

# Development History

by Anita Riggio

Produced by  
**FAT CHANCE PRODUCTION GROUP, LLC**

Direction  
**MONIQUE HOLT**

Concept, Book & Lyrics  
**ANITA RIGGIO**

Choreography  
**KAREN DEARBORN**

Music  
**SILA SHAMAN**

Artistic Sign Language  
**IAN SANBORN**





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B&W Photography by Gregory Costanza

## Introduction

**H**EAR ME is a contemporary musical in two acts about love, healing, and the creative process. Blending spoken English and American Sign Language (ASL), this bi-lingual, cross-cultural, 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/her inner demon 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. My deepest gratitude goes to Deaf creatives, Director Monique Holt, Choreographer Karen Dearborn, and Director of ASL (DASL) Ian Sanborn, whose extraordinary vision has compounded my own, exponentially.

Fat Chance Production Group, LLC has been developing this piece since 2007. We are ready to take HEAR ME to the next level toward a full production. We sincerely appreciate your interest and support!

Support ❤️: <https://fundraising.fracturedatlas.org/hear-me-musical>



## Development History

**August 2010.** HEAR ME, formerly titled BRINDLEBEAST, was born in Connecticut and raised in New York City. We cast the roles, hired interpreters, recorded a partial demo at John Kilgore Studio in NYC.

**November 2010.** We used the opportunity of our first 29 hour Equity work session to work intensively on the script and ASL with actors, ASL masters and interpreters.

**January 2011.** Actors Equity kindly granted a dispensation for a second 29 hour work session.

**February 2013.** Three original songs from HEAR ME were recorded by Eric Kunze.

**Saturday, February 23, 2013.** "An Evening with Eric Kunze, a cabaret to benefit the ongoing development of HEAR ME," Town & County Club in Hartford, CT. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lul-5fQ5j18>

**June 17, 2013.** Our eleven-song demo CD was recorded at John Kilgore Sound & Recording in NYC.

**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.

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

*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\*, Assistant 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.

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

*Participants, February 22-24, 2015 Reading*

Anita Riggio, Writer, Lyricist, Producer; 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.

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

**Fall 2017.** Brian P. Allen Executive & Artistic Director of Good Theater in Portland, was keen to produce the world premiere of HEAR ME. Sadly, lack of funding forced Good Theater to back out.

**Winter 2020.** The script was revised again.

**May 1, 2022.** Monique Holt signed on as director of HEAR ME. Choreographer Karen Dearborn, and DASL Ian Sanborn joined the Creative Team in short order.

**May 15-21, 2023.** Creative Team workshop, Old Wethersfield, CT. Completed ASL translations of song lyrics with ASL video tutorials that will accompany the script and score. (See below.)

*Participants, May 15-21, 2023 Workshop*

Anita Riggio, Book Writer, Lyricist, Producer; Monique Holt, Director; Karen Dearborn, Choreographer; Ian Sanborn, DASL.



DASL Ian Sanborn and Director Monique "MoMo" Holt interpreting "Do You?" music by Sila Shaman, lyrics by Anita Riggio.

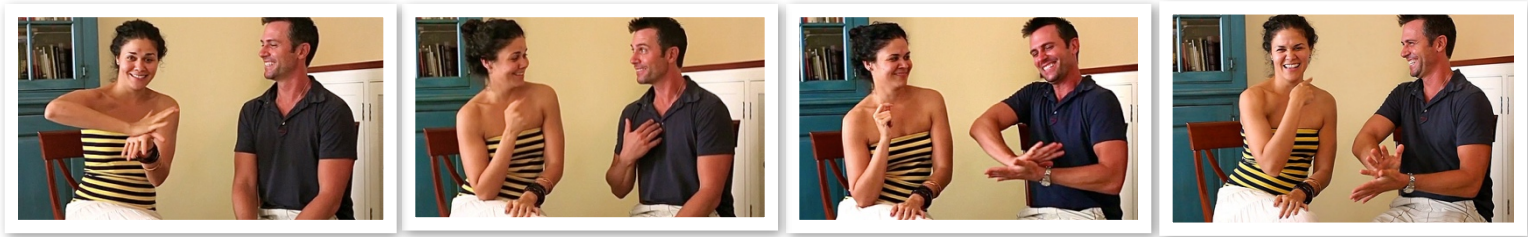
## Synopsis

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 Beast, the embodiment of the demons that have kept him from love itself.

