

A History of Concrete Theatre

Concrete Theatre started in 1987 and was officially registered in 1989 as a Not-For-Profit Society. It began as a collectively run company committed to using theatre in the community to explore and analyze social issues. The founding artistic directors were Mieko Ouchi, Caroline Howarth, Kazimea Sokil, Jan Selman and Elinor Holt. Concrete Theatre operated on a project-to-project basis facilitating community groups to create theatre that reflected their realities. These early projects included work with street involved youth, teen mothers and single parents. The name Concrete was selected to reflect the company's commitment to the urban Edmonton community.

In 1990, Concrete Theatre began working in schools with a participatory workshop project called *Love, Anger and the Media* that explored relationships, gender roles, dating violence and the impact of media. This workshop toured to schools around Edmonton and Northern Alberta. In the early 90's new artists joined the collective. Padma Viswanathan and Philip McIntyre-Paul created a collective theatre and visual art project called *Acting Our Colours*. For this project, a group of young women from diverse cultural backgrounds and different high schools from the Edmonton area spent several months exploring race relations among teens and created a mural and theatre piece that toured to schools and teen conferences. The company also facilitated a number of community-based workshops and small performance projects with social service agencies, churches and schools.

In these early years, the company was administered by the Artistic Co-Directors, who worked for the company on a volunteer basis. Funding to cover the cost of projects came from social service agencies, Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission (AADAC), Canadian Heritage and the City of Edmonton.

In 1994 Concrete Theatre partnered with four social service agencies to develop *Decisions, Decisions* a participatory theatre piece written by Mieko Ouchi for Junior High students that explored a wide variety of issues including racism, sexuality, drug and alcohol abuse and dating violence. This project was co-produced by Concrete Theatre, AADAC, The Sexual Assault Centre, Planned Parenthood Edmonton and the Support Network with funding from The Wildrose Foundation and The Government of Alberta Early Intervention Program. Directed by Caroline Howarth, *Decisions, Decisions* was a highly successful program that toured to Edmonton schools from 1994 to 1996. In the casting and content of this project, Concrete Theatre made a commitment to promoting cultural diversity and reflecting the diverse nature of school populations.

As Concrete Theatre's connection to schools developed, other projects were created including *The Multi-Cultural Project*, which explored the issues of new Canadians and ESL students in the school community of Louis St. Laurent Junior High School and *Crossing the Line*, a participatory workshop on harassment and bullying which toured extensively to Junior Highs across Northern Alberta. Concrete Theatre also worked with individuals and community groups to provide theatrical forums for alternative voices. *Youth Under Pressure* provided performance opportunities for young theatre artists, musicians, improv and visual artists at the Edmonton Fringe Festival and First Night Festivals for several seasons.

Crips Against the Law of Gravity and *Returned to Sender* were plays by and about the disabled community. The playwright Heidi Janz, a writer with Cerebral Palsy, worked extensively with Concrete Theatre and with the disabled community to create two shows that reflected a reality not often seen on the stage in Edmonton. These shows were performed at the Edmonton Fringe Festival and at the U of A Hospital Theatre in conjunction with the U of A Bioethics Committee and the Association For Community Living. We have continued our relationship with Heidi, most recently with her short children's play, *The Hare and the Hedgehog – A "Challenging" Fable* for the *Sprouts 2002 Festival*.

The Road Show explored environmental issues and came out of a partnership with Eco-City, an Edmonton based organization committed to alternative forms of transportation and urban

environmental issues, and the Edmonton Transit System. The show was performed on an ETS bus at the Edmonton Fringe Festival, and from it's bus stop at Gazebo Park, took riders on a fun and fact filled Eco-ride through Edmonton.

During this period the company continued to operate as an artistic collective working on a project-to-project basis with no formal administration. The evolving membership of the Artistic Collective included Uma Viswanathan, Elyne Quan, Jared Matsunaga-Turnbull, Andrew Houston, Wendy Philpott, Lise Ann Johnson, Juleta Severson-Baker, Caroline Howarth, Kazimea Sokil and Mieko Ouchi. The company accessed funds from Foundations, The Provincial Government and the City of Edmonton.

