

Finding her voice

Ground-breaking actress
Marlee Matlin wows
crowd in Madison

By Lisa Reisman
Special to the Times

Her hand went to her mouth in consternation. She screwed her eyes shut and made a gesture that caused her sign-language interpreter Jack Jason to put his hand over the microphone and blush. And the 1986 Academy Award Winner for "Children of a Lesser God" wasn't acting.

Asked where to find the three children's books she'd written, Marlee Matlin had uttered "Amazon.com," a name that is anathema to independent bookstore owners nationwide, not least Roxanne Coady of R.J. Julia Booksellers who happened to be standing just behind her.

"No no no no, destroy your computers," the quick-witted 43-year-old told the crowd at the bookstore in Madison that Wednesday evening, April 19, exhorting them to place their orders at R.J. Julia's. She ascribed her verbal blunder to the 20 percent of her I.Q. she'd lost with each of her four children.

That was about the only glitch in the book-signing appearance of the celebrated actress. Indeed, to judge from the number of times that a large part of the audience held their hands in the air and shook them, the visual signal of applause for the deaf community, it's clear that



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a large part of the audience held their hands in the air and shook them, the visual signal of applause for the deaf community, it's clear that the charismatic Matlin retains her status as an icon for the hearing-impaired.

And yet, to hear – or, more precisely, to watch her delicate features dance with expression and her hands fly in sign language interpreted by longtime sidekick Jason –being deaf is only a footnote, as Matlin has put it, to who she is.

Clad in a light V-neck sweater and slim-fitting jeans, the petite Marlin exudes a larger-than-life presence. She's also unapologetically authentic, as Bruce Wydallis of Westfield learned. Questioning Matlin on how to advance his screenwriting career, the youngest performer ever to win an Oscar for Best Actress and four-time Emmy Award nominee theatrically sighed.

"It's not an easy business, not even for me," she signed to the hearing-impaired Wydallis. "You need patience." At which point, eschewing Jason's interpreting, she launched into an impromptu pep talk. "You just have to keep at it," she spoke aloud, blue eyes sparkling. "You've got energy and enthusiasm. You'll get there."

It's this kind of boldness, even defiance, that has defined Matlin's career. She was the first deaf performer to star in a weekly TV series ("Reasonable Doubts"). By taking on roles that required her to speak aloud, she roused the ire of the deaf community, thereby, some argued, perpetuating the stereotype that deaf people have to speak to be successful. With Jason, she's launched her own production company, Solo One Productions, in order to exert more control over her work. "The real handicap of deafness is not in the ear but in the mind," is the creed of Matlin, who lost most of her hearing after contracting roseola as an 18-month-old. "We can achieve much more if we focus on our abilities rather than our perceived disabilities."

Which, in part, explains the impetus for her candid new memoir "I'll Scream Later." While doing show-stopping cha-cha-chas and sambas in last season's "Dancing With the Stars," thousands of e-mails and fan letters poured in, expressing wonder and awe at Marlin's ability to glide effortlessly along to music she could not hear.

As much as she loved the positive feedback,

"I wanted people to know more about me than just Marlee Matlin satile Matlin who's played memorable roles on wildly popular TV sh Wing," and "The L Word." The author was in Madison as part of her b Later."

she told the audience, she also sensed opportunity. "I wanted people to know more about me than just Marlee Matlin the deaf actress," said the versatile Matlin who's played memorable roles on wildly popular TV shows like "Seinfeld," "The West Wing," and "The L Word."

"Suddenly I saw in those (emails and fan) letters an opening to inspire and help people who might be going through the things that I went through."

For those who know Matlin as an actress who breaks barriers and tireless activist for causes from closed-captioning to AIDS, some of the details in the book may come as a surprise.

She was only 11 when she was molested by a babysitter and 14 when sexually abused by a male teacher, revelations that until "I'll Scream Later," she had shared only with her husband Kevin Grandalski. At 19, she began a torrid two-year affair with the then 35-year-old actor William Hurt which ended when he allegedly became physically violent. At the time she was battling an increasingly serious addiction to marijuana and cocaine.

It was early one morning during her month-long drug rehab at the Betty Ford Clinic in 1986 that Matlin got word of her Academy Award nomination. Phone calls were strictly monitored; random calls at off hours were

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forbidden. No one knew of the fledgling star's stay except her immediate family and interpreter Jack Jason. Somehow Jason convinced them it was an emergency. By use of a TTY, an early form of text messaging, he gave her the news. Her counselors were closely watching her.

"Emotional moments, even good ones, can be tough on addicts," she writes. "I'll scream later," was Matlin's response, unwittingly providing herself a title for the memoir she would write more than three decades later.

In a larger sense, the title is a metaphor for what people in abusive relationships or facing addiction tell themselves, says Matlin. "It's the idea of not dealing with the truth until later,

of holding back the pain. In the end, I learned that the best way to heal is to break the silence and 'scream.' Thus my book which screams the truth. Now I tell people that silence is the last thing the world will ever hear from me."

Happily married to police officer Grandalski since 1993 ("who can resist a handsome man in a uniform?" she quipped, batting her eyes coquettishly) with four children ranging in age from 6 to 14, Matlin says she feels grateful for where she is and all she's been through. "Never be afraid to go out of your comfort zone, and I'm not just talking about writing this book," she told the audience. "It's always worth it."

No one, it seems, can escape the magnetic per-

former's inspirational pull. Toward the end of the evening, 8-year-old Leah Conway of Madison shyly asked Matlin how hard it would be for her to learn sign language.

"It depends," said Matlin. "You can teach yourself from a book, but I bet a girl like you could get this one right away." And flashing a smile framed by her trademark dimples, she showed Conway the sign for "I love you."

Oh, and no need to order books on sign language from that website that shall not be named, R.J. Julia Booksellers carries them for both children and adults, Coady noted.