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A Conversation about *Songs My Mother Never Sung Me*

Caroline Howarth, Mieko Ouchi and Kelsie Acton

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

This conversation explores the development and premiere production of *Songs My Mother Never Sung Me*, an American Sign Language (ASL)/English chamber opera written and composed by Dave Clarke and produced by Concrete Theatre in Edmonton, Alberta. Staging an opera for Deaf and hearing family audiences required building meaningful connections to Edmonton's Deaf community, both through engaging a Deaf cultural consultant and through a partnership with SOUND OFF, Canada's Deaf theatre festival. Prioritizing ASL, Deaf audiences, and casting a Deaf actor in the role of Mom were significant.

A Conversation about *Songs My Mother Never Sung Me*

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Cette conversation entre Caroline Howarth, Mieko Ouchi et Kelsie Acton porte sur l'expérience de la création et de la mise en scène de *Songs My Mother Never Sung Me*, un opéra en langue des signes américaine (ASL) avec orchestre de chambre écrit et composé par Dave Clarke et produit par la compagnie Concrete Theatre d'Edmonton, en Alberta. Mettre en scène un opéra destiné à un public malentendant et à des personnes entendant exige que l'on tisse des liens étroits avec la communauté malentendante d'Edmonton. À cette fin, l'équipe a recruté un conseiller malentendant et a forgé un partenariat avec SOUND OFF, le festival canadien de théâtre pour malentendants. Elle a aussi accordé une priorité à l'ASL et au public malentendant et a choisi une actrice malentendante pour jouer le rôle de la mère.

Mots clés : accès, langue des signes américaine (ASL), opéra, enfant d'adulte sourd, théâtre pour malentendants, théâtre handicap, théâtre jeunes publics

This conversation explores the development and premiere production of *Songs My Mother Never Sung Me*, an American Sign Language (ASL)/English chamber opera written and composed by Dave Clarke and produced by Concrete Theatre in Edmonton, Alberta. Staging an opera for Deaf and hearing family audiences required building meaningful connections to Edmonton's Deaf community, both through engaging a Deaf cultural consultant and through a partnership with SOUND OFF, Canada's Deaf theatre festival. Prioritizing ASL, Deaf audiences, and casting a Deaf actor in the role of Mom were significant.

Keywords: accessibility, American Sign Language (ASL), opera, Child of Deaf Adults (CODA), Deaf theatre, disability theatre, Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA)



Songs My Mother Never Sung Me (premiered at SOUND OFF: A Deaf Theatre Festival 2019, and produced by Concrete Theatre, Edmonton) is a bilingual chamber opera in American Sign Language (ASL) and English for family audiences that charts the relationship between Mom, who is Deaf, and Boy, her hearing son, as Boy ages from babyhood to adulthood. It is

A CONVERSATION ABOUT SONGS MY MOTHER NEVER SUNG ME

based on the lived Child of Deaf Adult (CODA) experience of playwright and composer Dave Clarke, and is the “story of how my mom helped me find my voice” (1), offering a unique narrative of Canadian youth. Here, we trace its development in conversation with co-directors/dramaturges Caroline Howarth and Mieko Ouchi, and Kelsie Acton, who was the assistant director of the premiere.

Caroline: To start, I think it is helpful to explain a little about the unique style of the piece. The Narrator, the Boy grown up, leads us through the story, utilizing both sign and song, and Mom is played by two performers: Mom, who exclusively signs, and Mom’s Voice, a singer. Boy is played from babyhood through his teenage years by one signing/singing actor. Since the story begins when Boy is a baby, the audience watches his language development, enabling audience members who don’t speak ASL to learn some basic signs. Kids were particularly engaged with these sections; they loved seeing an adult play a small child and connected strongly with the comedy built around Mom and Boy playing mischievously together, discovering a new toy and changing a poopy diaper. These scenes showed the boy developing communication skills through ASL blended with physical humour and fun.

Kelsie: The piece is designed to be accessible to hearing and Deaf audiences of all ages through music, sung English, ASL, projection, and vibration.

Mieko: *Songs* premiered as part of the SOUND OFF, Canada’s first Deaf theatre festival, in February 2019. It was produced by Concrete Theatre and was the culmination of ten years of collaboration between the playwright/composer Dave Clarke, myself, and Caroline.

Caroline: Since 2002 Concrete Theatre has produced the Sprouts New Play Festival for Kids, an annual incubator for new TYA plays from playwrights of diverse cultures and lived experiences. In 2008 we invited Dave to write a piece about his childhood growing up with Deaf parents and learning sign (British Sign Language/BSL) as his first language.

Mieko: Even the first simple fifteen-minute iteration was captivating, true to both Dave’s individual experience and resonant to a wide range of audiences. Kids were fascinated by the ASL—the way the show tracked Boy’s language learning, from infant to adulthood, encouraged kids to sign along. They connected to the parent-child relationship.

Caroline: We were excited by the potential of a piece that did not rely on interpreters or captioning for access. Challenges in communication and parenting resonated with both Deaf and hearing audiences.