1998/1999 Season

In 1998, the Artistic Co-Directors of the company decided to develop a performance piece that explored their own cultural diversity. *Triptych* was made up of three very personal performance pieces that explored aspects of culture: *Surface Tension* by Elyne Quan, *By This Parting* by Mieko Ouchi and *subtext* by Uma Viswanathan. *Triptych* was highly successful both critically and in its outreach to alternative cultural communities, and strengthened the company's commitment to continue to create theatre that celebrated alternative voices. It confirmed our commitment to reflecting the cultural diversity of Canada both in main-stage productions and theatre for young audience productions.

1999/2000 Season

Naomi's Road adapted from Joy Kogawa's novel by Paula Wing was successful produced for school and community audiences in 1999. We were able to cast the production using Edmonton based Asian Canadian artists, with the addition of former Edmontonian Yoshiko Shimizu. Out of our search for artists for the cast, we were able to assemble a database of Asian Canadian artists from coast to coast. This has proven to be very important, as other companies are beginning to use Concrete Theatre as a resource to contact Asian Canadian artists for their specific projects. *Naomi's Road* was awarded the Elizabeth Sterling Haynes Award for Outstanding Production for Young Audiences for the 1999/2000.

2000/2001 Season

Building on the success of *Triptych*, the company developed *Rice-Stories with a Slant*, a multi-phased performance project exploring the experience of Asian Canadians, which included a multi-media installation in 1999 and a theatre performance in 2001. The performance of *Rice* wove together three stories: *The Story of the Little Bird* by Jared Matsunaga-Turnbull, *The Story of the Old Man and the Buddha* by Mieko Ouchi and *What?* by Elyne Quan. David Fraser's production design garnered an Elizabeth Sterling Haynes Award nomination, and the script received a nomination for the Gwen Pharis Ringwood Drama Award at the 2001 Alberta Writers Guild Awards.

Are We There Yet? written by Jane Heather, grew out of our original collaboration with Planned Parenthood Edmonton on *Decisions, Decisions* in 1994. At the time, we spoke of the continuing need for young people to access information about sexuality and sexual decision – making. We felt that participatory theatre was highly effective with this issue, as it allowed us to open up discussion about difficult subjects such as responsibility and communication, key issues that Planned Parenthood had had difficulty in discussing in the context of a workshop. Over the past decade, the show has grown into one of our most popular productions. It has become an integral and integrated part of the Grade 9 sexuality curriculum, touring in Edmonton and area to both Public and Catholic schools each year in the spring. *Are We There Yet?* was awarded the Elizabeth Sterling Haynes Award for Outstanding Production for Young Audiences for the 2000/2001 season.

As a result of the rapid growth and artistic success of the company, it became impossible to continue operating without a paid administration and a more formal structure. The Artistic Co-Directors began the process of developing a Board of Directors drawn from the community and began a search for a part time General Manager. In 2001, Concrete Theatre received a grant from the Edmonton Community Lottery Board and hired Marian Brant as General Manager. Along with formalizing our structure and infrastructure, at that time, we also began to create more structured seasons of plays, featuring shows aimed at Elementary, Junior High and Senior High and Family Audiences.

2001/2002 Season

In 2001, Concrete Theatre produced their first Theatre for Young Audiences production targeted at students in Kindergarten through Grade Three. *Lig & Bittle* written and performed by Jared Matsunaga-Turnbull and Elyne Quan is an adventure that explores and celebrates difference. The play was a great success and was awarded the Elizabeth Sterling Haynes Award for Outstanding Production for Young Audiences for the 2001/2002 season. We also toured *Are We There Yet?* to Edmonton and Area Junior High Schools for four weeks in the Spring of 2002.

