

Dramatic ENTRANCE

Native playwrights project makes history, looks to future

BY TEEKA A. BALLAS
FOR FIRST ALASKANS

Last November, in a modest way, history was made in Anchorage. The first Alaska Native Playwrights Project was completed; nine primarily first-time playwrights came together to have their plays read before an audience by seasoned actors.

“The exciting thing for us was having Jean Bruce Scott come up,” says project director Ed Bourgeois. Bruce Scott is the producing artistic director and co-creator of “Native Voices at Autry.” Located in Los Angeles, Autry is an intercultural history center dedicated to exploring and sharing the stories of all the peoples of the American West. “It’s the first time in history, as far as Jean can tell, that there’s been such a movement in Native playwrights.”



Cast members of Susie Silook's "Ungjipamsuuka" discuss a question from the audience following the play's November reading. ED BOURGEOIS / COURTESY PHOTOS



ABOVE: **Professor Rob Caisley** instructs new playwrights during a workshop. BELOW: **Readings during November** resonated with Native and non-Native audiences. ED BOURGEOIS / COURTESY PHOTOS

In January 2010, of the 23 applicants, 10 soon-to-be-playwrights were chosen to participate in the project (only nine completed the process). From all over the state (one currently resides in Oregon), these Alaska Natives were flown to Anchorage to participate in a weeklong playwrights boot camp.

“We were looking for applicants who had the voice of a writer – some maturity ... a compelling idea and a compelling reason for selecting them,” says Bourgeois, who is also the director of public programs at Alaska Native Heritage Museum.

Bourgeois says the proposed plays ran the gamut. “Some were comedies, others were dramas – they really looked at some of the crosses Native people have to carry.”

The selection committee hailed from all over the country and was comprised of two theater directors, two Alaska Native actors/playwrights, one conference coordinator and one stage director. Bruce Scott and Robert Caisley, the head of the dramatic writing program and associate professor of theater at



Idaho University, both acted as lead teaching artists for the project.

Each writer was paired with one of five mentors. The mentors included experienced and well-known playwrights, dramatists and storytellers Diane Glancy (Cherokee), Jack Dalton (Yup'ik), Terry Gomez (Comanche), Joy Harjo (Mvskoke), and Diane Benson (Tlingit).

“I was afforded a valuable crash course in playwriting,” says project participant Susie Silook (St. Lawrence Island Yupik) of her mentor Terry Gomez. “She taught me how to break up dialogue to make it more natural ... I loved it and plan to keep writing plays.”

That sentiment rings true for all of the participants. What seems to have really sealed the deal was the week they spent together in November. After plugging away at their plays for nearly 11 months, with monthly teleconferences and regular e-mails with their mentors, the playwrights came together to hear each other's work read aloud by professional actors before an audience at the Cyrano's Off-Center Playhouse in Anchorage. After each

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– Lisa Marie Heitman-Bruce (Sugpiaq)

play, audience members provided feedback.

“It was an honor to have people volunteer to read our plays,” says Lisa Marie Heitman-Bruce (Sugpiaq). “The workshop was very emotional. There was a lot of crying. You realize how much Native cultures have suffered – how long we've stayed quiet about it.”

All of the playwrights primarily drew from their own lives or from their elders and family members. They spoke of triumphs and hardships, racism and the coming together of all peoples.

“I grew a lot in that one week,” says Heitman-Bruce. “And for that reason, I really think they should continue on with this.”

The playwrights project was completely funded by a \$75,000 grant from the Ford Foundation. Bourgeois said the project was a great success, and he hopes they can secure the funding to make it an annual event.

All nine of the playwrights were invited to submit their plays to the “Native Voices at the Autry,” a program devoted to every year developing and producing new works for the stage by Native American playwrights from around the country. ■

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A workshop takes place in the qargi at the Inupiak village site of the Alaska Native Heritage Center.

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PHILLIP JOHN CHARETTE

Yup'ik

Mentor: Diane Benson

“Threads”

Camai, Denali, L'atseen and the Raven embark on a journey through time to reclaim spirits forcibly taken, binding their strength and courage together to fulfill a prophesy in a world on the brink of change.

“With this play I was able to look back in time and forward. It allowed me to connect with traditional and contemporary – to fuse it together,” says artist and musician Phillip. “It was on my bucket list – a novel is next!”