As Will's relationship with Claire grows more serious, so does 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 beast and claim a life he'd only imagine





## Cast

4 Males; 3 Females.

### Males:

- (1) Middle aged, Hearing, Bari-Tenor
- (1) Middle aged, Hearing, Bari-Tenor
- (1) Middle aged, Deaf, HoH, CODA preferred, ASL proficient, vocal range n/a
- (1) Middle aged, Hearing, Baritone, ASL proficient.

### Females

- (1) Middle aged, Deaf, HoH, CODA preferred, ASL proficient, vocal range, n/a
- (1) Plays 11-14, Hearing, CODA preferred, ASL proficient, vocal range: Belt.
- (1) Middle aged, Soprano belt

## Characters

**Will.** Middle aged. Hearing. Writer/illustrator of a successful comic graphic novel series for middle-grade students. Emotionally shutdown 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 in the images he draws. Bari-Tenor.

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

**Claire.** Middle aged. Deaf. An independent, single mother. A dancer and art teacher. Radiant. Intuitive. Fiercely independent. Has built a life with her daughter Tessa, and an extended family that includes her brother Casey, and his husband Neil. ASL fluent. Voice N/A.

**Tessa.** Age 11-14. 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.** Middle aged. Hearing. Will's sassy agent and former lover. Soprano/belt.

**Casey.** Middle aged. 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.** Middle aged. Hearing. Casey's husband and business partner. Warm. Charming. Level-headed. Dotes on Tessa and Casey. ASL fluent. Baritone/Bari-tenor.

## American Sign Language

The seeds of this cross-cultural, bi-lingual musical were planted many years ago when I taught at the American School for the Deaf (ASD) in West Hartford, Connecticut. There, my students taught me about Deaf culture and American Sign Language, while I taught them English and Art.

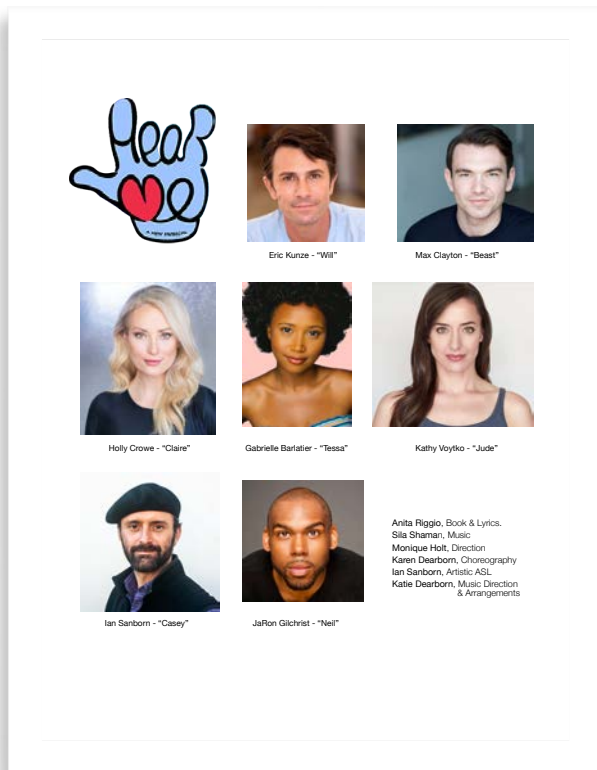
My first experience at ASD was only to fulfill a requirement for an education course in my senior year at the University of Hartford. As a volunteer, I was fortunate to be partnered with a hearing CODA, whose sign language was mesmerizing.

In Tomie's reading class, I directed a play with 8th grade students who gave me my sign name: a sign using the "A" handshape that is the same sign as "theatre." Prescient, huh? I have very fond memories of producing and directing an ASL holiday music concert that we toured to public schools in West Hartford. These experiences and others cemented my life-long interest in the Deaf community and in ASL.

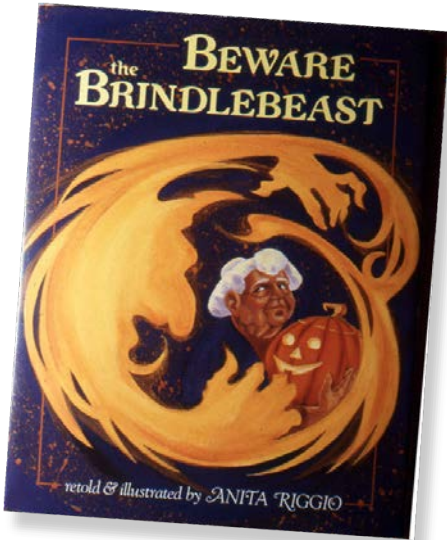
In 2006, during a twenty year career writing and illustrating children's books, I was commissioned by the National Theatre of the Deaf to adapt to a play, my picture book, perennial Halloween favorite Beware the Brindlebeast for NTD's touring company. "Beware the Brindlebeast and

Other Stories" toured nationwide for 70 performances in 2007-2008 during NTD's 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary season, featuring brilliant, young actor Ian Sanborn in the role as the "Brindlebeast."