In the spring of 2002, Concrete Theatre also introduced an exciting new play initiative, *Sprouts New Play Festival For Kids*. The goals of this annual project were to expand the pool of new TYA scripts that specifically promote cultural diversity, to develop new playwrights who are interested in writing for young audiences, and to develop a stable of short scripts that could grow into full length touring and main-stage productions for Concrete Theatre. *Sprouts 2002* featured work by Trevor Anderson, Tololwa M. Mollel, Patricia Darbasie, Janet Hinton-Mann and Heidi Janz. Several of the scripts from this first year have gone on for further development with the company. *A Promise to the Sun* by Tololwa M. Mollel and *Carnival Magic* by Patricia Darbasie were developed into a 50-minute show, which toured Edmonton area Elementary Schools as part of our 2004/2005 season. *Nami Namersson, the Viking who Liked to Name Things* by Trevor Anderson was developed into a 50 minute musical with music by Bryce Kulak and toured elementary schools as part of our 2005/2006 season.

2002/2003 Season

Our 2002/2003 season included a fall/winter main-stage production of *The Shape of A Girl* by award-winning playwright Joan MacLeod at the Kaasa Theatre. Our production was marketed to Junior and Senior High aged students and was very well received by audiences and critics. The show was awarded the Elizabeth Sterling Haynes Award for Outstanding Production for Young Audiences for the 2002/2003 season.

A new workshop initiative *Getting In On It* focused on the new health curriculum on nutrition and healthy living for teens developed in collaboration with Alberta Learning. This workshop toured to several Edmonton and area schools and was presented in several junior high schools in Fort McMurray.

Lig & Bittle was remounted in Edmonton, and toured nationally very successfully to the Kids On The Waterfront Festival in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, both in the Spring of 2003. We also toured *Are We There Yet?* to Edmonton and Area Junior High Schools for four weeks in the Spring of 2003.

Sprouts 2003 featured new plays by Elyne Quan, Leona Brausen, Mark Haroun, Marty Chan, Maralyn Ryan and Jim De Felice.

2003/2004 Season

Our 2003/2004 season included a fall tour of *The Incredible Adventures of Mary Jane Mosquito*, a musical cabaret in English, French and Cree by Tomson Highway that toured to Edmonton area

Elementary schools. This charming musical, by Governor General Award winning playwright Highway, examines issues of difference, of cultural identity and learning to fit in and accept others, and includes gentle language lessons in French and Cree as well as the opportunity to sing-a-long with the lovely Mary Jane.

Lig & Bittle was remounted for a few public performances for Families in Edmonton, and then toured very successfully to The Lorraine Kimsa Theatre For Young People in Toronto, and to the idea Congress in Ottawa, both in the spring of 2004.

Are We There Yet? toured to Edmonton and Area Junior High Schools for four weeks in the Spring of 2004.

Sprouts 2004 included new works by Jared Matsunaga Turnbull, Jan Taylor, Chris Bullough, Beth Graham and Daniela Vlaskalic, and featured a preview of songs from the new musical *Nami Namersson, the Viking Who Liked To Name Things*.

2004/2005 Season

Our 2004/2005 season included a fall main-stage production of *The Plum Tree* by Mitch Miyagawa, performed at the Catalyst Theatre in fall/winter of 2004. This show was aimed at Junior and Senior High aged students, and explored issues of the Japanese-Canadian Internment and Redress Movement as well as issues of land claims and rights.

To celebrate Black History Month in February, we toured a double bill of the short plays *A Promise to the Sun* by Tololwa M. Mollel and *Carnival Magic* by Patricia Darbasie to Edmonton Elementary schools. Aimed at K-Grade 6, the show was performed for a sold out three week run.

In spring, we produced a short remount of *The Incredible Adventures of Mary Jane Mosquito* at the Library Theatre before the show traveled to be a part of the Alberta Scene at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa in April 2005, as well as being presented at the Kids on the Waterfront Festival in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia in May 2005. In April/May we presented the 8th tour of *Are We There Yet?*, which traveled to Edmonton and area Junior Highs for four weeks.

