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Alabssi needed the help.

Although he is, in Weber's words, "dripping with talent," he had some challenges to overcome.

Alabssi attended a deaf school in Syria, where he learned Syrian Sign Language. But then the war started and his family left their home country for Jordan, then Canada.

Here, Alabssi is still learning American Sign Language (ASL) and barely understands English.

Plus, his acting experience is limited to his one school performance.

"He couldn't have done this obviously. He just didn't have the resources," said Ells.

"For him to understand even what was happening, it took a lot of explaining."

"I didn't even understand the word audition," Alabssi said, signing in ASL, Grodecki interpreting. "Chrystene came out with the word and she goes, 'It means you're going to try to be in a show.'"

"(The script) was English, right? And I don't know a lot of English yet, so they would help me take that English and turn it into ASL and then I practised that ..."

"So then Chrystene and Berny helped me make the audition video and then I just really hoped that I got it, but really I thought they were going to turn me down."

Alabssi acted a minute-long scene of the character Ryan meeting another person during a zombie apocalypse.

Weber thought the audition video would be "easy peasy" after interpreting the script, but Ells complicated the process.

"She just goes the whole nine yards, she comes up with a location in Regina, in front of a dump," said Weber. "She gets the costume together for Mustafa; we're translating our script. Both Murray and I and Chrystene and Berny were out there on the hottest day of the year and dressed up Mustafa and we take shots of him."



A screenshot from Mustafa Alabssi's audition video for the Netflix series Black Summer. *BERNY HI / SCREENSHOT*

When Alabssi passed muster, there was the next hurdle: a callback over Skype with the director.

"The director was trying to give Mustafa direction," said Ells, "... then he'd have to stop and look at the interpreter, and I was like, 'Oh my God, this isn't going to work.' So by the end, both the interpreter and I were behind the screen where the director was."

They mimed actions for Alabssi to copy, as the director gave instructions from cyberspace.

"It was really a mess, but anyway, they already were going to cast him before the callback but we didn't know that," said Ells.

"It was only a few days later that we found out that Mustafa was the only one they called back," Weber added.

"It was just a genuineness in his performance. He didn't try and act," Binstock explained.

"He just clearly was embodying the character and what would happen in this situation. And quite frankly, I think probably his experience as a refugee informed his performance.

"Because this (show) is all about refugees; everyone is running for their lives. Everybody is a refugee, nobody is at home, nobody is safe, and I think because he's been through that, that came across loud and clear in the audition."

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With a big red nose, Alabssi pushes a broom across a stage, clowning as he goes. He curiously peers into books as people are reading.

Then, moments later, he's a pilot wearing goggles and a leather cap, making his way to Canada.

This is Alabssi's scene in Apple Time, the play written and created by his high school class. It was Alabssi's take on his immigration story.

Since Nayle and Manal Alabssi left Damascus with their children, due to a war creeping ever closer to their home, Mustafa Alabssi couldn't attend school.



Mustafa Alabssi mimes flying an airplane to Canada during his story in the Deaf Crows' production of Apple Time. *TROY FLEECE / REGINA LEADER-POST*

“My story is sad, but I want to be happy,” said Alabssi. “It was kind of a conflict where you travel back and forth. Even as you watch my story, you went from happiness to sadness and that was just a normal part of my life.”

“And then the clown became kind of fun, that was like my metaphor where I was at school and it was boring and everything was scary around me, I tried to be comical and funny. So that’s where the clown came.”

Being a joker comes so naturally to Alabssi, Ells devised a cue to remind him to shut it off during rehearsal.

“If it’s a zombie film, you’re not going ‘wowowowow,’” said Ells, doing her best zany clown impression.

“I’d mime taking off his clown nose and putting it in his pocket. And that means, ‘... you’re really funny, but that all has to go away now, because this is a serious realistic project.’”

However, Alabssi’s penchant for physical theatre helped him in the role — and even to win the audition.

“Most of the time it was also a lot of physical theatre, like you’re using your body to convey your emotions,” Weber said. “And that was the one thing the director (John Hyams) told me, is that Mustafa is the only deaf actor that auditioned that could use the body as well as his face and hands.”

After Alabssi was cast as Ryan, it meant even more work for Weber and Ells, who continued helping him understand the script and the role.

“He can’t read scripts, so he has to have all that interpreted. He (didn’t) know anything about acting, timing, camera,” said Ells.

“He couldn’t just show up” on set, added Ells. “He needed to know the world, he needed to understand his character, he needed to know what was going on in every script so that he could build his performance.”

For five days, Ells and Weber met with Alabssi to help him “understand his character arc.”

They made a chart to represent each scene. Not having enough words to write the details, Alabssi drew stick figures to remind him about what happens when — “kind of like a story board.”

“So then at the end of each day I’d say, ‘OK Mustafa, tell us what happens in this whole episode to your character, and he’d go through this chart of stick figures and he would perform the whole thing,’” said Ells.

“It was unbelievable. Because I looked at his chart and I’m like, ‘I don’t know what’s happening in there.’ But it worked for him and it got him to understand the world and the character.”

