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Partner Spotlight: Deaf Crows Collective

Published On: March 23rd, 2021 | Categories: Other, People and Places |

Tags: deaf artists, deaf crows collective, partner spotlight

This month, as part of the artsUNITE / UNITÉ des arts national launch, we will be highlighting four of our partners from across the country. This week, we sat down with Joanne Weber from the [Deaf Crows Collective](#), to chat about language deprivation, the challenges of our new digital world and the true meaning of inclusivity.

I'd love to hear about how the Deaf Crows Collective came to be?

So I have been a teacher of the deaf in a program in Regina. I worked with high school students and I was seeing that they were deprived of language. This means that their cognitive, social and emotional development was skewed. So we hired an artist in residence and the two of us had worked together to collect the student's stories. We made

a decision that we were going to write a script. The students were going to perform their experiences with language deprivation. And that performance was really heart wrenching and touching, it received a lot of praise, there were three sold out shows in Regina. So it became obvious that we really needed to set up a theatre company, and we called it the [Deaf Crows Collective](#). We have since separated from the high school program and we are starting to develop more activities, more plays, more things related to arts and the artists.

I'm so curious to know why you named yourself after crows, can you share?

The students were starting to express their feelings about being rejected, many of them didn't have good voice and speech skills, they didn't have a lot of language. Other people really looked down on them. The students started to identify with the Crow as a metaphor for their experience with language deprivation, with being looked down upon and being rejected. So all of our plays have always been about analyzing the student's power, and their agency, their ability to make changes to find each other and to find support within the deaf community. The research has found that a crow is a really good community example because crows are always together as a collective. We felt that it's a really good metaphor for the deaf experience.



Deaf Crows Play (2016)

I noticed that you have really diverse programming, everything from art installations like the [Deaf Forest](#), to your performances using mime and puppetry like [Apple Time](#). Could you speak to your curatorial process? How do you decide what to do next?

The vision and goal of Deaf Crows has always been to show the general public the deaf experiences. To do that we use different kinds of physical theater, puppetry with masks, mime and we use ASL poetry. We're trying to develop a new kind of theater approach; we always have deaf and hearing actors partnered together, that's very important. We develop shows and ideas through discussion. We talk with the groups about their stories, we talk about their dreams or maybe a student or an actor has a story from the past that they feel really bothered by and they want to express that. Then we would do interviews, we will have different theater activities to pull out that story and pick things from it. And

later, we have a discussion about what we want, what do we want the audience to understand?

I love that! It sounds really collaborative, like it's got roots in devised theatre?

Devised theater. That's exactly what we do and that's where the true power has come because it's like a community art. The



Deaf Crows Play (2016)

creative process is from the community, and it's given to another community. It's really about analyzing the power and the control, and who has the authority to make decisions and who can explain the experiences. We tend to disregard the deaf children because they don't have a voice. Their parents have made a decision or professionals have made a decision for them and their options are very limited. So that is one of the main points of the devised theater, is that it helps them to have that power to express their stories without needing the language.

I'm wondering what your experience has been of the "digital pivot" so many organizations have undergone this year, have you come up against any major challenges?

Well, we've really not connected with online theater, we've seen many performances. But, it's just not the same as physical theater. Our style of theater is really connected with the physical body. In online performances generally there's a lot of talking and that's been very successful for those groups. But in our kind of performances we really try to limit the amount of talking. And so how do you make the sign language accessible for the hearing audience? On the internet, there are many deaf theatre companies that do a lot of online theater for Deaf audiences. So they can sign and they're able to have the same experience as hearing people would have with talking. But that's not our style. We really tried to do something that is more deeply physical, that really communicates through our bodies and we just haven't been able to immerse ourselves in this online world. So we've just been waiting. We're waiting, waiting, waiting.

I see that you were recently named the first [Canadian Research Chair of Deaf Education](#). Congratulations. That's a huge accomplishment. In your expert opinion, what is something that you would like to see more of from nationally focused arts organizations like artsUNITE; in terms of advocating for your community specifically?

I think it's really important to develop partnerships. There are many deaf children that don't really have many opportunities to communicate. Maybe they get an hour to sit in a classroom and they'll get to say maybe one or two sentences in that whole hour and there's not a lot of social interaction with their peers and their teachers. It's really dependent on their interpreter, on their mentor or the technology they're using. So the key is really partnerships. The Deaf organizations, and leading national organizations like artsUNITE, should provide that connection to local and provincial organizations to allow that partnership because I would like to see more artists work with teachers to provide programming in the schools.

What is something that you have learned about your arts community through your work at DCC?

One thing that I really found about the arts community is they are really welcoming and open. They understand language deprivation very quickly. A big frustration for me as a teacher of the deaf and being a deaf person myself, is that hearing people are very obsessed with the idea of inclusive education. Often, they think that means just putting a deaf child in a hearing classroom and automatically they're just going to absorb all the language in their environment. They're not really understanding the concept of language deprivation. So the arts seemed to be the most flexible and creative in that regard. Artists went over that barrier, they were able to see the issues of justice. The teachers were making decisions about what inclusion actually means and they were forgetting that inclusion is not a place, it's an experience. If the kid is not feeling included, that is their experience. And the teachers would tend to put that aside and say, "Oh, no, the kids included in everything, there's smiling in the classroom, they're happy." But that's really not what inclusion means. So the teacher was wishing for them to be included. But the artists,



Apple Time (2018)



Hearing Forest (Deaf Forest 2017)

they were more honest about that, you know, artists were more looking at the kids, and they saw the connections with the body and the experiences with their feelings and emotions.

And, finally, what is a piece of advice you'd give to deaf or hard of hearing artists as they're trying to find new ways to adapt to a bizarrely changing world?

I think that the problem is that the deaf community has spent a lot of energy fighting for their rights, fighting for language rights, for cultural rights, for proving that we really are a community. So I'm trying to encourage the deaf community to shift the focus to say, you know, stop this fighting. You know, there are some successes there. But the energy that it takes, you know what we're getting burnt out.

For more information on the Deaf Crows Collective, visit their website [here](#) and follow them below:

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