



Impact Story: Mann Art Gallery

by
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Saskatchewan
Arts Alliance





"The Regina-based non-profit brought members of the community together to make art – now they increasingly find themselves making art that builds communities."

SAA's Arts Work series highlights an arts organization making a positive impact in its community: Listen to Dis' community-based programming offers opportunities for participants to immerse themselves in the creation and production of various forms of theatre art, regardless of their physical abilities.

Make your way into Regina's independent arts space Artesian most Tuesday nights, and you're likely to be met by the sound of theatre artists warming up with vocal exercises – trilling up and down the scales, then turning to tongue twisters designed to stretch an actor's mouth and jump-start diction: "I wish to wash my Irish wrist watch..."

Tonight, Listen to Dis Voice – a group of differently abled theatre artists – has met to prepare for an upcoming production of The Monster Monologue, written and directed by artist-in-residence Natasha Urkow – a production that draws from such well-known literary monsters as the Hunchback of Notre Dame, Frankenstein, and The Vampire Lestat. Urkow says the inspiration for the play came from her own experience of living with disability, and how she and her collaborators saw connections between their broader experience – feeling marginalized by mainstream society – and that of those misunderstood mythical characters.

"There are so many similarities – being stared at, the sense of fear, the experience of not being touched," Urkow says. "We're totally treated like outcasts in so many ways. So, I went on a hunt for classic monologues by monsters from some of our favourite stories. Being able to express pain – you don't have to feel as vulnerable when you're doing it behind a character."

Founded by artistic director Traci Foster in 2006, Listen to Dis' community-based programming offers opportunities for participants to immerse themselves in the creation and production of various forms of theatre art, regardless of their physical abilities. "Developing a voice to advocate for yourself on





a day-to-day basis when you live with disability, that's something that develops pretty quickly for a lot of people who participate," Foster says. In addition to the Listen to Dis Voice group, which meets here weekly and is rooted in community theatre, the organization also runs The Other Ordinary collective, comprised of emerging and professional theatre artists whose past productions include *Mine to Have* and *Neither Heroes Nor Ordinary People* – both of which have been remounted several times, and continue to draw audiences provincially.

Foster points out that, in the beginning, the Regina-based non-profit brought members

of the community together to make art – now they increasingly find themselves making art that builds communities; Listen to Dis takes a holistic approach to accessibility in the arts – from accessibility audits that consider the mechanics of getting people through the doors of Saskatchewan's myriad arts venues, to addressing the challenges of casting artists whose ability to participate in productions can change from week to week.

Urkow points to the irony of working to render the often invisible visible through an art form that's all about being seen and heard.

"There are people of difference out there that are just as talented as anyone else. If you're not casting people of different abilities and appearances, then how will they ever learn to achieve?" Urkow says. "We are a group of varied abilities. But, in a sense, so is everyone."

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