

It was a Sunday night in June, 1980. The Mark Hellenger Theatre on Broadway was filled to overflowing by those who had come to attend the annual Antoinette (Tony) Perry Awards program. The audience included hundreds of celebrities from the entertainment world-and the unseen millions of other people who were watching the nationally televised CBS-TV spectacle. The special attraction, as everyone knew, would be the presentations honoring the best performers and the best play of the new season of plays on Broadway.

Finally, the time came for the grand climax and a hushed silence fell over the entire audience. The presenter opened the first envelope, drew out the vote, and exclaimed: "And the winner for the best performance by an actress is . . . Phyllis Frelich... for Children of A Lesser God!"

The odds against such a personal triumph seemed almost astronomical at the time when Phyllis Frelich was born on February 29, 1944. She was the oldest of nine children, all deaf from birth, and her parents were also deaf. Her girlhood home was a small

farmhouse in Devil's Lake, North Dakota, and life was hard for the growing family who had few luxuries. There were other arid more lasting qualities, however, which enriched the family and molded their character. There was joy and laughter and good-natured teasing-all expressed in their native American Sign Language. Little Phyllis was especially gifted and would often entertain the family and neighbors with "make-believe" roles and skits in dramatic mime and sign.

It was at the North Dakota School for the Deaf where Phyllis received her education. After graduating, she enrolled in Gallaudet College, where she majored in Library Science. However, her first love was dramatics, and she took an active part in many plays. Her outstanding performances as Medea, and as the Leader of the Chorus in Iphigenia in Aulis, won her the award as best actress of the year.

The "Summer of '67" proved to be an unforgettable experience and the turning point in her life. Shortly after graduating from college, she was invited to join the National Theatre of the Deaf, in Waterford, Conn., as one

of its founding members. It was there that she met Robert Steinberg, a young man with normal hearing who became the stage manager for the professional company. During the courtship that followed, Phyllis taught Bob sign language, and a year later they were married.

The next phase of her life was devoted to motherhood and family. Two boys were born to the Steinbergs, named Reuben and Joshua. Both children had normal hearing and both learned to communicate in sign language, the first born actually learning to sign before he spoke his first words.

During this period, Phyllis followed her husband's career interests in the theatre. First came a stay in Oklahoma City, where Bob worked as resident designer for the Mummer's Theatre. They then moved to the University of Rhode Island, where he assumed a faculty position in the theatre department. The move allowed Phyllis to rejoin the NTD in *nearby Waterford, Conn., and she performed with the company during the next two years. It may have also set the stage for the big breakthrough she later made on

Broadway.

The chain of events began when Phyllis met the playwright, Mark Medoff, during the time she was a guest actress at the University of Rhode Island and he was guest playwright. Medoff had already written a successful play, *When You Comtn'Back, Red Ryder?*, and now was intrigued with the idea of doing a play about the problems of the deaf in a hearing world. The more he talked with Phyllis and her husband, the more determined he became to write such a play. To prepare himself for this, he even learned to communicate in sign language.

In January, 1980, Medoff invited Phyllis and Bob to his home in Las Cruces, New Mexico, where he served as chairman of the theatre department of the State University. Gradually, the play began to take shape as Medoff



found new insights into “the deaf experience,” including the deaf versus hearing experiences of the married couple. Often, Phyllis and Bob improvised scenes for the play, which is a fictional story about the romance between a speech therapist and a deaf woman stu-

dent. Their later marriage problems are the result of communication breakdowns and her active involvement in deaf rights. Their difficulties, howev-



er, have a universal appeal as each explores their individual need for independence. The play includes two other deaf characters in minor roles who also help provide a better understanding of deafness and deaf people.

When the script of the play was finally completed, Medoff gave it the title, *Children of A Lesser God*. It was first presented in a workshop at the

State University with Phyllis as the deaf student, “Sarah Norman,” and Bob as “James Leeds,” the speech therapist.

Shortly afterwards, the play was brought to Los Angeles by Gordon Davidson, the artistic director of the Mark Taper Theatre. Under his brilliant direction, the play moved swiftly through the preliminary auditions, call-ups, and rehearsals. The leading male role of “James Leeds” was taken over by John Rubinstein, the rising young star of stage and screen. It was a demanding role, as Rubinstein had to communicate in fluent signs with Frelich and at the same time speak her half of the dialogue. The setting of the play also challenged the imagination of the audience. To emphasize “the silent world” of the deaf, there was very little scenery, and even the props were mimed.

The result was that *Children of A Lesser God* caught on like wildfire. After a successful run in Los Angeles, it opened on Broadway, March 30, 1980, at the Longacre Theatre. Its impact was so great that it won the acclaim of audiences and critics. “Tony Awards,”

the highest honor in the theatre, went to it as "Best Play," and for "Best Actress" (Phyllis Frelich) and "Best Actor" (John Rubinstein). The Outer Critics Circle named it "the most distinguished new play" and they hailed Frelich's acting as "an outstanding debut."

In the months that followed, the play performed to packed houses and the demand for tickets continued to build up. To meet this demand, another company was formed to take the play on tour. This was the National Tour Company which appeared in major cities throughout the U.S. and Canada. Soon, two other groups were added. The "Bus and Truck Company" played in smaller cities of the U.S., and the "London Company" traveled abroad to England where it enjoyed a long run. In each of these touring companies, a deaf actress played the role of "Sarah Norman." By 1983, over 20 deaf persons had been employed in

leading or supporting roles, and as understudies.

Phyllis Frelich continued to perform on Broadway in the original production of Children of A Lesser God, which ran continuously for over 2 years. She also won many honors and made special appearances on television in response to the increasing demand for her services.

She was honored by her native state of North Dakota when Gov. Allen Olson presented her with the "Theodore Roosevelt Rough Rider Award" in 1981. In the same year, she was featured with Hal Linden on NBC-TV in a Barney Miller episode in which she played a deaf prostitute with sexy realism and humor. And in March, 1982, she participated in the ABC-TV spectacle, Night of 100 Stars, for the benefit of the Actors Fund of America.

On that Night of 100 Stars, she joined an exclusive group of celebrities from stage, screen and television. It was the most visible proof that Phyllis Frelich has now become a star of the first magnitude in the world of theatre.