That collaboration with NTD planted the seed for HEAR ME. Now, years later, the circle is complete: I'm thrilled to welcome Ian Sanborn to the Creative Team as DASL, and to the HEAR ME cast as "Casey" and ASL Captain.



## From the Writer



Like “Will” in *Hear Me*, I have had a successful career as a writer and illustrator of books for young readers—and have faced down a demon or two.

On the surface, picture books and musicals would seem to have little in common, yet in applying what I know about the former to what I’ve learned about the latter, I realize there are similarities. For starters, entire worlds are created in both art forms.

In the best picture books, much like the book of a musical, the story is grounded in a solid structure, and is revealed in economic language through a series of actions undertaken by the main character.

The illustrations in a picture book, like lyrics, do more than embellish the story; both reveal character, and move the plot forward.

The plot of *Hear Me* is, in fact, adjacent to the plot of my picture book, *Beware the Brindlebeast* published in 1994. And the theme of both works is the same: Everyone has a personal demon to confront, and the skill and success of that confrontation can ultimately define the quality of a person's life.

- Anita Riggio, Creator, Writer, Lyricist







## From the Composer

This multi-layered work has a chamber score that draws from both classical and modern forms of musical theater. As in recent Tony-winning musicals, *COME FROM AWAY*, *NEXT TO NORMAL*, *ONCE*, and *THE BAND'S VISIT*, the score has a distinctive and contemporary voice.

The sound of *HEAR ME* is intimate yet intense. Alternately lyrical and percussive, the music juxtaposes emotionally charged melodies and subtly complex harmonies, rhythms and vibrations 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, ASL, VGC (Visual Gestural Communication), and dance rather than spoken lyrics.

The orchestration is not generic, the specific range and timbre of each instrument is carefully chosen and closely associated with the character it represents.

Music Director/Arranger Katie Coleman came on board in 2023 to finalize and arrange the score.

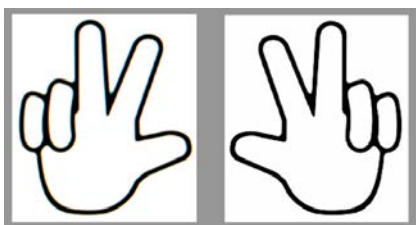
Like *COME FROM AWAY*, *NEXT TO NORMAL*, *ONCE*, and *THE BAND'S VISIT*, *HEAR ME* is a boundary-breaking, intimate story that is brought to life by a small cast and an ensemble of onstage musicians.

- Sila Shaman, Composer

## From the Director

The title of the musical HEAR ME is oxymoronic, and a beautiful example of a perplexing idiom that is so ingrained in all of us. Deaf people like me still use this idiom that doesn't apply to us at all. And yet we allow audism from hearing people, from family, educators, and employers to colonize our way of thinking. This is a metaphor for the superego... Difficult to wean off from super-ego, which keeps telling one of one's self-worth since Aristotle's time. That is a beast in itself.

To address the oxymoron of the title, the sign for "HEAR ME" in ASL becomes a "3" handshape - [thumb, index, and middle fingers with ring and pinkie fingers closed.]



It conveys 3 different meanings in one:

1) hear me "3" + "aurally" - both hands "3" thumbs touch the ears, index, and middle fingers wriggle as an antenna receiving the sound.

2) hear me "3" + "visually" - both hands "3" touch the bottom of the eyes, index, and middle fingers wriggle to receive the visual cues.

3) demon "3" + "horns" - both hands "3" touch the top of the temple, index, and middle fingers wriggle represent the beast and its super-ego.

