

A Concrete Foundation

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Twenty years ago, a bunch of U of A drama kids got together with a bunch of former street kids, and in that rare alchemy of artistic innocence and worldly experience a new Edmonton theatre company was born, the Concrete Theatre. Since then, the company has grown up and gone pro, but it has always maintained a commitment to telling stories about serious social issues in a way that is relevant to and respectful of its target audience: the young. This past fall, the company's founders and co-artistic directors, Mieko Ouchi, '92 BFA, and Caroline Howarth, '87 BA, '94 MA, celebrated the Theatre's 20th anniversary along with a couple of generations of artists and audiences who have been influenced by their creation.

The Concrete Theatre was born at the U of A out of a course on collective, popular and improvisational theatre as a project that paired U of A drama students with street-involved youth from Edmonton's Safe House to help the latter tell their own stories of life on the streets. "It was such a positive experience," remembers Caroline, "that we decided we wanted to do more." Caroline, Mieko, Kazimea Sokil, '89 BA, and Elinor Holt, '88 BA, founded the theatre, which takes its name from the group's commitment to the urban Edmonton community, and, aided by Jan Selman, '79 MFA, now chair of the U of A drama department, they cobbled together funds to put on workshops and performances. "Everyone would do what needed to be done," says Caroline, which often included one of the drama students being tapped to play the "mom" in a performance, even though they were all in their early twenties and Mieko was just 19. "I think the reason we were so successful in doing that work was because we weren't social workers or adult figures," she remembers. "Their life experiences were very different from ours, but we were peers."

Today, Caroline and Mieko are still in touch with a few of the original players, some of whom have gotten their lives back on track, finished their educations, married and built families and careers. But the Concrete Theatre has come a long way since its early years when it was made up entirely of unpaid volunteers, working project-to-project on a shoestring budget. Since then it has shifted its focus from collective theatre to predominately commissioned and scripted works geared toward school audiences, while still concentrating on social issues like diversity, sexuality, even violence. And these days the company has full-time staff to help carry out that mandate and a budget of more than \$400,000 for their annual season of three shows and a festival of short plays. They have also put a lot more bums in seats. For their 2008–2009 season, their student audience totalled 13,758 — many of them students who might otherwise never have seen a live theatre performance.

"To Concrete, theatre is not about dressing up and going to see high art in a big theatre house," explains Jared Matsunaga-Turnbull, '98 BFA, who wrote, performed and provided artistic direction for plays with Concrete for 13 years before leaving the

company in 2007. He now works for the Alberta Worker's Health Centre, where he creates theatre that educates young audiences on their rights in the workplace. "It would be great if everyone had the opportunity to do that, but when you're touring around, you're reaching kids who will never see theatre, and they deserve to see it more than anyone else. When a show comes to their gym, you can see how those kids are just transformed."

Jared got his start with Concrete when he was still a student at the U of A, playing "multiple boyfriends" in the company's first full-length touring show, *Decisions, Decisions*, written by Mieko and directed by Caroline. "That experience really solidified for me the kind of work I wanted to do: social action, social justice theatre with young people," he says. "It was important to me to work with diversity and Concrete was the only company that expressed that in their mandate. And they're interested in diversity of all kinds, not just cultural diversity. They produce plays about gender issues, queer issues, body images issue, and youth — who are not really given a voice in our society."

Not long after graduating, Jared was writing his own plays about diversity for Concrete. Along with Elyne Quan, '95 BA, he co-wrote and performed one of Concrete's most successful productions: *Lig and Bittle*, about a big character who doesn't fit in — based on the 6'5" Jared — and a little character who doesn't fit in — based on the five-foot-tall Elyne. "On the surface it's about size difference, but it's mostly about just being different," he explains. "So it touches on race and diversity, but it doesn't shy away from conflict, and I think that's what made it so successful. The worst kids theatre presents the idea of an issue. The best kids theatre actually explores the issue." *Lig and Bittle* won Edmonton's 2002 Sterling Award for best production for young audiences and continues to be performed across the country to this day.

Another award-winning Concrete production that deals head on with the thorny issues facing today's kids is Jane Heather's ['75 BA, '93 MFA] *Are We There Yet?*, a participatory show about sexual decision-making geared toward Grade 9 students. "It sounds like it might be awful," laughs Caroline, "but actually there's a lot of humour in the show, and it makes the kids feel comfortable to talk about sexuality, which is usually really embarrassing for them to talk about." Now in its 13th season with the company, *Are We There Yet?* has become an institution in its own right and was completely sold out last year. "We've been doing it so long, in fact, that this year we've cast an actor—Richard Lee Hsi, '08 BFA—who saw it performed when he was in Grade 9."

Now that Concrete has become a well-oiled machine with a full-time staff, Caroline and Mieko have been able to step back from the day-to-day running of the company and focus more on its artistic mission. It's a good thing too, since outside of the Concrete season they both maintain a full roster of projects: Caroline is a sessional instructor at Concordia University in Edmonton and is working on her MFA in the U of A's drama department, and Mieko is a nationally recognized, award-winning filmmaker and playwright for adult audiences. These other endeavors seem to enrich and expand the theatre they create for kids.

Since 2001, the dynamic duo have taken the company in a new direction, creating the Sprouts New Play Festival for Kids that the company puts on every year at the Stanley A. Milner Library in Edmonton. Now in its ninth season, Sprouts often contains the seeds that grow into full-length plays for the theatre's season. The plays, which the company commissions, have also helped expand the pool of talent writing plays for young audiences. "Sprouts has allowed us to develop new plays and to develop culturally diverse work from culturally diverse writers," says Jared. "In the process we're creating playwrights, some who had never written before, some who had written other fiction but had never written a play before, and some who were playwrights but had never written for children before." Among the distinguished cast of "Sprouts" writers are several U of A grads, including Mark Haroun, '03 BA; Daniela Vlaskalic, '98 BFA; Chris Bullough, '98 BFA; Marty Chan, '90 BA; Todd Babiak, '95 BA; Patricia Darbasie, '86 BFA; Heidi Janz, '93 BA, '95 MA, '03 PhD; Janet Hinton-Mann, '84 MFA; Andrea House, '96 BA; Twilla MacLeod, '00 BFA; and Dave Horak, '94 BFA.

For Caroline, one of the highlights of her 20-year history with the theatre came after the very first performance of a Sprouts show by Tololwa Mollel, '79 MA. The show was about a bat who could make it rain on an African savannah scorched by drought. After the show, a little girl who had been in the audience ran back into the theatre to find Kate Ryan, '91 BFA, who played the bat, to tell her that it had started to rain outside. "I thought it was so powerful that she had bought into the story so completely that she needed to tell us that the magic had worked," remembers Caroline. "The bat had made it rain."