In early 2005, Concrete Theatre and community partners including Planned Parenthood, the University of Alberta Departments of Drama and Human Ecology, Native Counseling Services, NeWorld Theatre in Vancouver, Saskatchewan Native Theatre in Saskatoon and Mulgrave Road Theatre in Guysborough, Nova Scotia, were awarded a major research grant worth \$952, 000.00 from the prestigious SSHRC Program through the CURA (Community University Research Alliance) for the ground-breaking participatory play program *Are We There Yet?* The grant will be used to tour, analyze and study the show for four years, develop and test the show in other communities across Canada, conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the learning outcomes of the project with young people around issues of sexuality, to write and publish the script along with a detailed description of the development process and participatory theatre training guidelines and to hold a national symposium to share the findings of this innovative project with other sexuality educators and theatre companies across the country.

We finished this busy season with *Sprouts 2005*, which featured readings of four short new plays, a newly minted kids art exhibit and a brand new bilingual project: a reading of a new TYA play from France, *Jeremy Fisher*, in both French and in an English translation, in collaboration with L'Uni Theatre, Edmonton's professional Francophone Theatre. The playwrights in 2005 included Mieko Ouchi, Portia Clark, Isabelle Rousseau and Sheldon Elter.

2005/2006 Season

We opened the season with a remount of our award winning production of *The Shape of A Girl* by Joan McLeod. The play toured to Edmonton and area junior and senior high schools, as well as

to Grande Prairie Live Theatre and Saskatoon's Broadway Theatre. *The Shape Of A Girl* is a powerful and thought-provoking one-woman show that examines the complex dynamics of teenage relationships and codes of behaviour between girls. The play, an emotional and poetic exploration of violence based on the brutal murder of Reena Virk by her peers in Victoria, B.C. in 1997, featured Clarice Eckford as Braidie.

In February we produced a second short remount of *The Incredible Adventures of Mary Jane Mosquito* at the Library Theatre before the show traveled to London Ontario for a very successful run at the Grand Theatre.

In February we also debuted our premiere production of *Nami Namersson, The Viking Who Liked To Name Things*, the first full length play to come out of our new play development program. Book and lyrics by Trevor Anderson, music by Bryce Kulak, the play toured to Elementary schools in Edmonton and area, as well as having three very well attended public performances at the Library Theatre.

In April/May we presented the 9th tour of *Are We There Yet?* which traveled to Edmonton and area Junior Highs for six weeks.

Sprouts 2006 included new short plays by Collin Doyle, Andrea House, Jana O'Connor and Marty Chan. We also presented a reading of Marty Chan's new full length play *Nearly Normal*.

2006/2007 Season

We opened the season with *Offensive Fouls* by Jason Long, which toured to Junior and Senior High Schools around Edmonton and area. The play explored an interracial relationship and the fallout from a race based act of violence. Directed by Jared Matsunaga-Turnbull, the play featured Nadien Chu and Chris Bullough and was stage managed by Gina Puntil.

In February, we were proud to present the world English language premiere of *Jeremy Fisher* by Mohamed Rouabhi, translated by Mieko Ouchi. The play was directed by award winning director Ron Jenkins and featured theatre veterans Sheldon Bergstrom, Patrick Howarth, Rebecca Starr and Guillermo Urra. It was stage managed by Shaun Thronson and designed by David Fraser. It toured very successfully to Edmonton and area Elementary schools and enjoyed four public performances at Fringe Theatre Adventures' PCL Studio. In June, we were thrilled when the production received the 2007 Sterling Award for Outstanding Production for Young Audiences.

In April/May we presented the 10th tour of *Are We There Yet?* by Jane Heather, which traveled to Edmonton and area Junior Highs for a sold out six week tour. This year, we also went up to Fort McMurray for a full week of shows at the end of the tour. This production featured Ryland Alexander, Jeremy Baumung, Nadien Chu and Kristi Gunther Hansen. It was stage managed by Shaun Thronson and directed by Mieko Ouchi.

Sprouts 2007 included new works by Cathy Derkach, Mark Haroun, Mieko Ouchi and Guillermo Urra. The plays were directed by Caroline Howarth and stage managed by Michelle Chan. In 2007, we also added new lobby activities by TalentoAmuz, who created a sound garden with kid friendly instruments fashioned into plants and flowers.

