



From refugee camp to centre stage: Deaf teens share experiences through Regina play

Deaf Crows Collective presents production of *Apple Time*

CBC News · Posted: Jun 02, 2018 6:27 PM CT | Last Updated: June 2



The new play produced by Deaf Crows Collective, called *Apple Time*, tells the life stories of the eight deaf and hard of hearing youth from the Thom Collegiate program who are performing it. (Submitted by Deaf Crows Collective)

A group of Regina youths are hitting the stage to explore a world of welcoming and inclusivity.

That world is a far cry from the reality for many young people, especially those who are born deaf or hard of hearing.

The new play produced by Deaf Crows Collective, called *Apple Time*, tells the life stories of the eight deaf and hard of hearing youth from the Thom Collegiate program who are performing it.

Each character is shown arriving to a safe space where everyone is equal, no matter their background or abilities, said Michelle Grodecki, teacher with the program and co-director of the play.

The play uses American Sign Language, poetry, physical theatre, puppetry and "a little bit of magic" to tell the tale, written by the students themselves.

One of the stories it centres on is that of 19-year-old Mustafa Alabssi.



Mustafa Alabssi, 19, is a clown in the play, something his teacher says is a metaphor for his joyful disposition. (Submitted by Deaf Crows Collective)

He arrived to Canada in January 2017 from Syria. Grodecki said when Alabssi lived there, he went to a deaf school and learned Arabic Sign Language.

At the time, he said he didn't appreciate it and was clowning around a lot in class. Then, when he was about 11, war broke out and his family had to flee to Jordan.

He was told he couldn't go to school because he was deaf and got a job as a janitor at a university.

"He started to realize he wasted all that time in school not really focusing and now didn't have an opportunity for school," Grodecki said. "So he was watching all these people learning and he's pushing a broom."

Spreading joy

When his family was granted refugee status to Canada, he quickly enrolled in the program at Thom Collegiate and learned American Sign Language.

"Mustafa just felt at home. He took the opportunity to just soak up the signing and became this integral part of our classroom," Grodecki said. "He's always so full of joy despite all of the circumstances he's gone through in his life.

"His whole purpose is to make somebody smile everyday."





The play uses ASL poetry, physical theatre and puppetry. (Submitted by Deaf Crows Collective)

Grodecki said Albassi's positive demeanour is sometimes surprising. She said he showed her a photo of his home in Syria, which she described as a bombed out shell of a building.

In that moment, he was asked how he keeps a smile on his face.

"Mustafa said, 'I can choose to take the sadness or I could choose to spread love, spread happiness and joy. What's happened to me I can't change. But what I can change is how people see the world.'"

That's something she said he excels at on stage during his performance, which Grodecki calls "one-of-a-kind."

While there is no voicing, there is miming, gestures, puppetry, and captioning — like in old silent films.

The play runs both Saturday and Sunday night at the Artesian in Regina at 7 p.m.

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