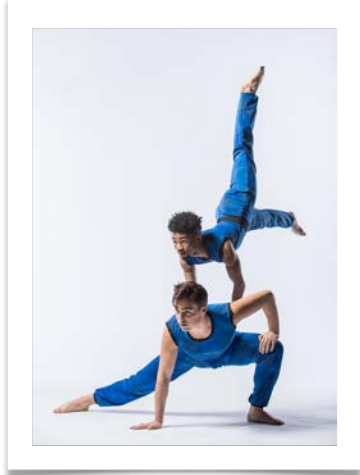
I want to direct this musical. Why? There are plays about universal love packed with tensions due to different backgrounds: religions, age, gender, class, status, education, and even politics.

Lately, we see more of "intersectional" love and discuss their interwoven struggle due to being biracial, bilingual, bicultural, and such. But we have not seen enough protagonists focusing on the battle between super-ego and self-worth. Why should anyone deserve love from "others"?

This issue is not new but still fresh. This battle affects the people around this person. The struggle between the super-ego and self-worth is real and universal.

Now we, as a creative team, want to present this in a different frame, using our identity: Deaf and hearing, our experience: love language, our world: communities and interests, and our languages: spoken English and signed ASL in a new musical that the public at any age can relate to. Music bridges both aural and visual experiences together. And yet brings a new tale in a different light.

- Monique Holt, Director



## From the Choreographer

The use of ASL, a physical, tactile language, creates endless possibilities for choreography of original movement and dance that incorporates ASL and VGC (Visual Gestural Communication).

As a late-deafened professional choreographer, teacher, and longtime chairperson of the Dance department at Muhlenberg College in Pennsylvania, I'm particularly excited about working on this unique and beautiful new musical that includes hearing and Deaf performers.

- Karen Dearborn, Choreographer





### From the Director of ASL (DASL)

Director of American Sign Language in the world of theatre is very vital because the job is to ensure scripts are translated correctly, and that the actors who are using sign language onstage are clear and easy for the audience to follow.

Sign Language is a rich visual language that should be part of the stage we all share together. Like any written language, theatrical sign language grows from the dynamics of teamwork with the writer, director, and choreographer.

Being a Director of American Sign Language for HEAR ME is a great opportunity for me to contribute to ways for sign language to grow in the world of music as the signing communities are currently starting to show more interest in music.

My goal is to be curious and engaged with hearing and deaf/hard of hearing actors, in the notion of incorporating sign language with music and lyrics, narrative, and dialogue. In doing so, we discover new ideas, new connections, and new ways to feel good about who we are, and what we do.

- Ian Sanborn, DASL



## Audience & Impact



HEAR ME is a visually arresting, sensorily engaging, inherently inclusive, heartfelt musical whose audience is both hearing and Deaf, straight and gay, American and foreign.

This musical offers a realistic representation (insofar as musicals are realistic!) of bi-lingual, bi-cultural relationships between hearing and Deaf people.

The quest of hearing main character “Will” is everyone’s quest: To confront his inner demons in order to love fully and live authentically.

The hearing audience will follow “Will” as he confronts his “Beast” when he falls in love with “Claire,” a radiant Deaf woman, who is a former dancer, a teacher, and the mother of a hearing child “Tessa.”

Deaf audience will recognize themselves in “Claire,” and her Deaf brother “Casey,” who, with his hearing husband “Neil,” owns and operated the Sign In Café and Bookstore , where most of the action of the story takes place.

As a CODA (Child of Deaf Adult), sweet, smart, sassy, eleven year-old “Tessa” will steal the hearts of Deaf and hearing audience members alike.

### Response to HEAR ME

TRU New Musical Reading Series, Baruch Performing Arts Center, January 20, 2014.

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

- Cheryl Wiesenfeld, Producer  
GERSHWIN’S PORGY & BESS, ROCKY

“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

## Creative Team



**Anita Riggio, Creator, Librettist, Lyricist** began to write an original musical in 2009 that incorporated her experiences in the Deaf community, her experiences as a reasonably successful writer & illustrator of children’s books, as well as her experiences as a perfectly flawed human. She established Fat Chance Production Group, LLC that same year, and as she was writing, began to assemble creative team, and the extraordinarily talented and committed cast of HEAR ME—and she has never looked back.

During a twenty-year career as a writer & illustrator, Anita presented her work at conferences of the International Reading Association, American Library Association, National Council of Teachers of English, state organizations of Reading teachers, as well as many schools and colleges. She served as the regional director of the New England Society of Children’s Book Writers & Illustrators for five years, producing large conferences, as well as small workshops.