At the end of our 2006/2007 season we saw changes in our administration. Jared Matsunaga-Turnbull, Artistic Co-Director since 1994 moved on to pursue theatre projects with the Alberta Workers' Health Centre and Marian Brant, our GM since 2001, took on a new role as Production Manager with the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra. We wish them both the best in their new positions. Caroline Howarth and Mieko Ouchi continued on in their capacities as Artistic Co-Directors, with David Cheoros filling in as Interim General Manager.

2007/2008 Season

We opened the season, our 18th, with a return to one of our favorites: *The Shape Of A Girl* by Joan MacLeod. The play had a very successful sold out two week tour in Edmonton and area Junior and Senior Highs with public performances at Concordia University College. The show starred Tracy Penner, directed by Tracey Carroll and stage managed by Ha Neul Kim.

Our Elementary school show was also a return to one of our favorites: *Nami Namersson, The Viking Who Liked To Name Things*, book and lyrics by Trevor Anderson, lyrics by Bryce Kulak. The play had a fantastic 10 day run at Fringe Theatre Adventures in the Westbury Theatre, followed by a sold out two week run to Edmonton and area theatres. The production again directed by Mieko Ouchi with design by Melissa Cuerrier, featured Ashley Ball, Cathy Derkach, Jesse Gervais and Sylvia Wong and was stage managed by Ha Neul Kim.

2008 marked the 11th tour of *Are We There Yet?*, hitting Edmonton and Calgary area grade 9's for six sold out weeks. This year's production featured Jeremy Baumung, Kristi Gunther Hansen, Mark Jenkins and Natasha Napoleao. It was directed by Caroline Howarth and stage managed by Gina Puntil.

Sprouts 2008 was a huge success this spring with a brand new twist. This year, the Festival featured sign language interpretation at all the performances. The Festival featured scripts by: Dave Clarke, Rita Espechit, Dave Horak and Conni Massing, the plays were directed by Caroline Howarth, stage managed by Michelle Chan and designed by Amanda Franklin.

In March of 2008, Debbie Giesbrecht came on as full time General Manager.

Concrete Theatre Today

Concrete Theatre is a not-for-profit society and a registered charity (no. 89738 7478 RR0001), and operates as a member of PACT (Professional Association of Canadian Theatres). The organization operates with a Board of Directors, two Artistic Co-Directors and a General Manager. Concrete Theatre employs professional artists on a contract per project basis. The various artists deliver workshops, design (set, lights, costumes, sound and graphics), create and perform in both our school tours and our main-stage productions. Concrete has worked in partnership with many community organizations, agencies and theatres such as: AADAC (Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission), Planned Parenthood Edmonton, The Sexual Assault Centre, The Support Network, Edmonton Public Libraries, Alberta Learning, Young Alberta Books Society, Native Counseling Services, the University of Alberta Departments of Drama and Human Ecology, University of Alberta Hospital and Bio-Ethics Committee, The Edmonton Japanese Community Association, the Citadel Theatre, NeWorld Theatre, Fringe Theatre Adventures, Saskatchewan Native Theatre Company, L'Unitheatre, Mulgrave Road Theatre and the Lorraine Kimsa Theatre for Young People among others.

Concrete Theatre continues to receive operating and project support from many different organizations and individuals that believe the work that Concrete supplies is vital to the healthy development of Edmonton's communities. Concrete Theatre has received funding from: The Alberta Foundation for the Arts, The Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission, The Alberta Performing Arts Stabilization Fund, The Canada Council for the Arts, Canadian Heritage, The City of Edmonton, The Clifford E. Lee Charitable Foundation, The Community Initiatives Program, DuMaurier Arts Foundation, Eco-City, The Edmonton Arts Council, The Edmonton Community Foundation, The Edmonton Community Lottery Board, Edmonton Rotary Clubs, The Lee Fund, The Kristie Foundation, The National Association of Japanese Canadians, The Province of Alberta – Early Intervention Program, SSHRC, Stand Firm Capacity Building Program and The Wildrose Foundation.