



The Development History

by Anita Riggio

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Introduction

Hear Me is a contemporary musical in two acts about love, healing, and the creative process. Blending spoken language and American Sign Language (ASL), this seven-character musical explores the premise that everyone has an inner demon, a personal "beast," and the way one confronts that beast defines the quality of one's life. The world of **Hear Me** is hearing and Deaf, straight and gay, multi-racial. The protagonist's quest is everyone's quest: to confront his inner demon in order to love fully and live authentically.

I am delighted to be collaborating with composer Sila Shaman, whose stunning virtuosity is matched by her keen understanding of the needs of this musical.

Deaf director and performer Monique Holt helms **Hear Me**, and has assembled an extraordinarily talented creative team of Deaf professionals, including choreographer Karen Dearborn.

Fat Chance Production Group, LLC has been developing this piece since 2007.

Hear Me is ready for a full production.

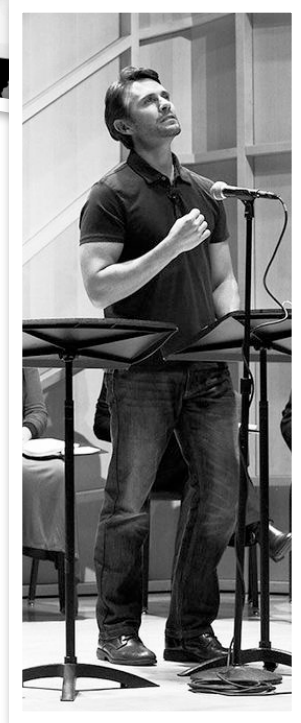




Synopsis

When notoriously single graphic novelist, Will Champion meets Claire Harper, an independent, Deaf, single mom, whose sensual, visual language is as lovely and compelling as she is, Will unwittingly summons his Beast, the inner voice that is embodiment of the demons that have kept him from loving fully and living authentically.

As Will's relationship with Claire grows more serious, so does the Beast's interference. Will's attempt to banish the Beast results in his creating pictures and, ultimately, a book about a form-changer called "Brindlebeast," whose transformations metaphorically mirror the events in Will's life. When a tragedy occurs, and Will's own defenses fail him, the love of a child forces Will to confront his demons, and claim a life he only imagined.





Cast

3 Males; 4

Females.

Males:

(1) Age 45, tenor legit

(1) Age 40, Deaf, HoH or CODA preferred , ASL proficient, vocal range, n/a

(1) Age 45, baritone legit. Proficiency in ASL, CODA preferred.

Females:

(1) Ageless, belt

1) Age 40, Deaf, HoH, or CODA preferred. ASL proficient, vocal range, n/a

(1) Age 12, bright belt, CODA preferred. Proficiency in ASL.

(1) Age 45, soprano legit

Characters

Will. Age 45. Hearing. Writer/illustrator of a successful comic graphic novel series for middle-grade students. Emotionally shut-down since the unexpected death of his beloved brother. Will's good looks make it easy for him to attract women without having to share anything of himself. He is so out of touch with his own feelings, he doesn't recognize them until he sees them represented in the images he draws. Bari-Tenor/legit.

Beast. Ageless. Hearing. The smart-mouthed, shape-shifting tormentor who lives inside Will's head, and is visible to Will alone. Bari-tenor/Baritone

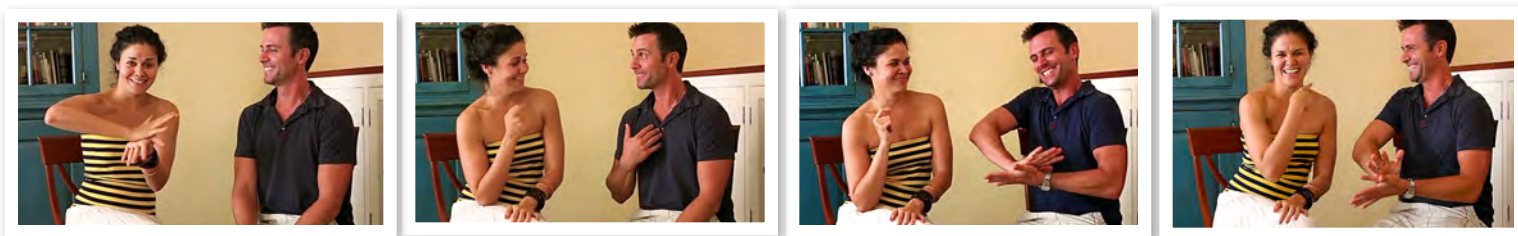
Claire. Age 40. Deaf. An independent, single mother. A dancer and art teacher. Radiant. Intuitive. Fiercely independent to a fault. Has built a life with her daughter, Tessa and an extended family that includes her brother, Casey and his husband, Neil. Claire now feels the stirrings of needing love in her life. ASL fluent. Voice N/A.

