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# Fantasy meets reality: Local film addresses plight of Deaf culture

*Deaf Crows Collective in Regina is in putting the final touches on the first movie produced in Western Canada featuring an all-Deaf cast.*

**Greg Harder**

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Fatima Nafisa, left, and Mustafa Alabssi act out a scene during filming of Fable Deaf at the Saskatchewan Production Studios Soundstage in Regina. PHOTO BY TROY FLEECE /Regina Leader-Post

As a proud member of the Deaf community, Fatima Tun Nafisa has a voice that needs to be heard.

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The 19-year-old actress wants to create awareness through her role in an upcoming short film, Fable Deaf, which was shot last summer in Regina and is currently in post-production. It was created by a local group called the Deaf Crows Collective and is believed to be the first movie with an all-Deaf cast to be produced in Western Canada.

James Gunn opens up on Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3



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“I really enjoyed being involved in this film,” Nafisa, who uses sign language, said through interpreter Michelle Grodecki. “This has been a good opportunity to show people about Deaf culture and help them to have an understanding. This film isn’t just for Deaf people. My goal from this really is for people to see the importance of mutual respect and equality.”

Raised in Bangladesh, Nafisa and her family moved to Regina in 2012. She eventually joined the Deaf Crows and appeared onstage in two theatrical productions before her impending film debut in *Fable Deaf*.

“I had no thoughts of being a performer,” she said. “I was focusing on perhaps studying to become an engineer or a doctor or something. When I grew up, I had very strict, but very nice parents and that was expected of me. But now that I’ve been involved in this show, I’m thinking maybe there are opportunities for performance in the future.”

Nafisa’s thoughts were affirmed last summer while the film was being shot at the Saskatchewan Production Studios’ Soundstage. She recalls one day in particular when a local filmmaker visited the set to research a Deaf role.

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“He saw that it would be OK to hire a Deaf person to act in his film,” said Nafisa. “That’s what I want people to see is that Deaf people can do the same as hearing people.”



(From left) Michelle Grodecki, Fatima Nafisa, Chrystene Ells and Mustafa Alabssi work on a short film called Fable Deaf at the Saskatchewan Production Studios' Soundstage in Regina. PHOTO BY TROY FLEECE /Regina Leader-Post

Fable Deaf is a dark fairytale set in a visual world — without spoken language — where anger can turn into a storm and tears become a monsoon.

The cast is comprised of four Regina actors: Nafisa, Allard Thomas, Mustafa Alabssi and Oscar Grodecki. Thomas plays Hugo, a Deaf elder who's clinging to traditions that place him in conflict with Jaul, an illiterate young traveller whose arrival threatens the community.

Nafisa plays Hugo's protegee, Devi, who intervenes by embracing the duties of her weary mentor.

“She wants to look after him and allow him to rest,” Nafisa explained. “(She’s prepared to) take on the responsibility of the community going forward.”

Although the film is rooted in mythology, its theme has obvious parallels to the real-life plight of Deaf culture.

Nafisa hopes that audiences will hear the deeper message.

“This movie is a warning,” she said. “It’s to show people what will happen if the Deaf community continues to dwindle and Deaf children continue to not have access to Deaf culture and language.

“It’s a warning to hearing parents (who) ignore it and just focus on oralism and lip reading. If that doesn’t work for your child, what future are they going to have? They are not going to have a (sign) language. They will be depressed and they’re going to have a lot of trouble.

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“Also, it’s a warning for Deaf people that they need to respect other Deaf people within the community. They have to respect the different cultures and languages within the community so we can learn ... and pass it on to future generations.”

As a long-time member of the community, Deaf Crows artistic director Joanne Weber continues to advocate for its preservation.

In fact, she strongly objects to the perception that people with hearing loss are only successful if they learn to speak. Those who can’t are often treated like “second-class citizens” despite the potential they may offer.

“One thing that is a mistaken notion out there is the idea that every Deaf person can learn to talk and use a hearing aid,” she noted. “Some are successful in integrating with the hearing world and some are not.

“Even the ways of seeing and perceiving the world are so different than what hearing people experience. We want to give a glimpse to the hearing world of what it’s really like to live in that kind of isolation.”

The Deaf Crows’ mission includes providing a sense of community through opportunities in theatre and performance.

Fable Deaf is the latest means to that end.

The movie’s cast is comprised entirely of Deaf actors as well as several Deaf crew members. It’s hoped the experience will create more opportunities for promising individuals who wish to pursue careers in film — or any other industry that might seem closed off to the Deaf community.

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Despite the absence of spoken dialogue, Fable Deaf is geared toward all audiences.

“There is some gesture being used and there’s a lot of body language that will help with understanding,” said Nafisa. “We are using some universal sign language and there will be captioning so it will be clear for any audience that’s watching it. There won’t be any talking so that will be a little bit different but there will be music and there will be rhythm that a hearing audience can follow.”

According to director Chrystene Ells of Moxie Films, the dream of creating a Deaf Crows movie took off about three or four years ago.

It was just a matter of finding the right approach.

“We had so many different ideas,” Ells said. “We’ve never done anything like this before.”

The editing process for the 15-minute film is lengthy due in part to visual effects utilizing a green screen. The project is scheduled to be complete this spring so it can premiere locally over the summer before appearing at various North American festivals, including the Saskatchewan Independent Film Awards.

There are also tentative plans down the road to show it overseas, including at a festival for the Deaf community in France.

“We know the film will be in high demand in many Deaf communities,” said Weber. “This whole concept of the film came about when people kept saying: ‘When can we see Deaf Crows (perform) in our own community?’ We still get requests. I got an email from someone in Nova Scotia. Vancouver wanted it. But it’s very difficult to (hit the road) with a large cast and crew and raise the money to go to all of these different places.”

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One solution was to produce a movie that can be shown across Canada, but the project was delayed multiple times due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As questions lingered about whether it would ever proceed, a script was developed in relative isolation and production meetings were held via Zoom. When the time came to finally begin filming, there was still confusion about the ever-changing COVID rules, including masks and gathering limits.

As a result, the production was scaled back so it could be done with fewer actors and crew members.

“That script was written again and again; I don’t even know how many times,” said Grodecki, a production assistant on the film and operations administrator for Deaf Crows Collective.

The film might not have come together at all without support from the arts community. That included a

federal grant via the Canada Council for the Arts and sponsorship from organizations like the Saskatchewan Film Pool and the Saskatchewan Arts Board. The film pool showed its support by having members take an American Sign Language class in addition to purchasing equipment for the Deaf Crows and making facilities available for editing, etc.

“That shows the impact that Deaf Crows has had in the community,” added Grodecki. “These bigger organizations are seeing the value in our work. They were so supportive.”

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