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

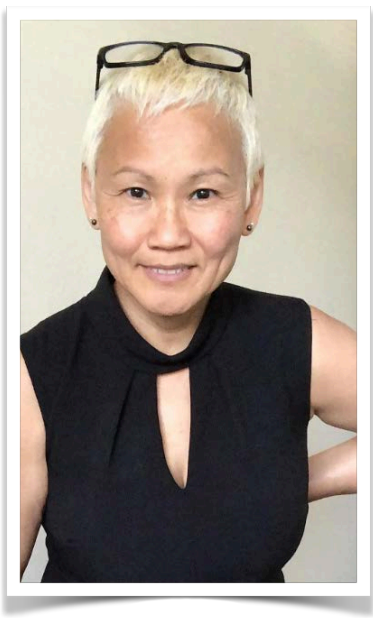
Anita writes and makes art from her home studio in Connecticut, and occasionally presents writing and creativity workshops. Pronouns: she/her/hers. [www.anitariggio.com](http://www.anitariggio.com).

**Sila 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. As a jazz pianist and composer she has released multiple recordings on SteepleChase and Louie Records including “A New Abode,” an album-of-the-week pick by NPR and Brief West Coast Tour, listed as one of the top releases of 2020 by All About Jazz.

Some of her recent projects include the film Transmission, a visual and aural examination of the COVID-19 pandemic through collected audio compositions, improvisation and narration; original score for limited podcast series “Playing Anne Frank” which examines the theatrical and cinematic life of the Anne Frank’s diary and the theme music for “Choice Words with Samantha Bee” podcast. Originally from Turkey she currently lives and works in New York City. Pronouns: she/her/hers. [www.silashaman.com](http://www.silashaman.com)





Monique “MoMo” Holt, Director is a performer, director, and storyteller who adores good stories in print or in performance. Her parents never read-signed bedtime stories, so her first experience of being read-signed a story was as an adult— and it was the complete novel “The Three Musketeers.” She believes no one is too old or too young to appreciate literature in this manner, whether they are children's stories, Shakespeare, or Asian Folklore.

MoMo’s specialty is translating and performing Shakespeare, especially his Sonnets, in American Sign Language. She is a member of AEA, SAG, and AFTRA. She also works as a Deaf Interpreter working with Deaf-Blind, Close-Vision, and non-Deaf/non-English-speaking clients.

As a performer, MoMo was recently seen as “Duchess of York” in RICHARD III on PBS Great Performances from the Public Theater’s Delacorte Theater in NYC. She recently directed IN THE EYES OF A DEAF CHILD at the Kennedy Center, and is currently directing NOT ANOTHER DEAF STORY. Her play PLEASE UNtranslate ME was produced at IRT Theater in NYC. Pronouns: she/her/hers.

Karen Dearborn, Choreographer is the founder and Director of Dance for Muhlenberg College. She has choreographed more than 80 works in concert dance, theatre, and musical theatre, including National Tours of the Tony Award-winning National Theatre of the Deaf and Equity theatre companies.

As a dancer, she performed professionally for 12 years in concert dance and musical theatre productions. Her research interests include performance studies, disability studies, and dance pedagogy, and her writing has been published in the *Journal of Dance Education* and the book *Performing Magic on the Western Stage*.

She has presented papers at numerous conferences including National Dance Educators Organization (NDEO), Congress on Research in Dance, and the National Dance Association. Currently she is Treasurer of the American College Dance Association (ACDA), a member of CORPS de Ballet International, NDEO, Society of Dance History Scholars and AEA. Distinguished teaching awards include the Limback and the Spira. Pronouns: she/her/hers.



Ian Sanborn, DASL hails from New Hampshire. He is well known for some of his works such as “Caterpillar” and “Tick Tock” that can be viewed on YouTube. His work has been used worldwide at schools and colleges for study and inspiration. He was featured with Convo and Sorenson video relay services for commercial and storyteller of the year. Ian enjoys many outdoor activities such as fly fishing, hiking, canoeing, and loves photography, filming, and painting. Also, storytelling and poems are other interests that he continues to create and share with the communities. Pronouns: he/him/his. <https://www.youtube.com/c/IanSanborn>

## Links & Contact

### Video Clips

<https://vimeo.com/user19808541>

### Website

<https://www.hearmemusical.com>

### Facebook:

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

### Instagram

<https://www.instagram.com/hearmemusical/>

### Contact

[info@hearmemusical.com](mailto:info@hearmemusical.com)

### Support ❤️

<https://fundraising.fracturedatlas.org/hear-me-musical>





**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