Tessa. Age 12. Claire's hearing daughter. A happy, loving, well-adjusted young teen, mature beyond her years. Secure within her family, but recognizes a yearning for a father she never had when she sees her mother bloom with love. Fluent in ASL. Belt.

Jude. Age 45. Hearing. Will's sassy agent and former lover. Soprano/legit.

Casey. Age 40 Deaf. Claire's brother, Tessa's uncle. Neil's husband and business partner, self-proclaimed head of the extended family, and fiercely protective of his sister and niece. A charmer and a prankster. Athletic and funny. A fabulous mime. ASL fluent. Voice N/A.

Neil. Age 45. Hearing. Casey's husband and business partner. Warm. Charming. Level-headed. Dotes on Tessa and Casey. ASL fluent. Baritone/bass/legit.



Development History

Hear Me, formerly titled *Brindlebeast*, was born in Connecticut and raised in New York City. In August 2010, we cast the roles, hired interpreters, recorded a partial demo at John Kilgore Studio in NYC.

We used the opportunity of our first 29 hour Equity work session in November 2010 to work intensively on the script and ASL with actors, ASL masters and interpreters. Actors Equity kindly granted a dispensation for a second 29 hour work session in January 2011.

Three original songs from Hear Me were recorded by Eric Kunze, and debuted by Eric and Alexandria Wailes at "An Evening with Eric Kunze, a cabaret to benefit the ongoing development of Hear Me" on Saturday, February 23, 2013 at the Town & County Club in Hartford, CT. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lul-5fQ5j18>

An eleven song demo CD was recorded at John Kilgore Sound & Recording in NYC on June 17, 2013.

Throughout Fall 2013, Fat Chance Production Group, LLC produced two hundred and twenty-five ASL video tutorials for all songs and character parts in advance of the musical's first public reading.

Then titled, *Brindlebeast*, the musical was given its first staged reading to a packed house of deaf and hearing patrons, by the TRU Voices New Musicals Reading Series, directed by Emily Maltby, January 20, 2014, at the Engelman Recital Hall (Baruch College), NYC. The response was overwhelmingly positive.

Tony-nominated director Glenn Casale subsequently helmed a private 20 hour reading in NYC, February 22-24, 2015.

A final demo CD was recorded at John Kilgore Sound & Recording April 23-24, 2015.

After submitting the piece for several years, I let the project cool off. In 2018, I revised the script and changed the title to HEAR ME. The script was revised again in the Covid winter of 2020, and finally in 2022 when director Monique Holt joined the creative team.

The world-wide pandemic has exposed the need to include more and diverse voices in the arts, so perhaps that exposure is a silver lining: After more than a decade in development, the time for *Hear Me* has surely arrived.

Participants, January 20, 2014 Reading

Anita Riggio*, Book Writer, Lyricist, Producer
Sila Shaman, Composer
Debbie von Ahrens, Lead Producer
Nathan Sheffield, Producer
Emily Maltby, Director
Becky Abeyta*, ASL Master
Leslie A. Warren*, ASL Master
Yan Li, Music Director & Accompanist
Kim Marie Jones, Stage Manager
Eric Kunze, Actor (Will)
Alexandria Wailes*, Actor (Claire)
Emily Robinson, Actor (Tessa)
Terese Genecco, Actor (Beast)
Kathy Voytko, Actor (Jude)
JW Guido, *Actor (Casey)
Bryan Seastrom, Actor (Neil)
Ann Talman, Actor (Narrator)
Craig Vogel*, ASL Interpreter
Sarah Brandenburg*, ASL Interpreter
Ashley Graham*, ASL Interpreter

Participants, February 22-24, 2015 Reading

Anita Riggio, Producer, Writer, Lyricist
Sila Shaman, Composer
Glenn Casale, Director
Tony Spinosa, Associate Director
Yan Li, Music Director & Accompanist
Jeff Rodriguez, Stage Manager
Eric Kunze, Actor (Will)
Alexandria Wailes*, Actor (Claire)
Frenie Acoba, Actor (Tessa)
Terese Genecco, Actor (Beast)
Kathy Voytko, Actor (Jude)
John McGinty*, Actor (Casey)
Dan Jenkins, Actor (Neil)
Ann Talman, Actor (Narrator)
Lydia Callis, ASL Interpreter
Anna Carter, ASL Interpreter
Lena Jelen, ASL Interpreter





Score

This multi-layered work has a chamber score that draws from both classical and modern forms of musical theater. As in recent musicals *Spring Awakening*, *Once*, and *The Band's Visit*, the score has a distinctive and contemporary voice.

