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ARTS PROGRAM LEADS TO INTERNATIONAL ACTING DEBUT



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Deaf Syrian actor credits artist residency program with his Netflix debut.

4 minute read

A few short years ago, all Mustafa Alabssi could see of his future was a career sweeping floors. His family had fled the war in Syria when he was 12 years old and, for the next four and a half years, they lived as refugees in Jordan. Alabssi was not able to attend school, as he was the only Deaf person in the camp. This created endless challenges for him, as he could not read, write or communicate in either Arabic or English. He got a job as a janitor, cleaning a university and envying the education that others his age were receiving. "I was so alone. I got into a depression. I wanted to have friends, but how can you do that?" he says.

When he and his family arrived in Canada in 2017, Alabssi enrolled in the Deaf and Hard of Hearing program at Thom Collegiate in Regina, which gave him access to Deaf mentors and role models and helped him learn American Sign Language (ASL). An Artists in Schools artist residency brought multidisciplinary artists Chrystene Ells and Berny Hi into the classroom to engage students through visual and performance art.



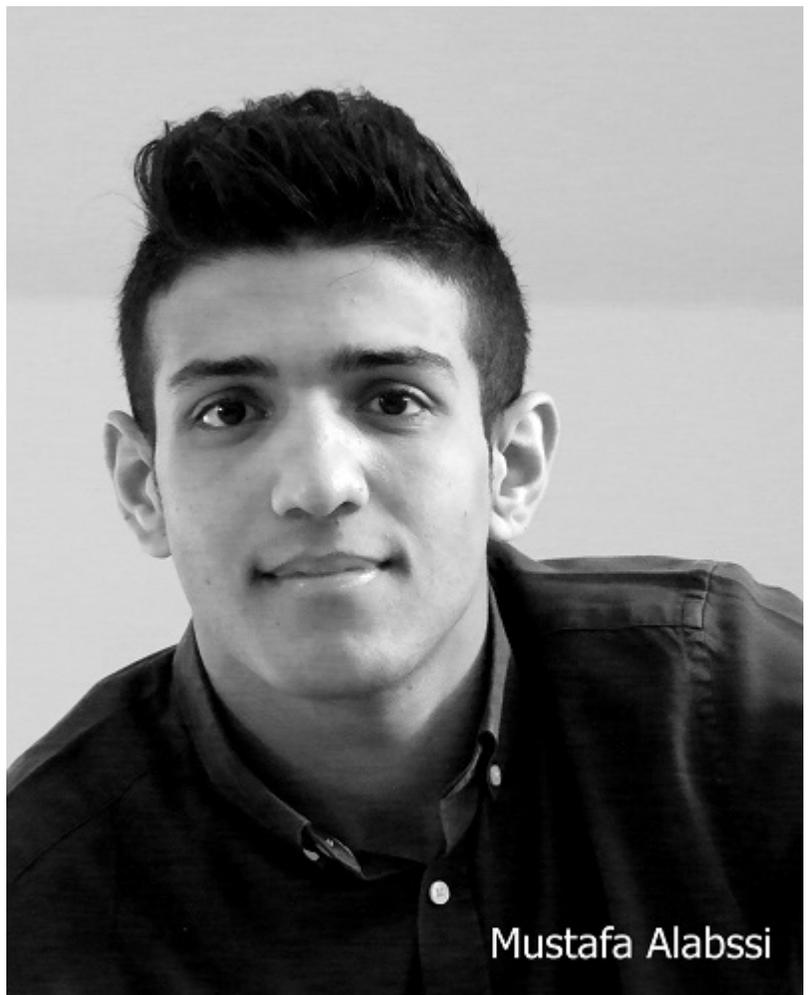
Teacher Joanne Weber says that adding art to the program increased student's literacy and sense of self. "Art enables a person to pull very deeply from

themselves, to understand their feelings and desires. It is a gateway to academics because it becomes something to write about, to read about, to discuss. It provides material from where reading and writing can happen." In the past five years, she has seen students go from only having 200 "sight words" (words you can read and understand

out of context, such as “boy”) to reading at a Grade 5 level. “That’s because of all the art that we’re making.”

Ells and Hi worked with teachers and students to develop a new genre of Deaf theatre, one that is accessible to deaf, hard of hearing and hearing audiences from all cultures, including non-English speakers. The unique mash-up of puppetry, mime, gesture, circus, mask and ASL poetry was realized in two performances, *Deaf Crows* and *Apple Time*. “It is thrilling for me, particularly as a director, as I know how unique the work we are creating is,” says Ells. “The hearing community is becoming aware of the Deaf community in their midst, and art is bridging that gap. When the public goes to a performance or an art gallery to experience something firsthand, it’s so much more powerful. Art changes everything.”

Alabssi performed in *Apple Time*, telling his life story through the eyes of a clown. He was so compelling that his reputation spread throughout the



international Deaf community, and six weeks after the play, he was approached to audition for a Netflix series, *Black Summer*. Competition was fierce, with seasoned Deaf actors from across North America being considered for the role, but Alabssi was cast as Ryan, playing opposite film star Jaime King. Although his acting training was limited to what he received from Ells during *Apple Time* rehearsals, he was a natural and became known on set as the “one-take wonder.”

Alabssi says, "I'm hoping that when directors and producers see me, they will see that it's possible to take Deaf actors and put them on stage and screen. Hopefully, it will lead to more opportunities for Deaf actors."

He credits the arts and literacy program, now at Winston Knoll Collegiate, with his success. "Without it, I didn't think I had a future. Now, with this arts program, I can see that anything I want to be can be mine. People say, 'Mustafa, you have a great future and are going to win awards – you're going to win an Oscar!' And I can say I got it because of this arts program."

Black Summer debuts on Netflix in early 2019.

Artists in Schools is a Saskatchewan Arts Board program supported by funding from the Saskatchewan Arts Board, SaskCulture Inc. through the Saskatchewan Lotteries Trust Fund for Sport, Culture and Recreation, and the Government of Saskatchewan through the Ministry of Education.

Note: When used in lowercase, "deaf" refers to the audiological condition of having a hearing loss. The uppercase "Deaf" refers to a particular group of people who share a language – American Sign Language (ASL) – and Deaf culture.

Photos:

Top: A still from Mustafa Alabssi's audition tape for *Black Summer*. Video by Berny Hi.

Middle: Mustafa Alabssi performs as a clown in *Apple Time*. Photo by Michelle Grodecki.

Bottom: Mustafa Alabssi. Photo by Murray Valiaho.

The Saskatchewan Arts Board recognizes, encourages, and supports the arts to enrich community well-being, creativity, diversity, and artistic prosperity.

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