jeska Duckworth rehearses for her play about growing up deaf and queer, *Who Am I?*

in the hearing world, she co-founded Deaf & Hearing Out Reach, a nonprofit organization committed to creating and strengthening unity among queers who can and cannot hear.

"It's been a great improvement to that community and helped me in a number of ways. Before that, I felt isolated in the deaf community, and I asked, 'Why can't I open the door to the hearing community, and why can't they open the door to let me in?'"

DHOR has a schedule of American Sign Language classes, social groups and events to bring deaf and hearing folks together.

Duckworth has an acting bug, which she

likely caught from her father and grandmother—both actors on the stage and screen. She has performed with Northwest Theatre of the Deaf and created DHOR's Deaf and Hearing Comedy Nights.

"I spent my childhood in a fantasy world. I became very creative because of my isolation. While standing on my bed, I could act out my dreams," she says.

As a child, Duckworth attended deaf schools, practiced speech therapy and wore hearing aids until she was 28. Even her parents refused to learn to sign. When she began attending Gallaudet University, a college for deaf stu-

dents in Washington, D.C., she removed her hearing aids for good.

For Duckworth, deafness is not a disability. It's participation in a community and culture to which she belongs. Using hearing aids and joining the hearing world would be as dishonest as passing for a straight woman when she is queer.

"I stopped using them because I felt like they took away from my real identity," says Duckworth, making no apologies for her deafness. "I was born deaf. I communicate with my hands."

Improvements to hearing aids and other hearing devices such as cochlear implants are a challenge to the preservation of deaf culture, Duckworth says.

"Implants are getting better, and in the future ASL will die out as a language and a culture. This is my culture and my language, and I'd like to hold onto it." □

Take a glimpse into Jeska Duckworth's silent world with the debut performance of *WHO AM I?* 7 p.m. Feb. 25 and 26 at Metropolitan Community Church of Portland, 2400 N.E. Broadway. Tickets are \$5-\$10 sliding scale. For more information visit www.dhor.org.

Also in the works

Keep your eyes open for a new film on the subject of deaf and hearing culture titled *Hear and Now*. Footage was screened Feb. 10 at the home of Thomas Lauderdale, gay bandleader of Pink Martini. The event raised money for completion of the documentary, which chronicles the experiences of filmmaker Irene Taylor's parents, who were born deaf and underwent surgery in order to hear.

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