The sound of *HearMe* is intimate yet intense. Alternately lyrical and percussive, the music juxtaposes emotionally charged melodies and subtly complex harmonies and rhythms to reflect the diversity of this community, its characters, and the myriad of emotions they experience. Memorable songs with strong themes are at the center of the piece. These themes are developed organically throughout the score to provide the audience an aural connection with the characters. Unique to this work, additional instrumental songs are composed to the visual cues and movements of ASL rather than spoken lyrics. The orchestration is not generic, the specific range and timber of each instrument is carefully chosen and closely associated with the character it represents.

Composer/arranger Henco Espag came on board in 2022 to finalize and arrange the score.

Like *Spring Awakening*, *Next to Normal*, *Once*, and *The Band's Visit*, *Hear Me* is a boundary-breaking, intimate story that is brought to life by a small cast. - Sila Shaman, Composer

Visual Images

I come to *Hear Me* from a successful career as a writer and illustrator of picture books. On the surface, picture books and musicals would seem to have little in common, yet in applying what I know about the former to the latter, I realize that there are similarities. In both art forms, entire worlds are created. In the best picture books, the story is grounded in a solid structure and told in economic language as a series of actions undertaken by the main character, much like the book of a musical. The illustrations in a picture book, like lyrics, do more than embellish the story; they move the plot forward and reveal character. *Hear Me* is, in fact, based around—not on—my picture book, *Beware the Brindlebeast* published in 1994. The theme of both works is that everyone has a personal beast, and the way one confronts that beast defines the quality of one's life.

- Anita Riggio, Creator, Writer, Lyricist





Movement & Choreography

The use of ASL, a physical, tactile language, creates enormous possibilities for Deaf choreographer Karen Dearborn, who will design sensual, balletic, contemporary movement and dance that incorporate ASL and elements of visual vernacular.

American Sign Language

The origins of this musical go back many years to my very first job as a teacher at the American School for the Deaf. The middle and high school students to whom I taught Art and English, taught me American Sign Language and fostered in me a life-long interest in ASL and Deaf culture.

In 2006, I was commissioned by the National Theatre of the Deaf to transpose my picture book, perennial Halloween favorite, Beware the Brindlebeast to a play for their touring company, The Little Theatre of the Deaf. *Beware the Brindlebeast and Other Stories* toured nationwide during 2007-2008, their 40th anniversary season, featuring brilliant actor Ian Sanborn, for 70 performances. This collaboration with NTD planted the seed for *Hear Me*.

The use of American Sign Language (ASL) is intrinsic to the story and cannot be interchanged with, nor replaced by any spoken language because only Sign Language is a visual and tactile language.





Audience

Hear Me is a visually arresting, sensorily engaging, heartfelt musical whose audience is both hearing and Deaf, straight and gay, American and foreign. *Hear Me* would appeal to the traditional theatre-goer, as well as those who support inclusion of differently-abled actors in TV, film, and theater. Consider the popularity of the 2020 Academy Award nominated film *The Sound of Metal*, and the 2022 Academy Award Best Picture winner *CODA*, featuring brilliant Deaf actor Troy Kostur, who was voted Best Actor.

It is worth noting a 2005 study by the Gallaudet Research Institute that suggests ASL was ranked sixth in language use in the USA with an estimated 100,000 - 2,000,000 signers. Currently, forty states identify American Sign Language as a foreign language, and offer ASL courses at elementary schools, middle schools, high schools, and universities, yet Deaf theatre-goers remain an underserved demographic.



Impact

The world of *Hear Me* is inherently inclusive. It is multi-racial, Deaf and hearing, straight and gay. The quest of the protagonist in *Hear Me* is everyone's quest: to confront one's inner beast in order to love and be loved. American Sign Language (ASL)—gorgeous and dramatic in its own right—plays a big part in the plot and in the staging. Unlike Deaf West's remarkable revival of *Spring Awakening*, the deafness of two characters in *Hear Me* is presented as an attribute rather than as a disability.

Response to TRU New Musical Staged Reading

"This is a universal story because everyone in this room has a beast."

- Cheryl Wiesenfeld, Producer, *Rocky*; *Gershwin's Porgy & Bess*; and others.

"On opening night, [as a producer] you want to feel proud. I'd be proud if this were my piece." - Neil Danoff, Investor/Producer, *Spring Awakening*; *Matilda*; *Allegiance*; and others.