MARTHA JANE JACK

Yup'ik

Mentor: Diane Glancy

“A Circle of Wolves”

In Southwestern Alaska's distant past, glimpse the lives of a Yup'ik family group in a natural world before it was destroyed by modern forces, and feel what it is like to sit around a fire listening to stories of “things that really happened.”

“I wrote this play in two weeks. I started writing, with only one story. As I wrote, things came to me I hadn't thought of in years – ancient stories,” says Martha, whose speech before the Senate Subcommittee on Interior and Insular Affairs regarding the Alaska Native Land Claims Settlement Act was published in the book, “Famous American Speeches: 1969-1970.”



HOLLY STANTON

Yup'ik Athabascan

Mentor: Terry Gomez

“Cikiuteklluku (Giving Something Away)”

Liza Toopetluk, a young girl from rural Alaska faced with an unwanted pregnancy, must choose between giving her baby to family members – and restricting her child to a life in the village, a life she herself is trying to escape – or adopting her baby to a Caucasian family, which may secure more opportunity for the child, but will surely result in “giving away” the values and lifestyle of her Yup'ik culture.

“I didn't know anything about plays,” says Holly, who has worked as an obstetric nurse for the Yukon Kuskokwim Delta Hospital since 2004. “This process really helped me to put it all together. It was like having a radio in my head.”



JOAN KANE

Inupiaq

Mentor: Joy Harjo

“The Estranged”

A King Island Inupiaq family alienated from both places and each other struggle toward reconciliation between an unexpected and a fortuitous birth.

“This was really great because of the other playwrights. It was an opportunity to write with other Native people – the chance to learn from everybody,” says Joan, a published novelist and poet. “This was a really unique experience. Our mentors gave a lot. It's monumental.”



LUCAS ROWLEY

Inupiaq

Mentor: Jack Dalton

“William, Inc.”

William, a therapist in small town Alaska, struggles with daily life, is harassed by self-created archetypes, and experiences a few surprises from the board after creating a one-man Native corporation in his head.

“I had ideas that snowballed,” says Lucas, an artist and writer who works in psychological theater and Native ways of healing. “My mentor, Jack Dalton, his experiences and his stories were gems. He was really blunt. When [the writing process got hard] he said, ‘Sometimes it's painful! And he was right. His advice was invaluable.’”



LISA MARIE HEITMAN-BRUCE

Supiaq

Mentor: Diane Benson

“Imamsuat : People of the Sea”

A young Alutiiq man leaves Alaska to escape racism he's afraid to confront, only to return as a psychiatrist forced to speak up to save the suicidal and at-risk youths in his own tribe.

“This taught me the importance of speaking up,” says Lisa, who works as a marketing director and is the co-founder of the Kodiak Summer Science and Salmon Camp out of Kodiak. “I didn't understand the importance of that until my character came to life on the page.”



KAVELINA TORRES

Yup'ik, Inupiaq, Athabascan

Mentor: Diane Glancy

“The Trail Home”

Irenea, a mother and aunt, loses her job and as a consequence brings the children she cares for back to the Bush to live in peace while an overzealous, relentless social worker pursues Irenea and her family.

“I learned from this experience, that completion is good thing!” says Kavelina, who is currently working on an interdisciplinary degree in Yup'ik filmmaking. “And I love the fact that there are all these people – these Alaska Native people expressing themselves – writing about how they're seeing the world.”



MAUREEN MAYO

Athabascan

Mentor: Jack Dalton

“Raina's Journey”

A contemporary tale of a young Native woman living on the edge who has begun to experience the negative impact of alcohol in her life, and who, with the help of a mischievous yet wise “Spirit Boy,” not only finds guidance and her voice, but also re-discovers the matriarchal love found within her culture.

“[Playwrighting] was so new to me. This has opened me up to theater as a great form of entertainment, and a great form of expression. It's opened up a lot of possibilities,” says Maureen who uses multiple forms of art as a means of expression. “I learned that it's possible to write based on dreams or experience – it was something I wanted to share – a way of giving back to the community or other survivors.”



SUSIE SILOOK

St. Lawrence Island, Yupik

Mentor: Terry Gomez

“Ungipamsuuka: My story”

This is a memoir as drama, and is slated for publication in the Alaska Quarterly Review, Spring 2011 edition.

“[I learned to] focus intently, eliminating all unnecessary narrative and to achieve the sparse nature of the play,” says Susie, whose artwork has been exhibited in prestigious museums and galleries around the world. “This was my first playwrighting workshop, and I loved it and plan to keep writing plays. ... We sure had a great group of mentors and playwrights.”