And then it was off to Calgary, Alabssi taking a plane by himself for the first time, to a city where he stayed in a hotel alone for the first time.

There were interpreters on set waiting for him, but Binstock was surprised to learn that “we were going to have to have an interpreter for the interpreter.”

“The interpreters were qualified and trained ... they were among the upper echelons of interpreting across Canada,” said Weber. “They were excellent. But I had to stand beside them and say, ‘Hey, no, he won’t understand that. Do it again.’

“I’m the one that started teaching him ASL in the beginning, so I know where his gaps are, I know where he needs to do some more work to catch up, to understand the linguistic aspects of ASL. So my role was to work with the interpreter to make sure that the communication was going smoothly.”

It did, as far as Alabssi is concerned.

“The interpreters that I was provided with on set were just perfect in helping me to make sure I understood everything and it was really good,” he said.

“It was such a wonderful experience,” he added. “The director was giving me all this feedback about the stuff, saying, ‘You did a really good job with your acting and everything was perfect.’ I was really lucky.”

Alabssi bonded with the rest of the cast and was particularly enamoured by King, who played the lead character, Rose.

“She’s just this amazing person. There’s little me, Mustafa, and she’s way up there like Hollywood, and she just didn’t even care that I was deaf,” said Alabssi, who hopes to take King up on her invitation to visit in California.

“She treated me exactly the same as everybody else; she communicated with me the same as everybody else. She’s so friendly and ... we became really good friends.”

King shared that sentiment with her 1.1 million Instagram followers in August.

“He is representing the deaf community with incredible heart and fearless acting,” wrote King, whose credits include the Sin City films and Oceans Eight. “To step onto a set after just learning American Sign Language and diving right in has taught me what true love and understanding means.”

Though Alabssi couldn’t elaborate much about his summer job, strictly bound to not reveal details of the show, Weber reflected on the eight days she spent on set.

“They kept calling him the one-shot wonder because they could film him once, he could give them exactly what they wanted and there was never a problem ever, and that’s very unusual for a beginning actor,” said Weber — although she admitted there were moments when Alabssi was a “brat,” bored during long periods of downtime.

“I think that because he’s inexperienced, he was a wet sponge,” Binstock agreed. “He was just waiting to absorb anything that he could, and he really connected with the director very strongly. John would show him what he wanted him to do, sort of demonstrate it, and then Mustafa would ask some questions through his interpreter and he just nailed it.

“Some people are and some people aren’t, whether you’re deaf or hearing or otherwise, and he’s a natural.”

After filming a pinnacle moment of the story, Weber recalls cast and crew rushing to congratulate Alabssi.

“If they could they would have lifted him up on their shoulders. It was such a moment of triumph,” said Weber. “The director just jumped up and down and said, ‘F— yeah! F— yeah! That’s it!’ Everybody was so jubilant and it was an amazing moment.”



Mustafa Alabssi poses for a portrait at Winston Knoll Collegiate. *TROY FLEECE / REGINA LEADER-POST*

In and out of character, Alabssi was a hit, said Weber.

“He had them in his pocket the first day. He was forever teasing and joking and hugging, and all people wanting to learn sign language so they could communicate with him,” she said. “He is so gregarious and approachable and funny and kind and supportive. It was an amazing experience for him.”

It was an experience he might not have had without the Deaf Crows.

Ells is grateful to the Saskatchewan Arts Board, which has financially supported the program.

“That’s why Mustafa got this opportunity,” she said.

"It's huge; they've given thousands of dollars to this program. ... That allows me to be here where I can work with the students, and when one of them has some kind of aptitude, I'm in the position where I can help facilitate their going to the next level, outside of this program."

Alabssi isn't the only student from his class with film experience.

Richard Pangman spent a weekend last month working on a film crew. Sable Fink featured in *Der Glockner*, a film Ellis and Hi made in 2016 for The Caligari Project artistic festival in Regina.

Since beginning to act last school year, Alabssi has fallen in love with the craft and hopes to keep acting.

Binstock is not sure that will be possible.

"The truth is, the parts for deaf actors are few and far between. But I could see him becoming a performance artist," she said. "There are theatre companies and stuff in the United States for deaf actors, but film roles not that much."

Alabssi is optimistic that will change. He is on a mission to share his story to help effect that change.

"I hope when people see us on TV, they're going to really be impressed and we'll see more and more deaf people in movies," said Alabssi. "And maybe that will change people's hearts and minds about how they cast roles."

Ellis is "1,000-per-cent sure" that acting is what Alabssi is meant to do: "He is destined to be an actor. ... With every bone in my body, I know it."



Chrystene Ells (back, left) worked with the Deaf Crows â€” including Sable Fink (left), Fatima Nafisa (back, right) and Mustafa Alabssi to learn juggling for their show, Apple Time. *MICHAEL BELL / REGINA LEADER-POST*

Black Summer, a Z Nation spinoff, is due to Netflix in spring 2019.

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