Anita Riggio, Creator, Book Writer, Lyricist has written and illustrated many books for young readers including the award-winning picture book *Beware the Brindlebeast*, which is at the core of the musical *Hear Me*. A surprise 50th birthday gift—a cancer diagnosis—and subsequent full recovery, offered Anita the opportunity to reset and discover she didn't want to spend the rest of her creative life alone in studio, albeit a lovely one.

Well, what, then?

Make a musical. (Her ever-abiding first love.)

So, in 2009, Anita established Fat Chance Production Group, LLC and began to assemble an extraordinarily talented cast and creative team, and to write an original musical, incorporating her experiences as a teacher in the Deaf community, as a reasonably successful children's book writer/illustrator, and as a perfectly flawed human.

During her career as a writer & illustrator, Anita presented her books at the International Reading Association, American Library Association, National Council of Teachers of English, as well as many schools and colleges. She served as the regional director of the New England Society of Children's Book Writers & Illustrators, producing large conferences, as well as small workshops.

She was on the founding faculty of the Lesley University MFA in Creative Writing Program in Cambridge, MA, 2003-2011, and as well as the illustration department of the Hartford Art School, University of Hartford, CT, 1985-1990.

Anita writes and illustrates from her home studio in Connecticut, and continues to present writing and creativity workshops. www.anitariggio.com.

Sila C. Shaman, Composer is a composer and pianist whose work spans a variety of genres including music for film & TV, theater, dance, jazz, concert and experimental music. Her recent work has been described as "adroit tinkering and re-shaping of improvised source material into full fledged, highly polished works of art." Her score for the documentary *Sisters in Freedom* received 2019 Mid-Atlantic Emmy Awards for both Musical Composition and Audio.

An alumnus of the NYU/ASCAP Film Scoring Workshop and BMI Composing for the Screen Mentorship Program, her screen and stage credits include music for the play *Terrotica* by Brad Krumholz; scores for *Catskill Chainsaw Redemption*, a short film by J.R. Havlan of "The Daily Show with John Stewart"; documentary *First American Art*; the musical satire *Spin*, with book and lyrics by John Frohnmayer, featuring David Ogden Stiers; the documentary *9/11: Ten Years Later* for History Channel; the short film, *A Character Story*, by cartoonist Liana Finck; the musical *Hear Me* (formerly *Brindlebeast*), with book and lyrics by Anita Riggio; and TV pilot *Perception* by PJ Posner.

As a jazz pianist and composer she has released multiple recordings on SteepleChase and Louie Records of which "A New Abode" was an album-of-the-week pick by NPR. Her latest duo album with multi-instrumentalist Dave Storrs, "Brief West Coast Tour," was listed as one of the top releases of 2020 by All About Jazz. Her latest film/album project "Transmission" is a visual and aural examination of the COVID-19 pandemic through collected audio compositions, improvisation and narration.

Originally from Turkey she currently lives and works in New York City.

www.silashaman.com



Links & Contact



Video Clips:

<https://vimeo.com/user19808541>

Website:

<https://www.hearmemusical.com>

Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/hearmemusical>

Contact

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Photographs by Gregory Costanzo

Letter of Endorsement



Brian P. Allen, Executive Director & Artistic Director
Stephen Underwood, Production Manager & Technical Director

January 30, 2018

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing a letter of support for the new, original musical *Brindlebeast*. This is an extraordinary, unique piece of musical theater that is moving, lyrical and in need of a first production.

I run a small professional theater company in Portland, Maine, Good Theater. One of my patrons put me in touch with Anita Riggio the creator of *Brindlebeast*. We had a number of meetings as we tried to find a way to offer the world premiere of *Brindlebeast* as part of our 2018-2019 season.

Unfortunately the cost to present this piece were too high for us (we have 100-seats) to include the show in our season. We did offer one song from *Brindlebeast* during our annual *Broadway at Good Theater* concerts. Eric Kunze, the Broadway veteran, who has been associated with *Brindlebeast* since the beginning, sang "Thank You," as the finale to our concerts. It was an incredible moment in our show, and the moment that most patrons commented on. People were touched and moved by this gorgeous song.

Because of the unique needs to the piece, *Brindlebeast* will require a theater with a budget to accommodate these needs. They are not insurmountable and the beauty of the show will make it well worth the extra effort and expense required to bring this glorious piece to life.

The show has a wonderful message and features a number of first-time creative aspects that will make the show noteworthy beyond its beauty.

Brindlebeast reminds me of the musical *Once* with a little bit of *Come From Away* thrown in. It has a small cast, a stunning score, a terrific book and beautiful characters. I believe audiences in any city will respond positively to this show.

If you would like to discuss the show with me, I am happy to do so. Even though Good Theater won't be presenting the premiere, we are anxious to see the show happen.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Brian P. Allen".

Brian P. Allen
Executive & Artistic Director