Kelsie: Ten years is a long development period. What were some of the challenges?

Caroline: The story is deeply personal and took Dave time to tell in the way that he wanted. But the biggest challenge was making connections with collaborators from the Deaf community.

Mieko: Early attempts to reach out “cold” to the Deaf community were pretty unsuccessful. This is completely understandable, as we were all hearing artists with little to no ASL. Even Dave, who grew up in England and was fluent

in BSL, has limited ASL. We knew that the role of Mom had to be played by a Deaf performer and we recognized early on our limitations as a group of hearing artists, so we began building deeper connections to the Deaf community. Deaf cultural understanding and perspective had to be central to our process.

Caroline: As we did more research into Deaf culture and CODA experience, we began to understand more about the barriers that Deaf artists and audiences face. This was articulated in a panel discussion at SOUND OFF by Connor Yuzwenko-Martin, our Deaf culture consultant on the premiere: “If you want people to feel included, people who have been historically excluded, you need to create an invitation. These are vulnerable people; there is historical trauma there, and perhaps the feeling of not being invited, so when we’re inviting them now, there might be some hesitation or reluctance to do that.”

Kelsie: We needed Connor, not just to extend an invitation to Deaf communities, but to provide insight throughout every part of the process.

Mieko: In 2011 we did another workshop. This let us explore an expanded version of the story. This time the role of Mom was played by a hearing actor with basic ASL. We reconnected with Chris Dodd, an Edmonton-based Deaf actor and playwright who would go on to found SOUND OFF. Through Chris we met Elizabeth Morris, a Deaf performer from Kingston. Liz joined us in Edmonton to play Mom for a week-long workshop and reading at the first SOUND OFF in 2017. The process, the learning, and the response was amazing, culminating in an oversold reading to over eighty Deaf and hearing folks.

Caroline: Reconnecting with Chris and then Elizabeth launched the project to a new level. We connected with Nicole Sander and the NICA Consolidated team, a network of interpreters, consultants, and advocates who connected us more deeply with the Deaf community. Liz was very excited to be involved in a musical. She had grown up in a household with lots of music and loved music and rhythm. Working with Liz pushed us to look at our rehearsal processes and engage with real inclusion.

Kelsie: There was something very powerful about the forefronting of ASL for Deaf audiences. *Songs* is very much the story of a CODA’s experience, but there were moments intended to privilege audience members who knew ASL and who knew the work Deaf people do to make themselves understood by hearing people, including their own family.

Caroline: There are monologue sections where Mom signs only. This purposefully placed the hearing audience in the minority language position. Liz said of these, “The one thing that I love is the Deaf people laughed and I know the hearing people didn’t get it.” Several adult hearing audience members expressed that they did not like feeling left out of the ASL monologues; they were uncomfortable with being on the outside. Hearing kids, on the other hand, were engaged by the ASL and wanted to figure out the meaning and pick out signs they had seen earlier. Similar to Liz’s thoughts, for young Deaf ASL users,

it was exciting to see vibrant use of their language in the forefront, making them the insiders.

Mieko: When the full version of *Songs* premiered at SOUND OFF in 2019, it resonated deeply with audiences. Audience members wept. A young CODA woman was overwhelmed by seeing a play that mirrored her life for the first time. Many viewers commented on the beauty and simplicity of the piece. Deaf teens from Deaf Crows Collective in Saskatchewan came to the show multiple times, telling us how much they loved the bilingual story and seeing an accomplished Deaf actor in a lead role.

Caroline: We are currently planning to remount *Songs My Mother Never Sung Me* for a national tour in 2022. We are all thrilled with the prospect of taking this show to more audiences, and how the project expands the boundaries for accessible and inclusive theatre for family audiences.

Works Cited

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Contributors

CAROLINE HOWARTH is a director, dramaturg, and educator. An assistant professor in Drama at Concordia University of Edmonton, she is a co-founder and artistic associate with Concrete Theatre, where she coordinates the Sprouts New Play Festival for Kids and has directed several TYA premieres including, *Paper Song*, *The Early Bloomer*, and *Songs My Mother Never Sung Me* in collaboration with Mieko Ouchi.

MIEKO OUCHI, a co-founder of Concrete Theatre, works as a writer, director, and dramaturg. Her plays *The Red Priest*, *The Blue Light*, *The Dada Play*, *Nisei Blue*, *I Am For You*, *Consent*, and *The Silver Arrow* have been produced across Canada, internationally, and have been recognized with the Carol Bolt Award and a Governor General's Literary Award nomination. Mieko has been recognized with three Elizabeth Sterling Haynes Awards as director.

KELSIE ACTON is a neurodivergent dancer, choreographer, and researcher. She is Inclusive Practice Manager at the Battersea Arts Centre (the world's first relaxed venue), a member of the Critical Design Lab (a multi-institutional collective addressing questions of accessibility), and her SSHRC-funded dissertation examined the accessibility of practices of timing in disability dance.