Stages of Engagement

INDIGENOUS BODIES IN COLONIAL THEATRE TRADITION

Native American Arts Festival Invitational Exhibit

Curated by Shaliyah Ben

June 24-July 20, 2019
Parks Exhibition Center

IdyllwildArts™
NATIVE AMERICAN ARTS FESTIVAL WEEK
Festival week events open to the public - June 23-28, 2019

Per[FORM]ance: Indigenous Theatre & The Stage

SUNDAY, June 23
Welcoming: Mt. Cahuilla Bird Singers
6:30pm: Performance, “Brother Sun, Sister Moon” by Nunamta Yup’ik Eskimo Singers and Dancers. (IAF Theatre)

MONDAY, June 24
7pm: Gallery Talk - Guest artists, Asa Benally (Diné/Tsalagi) and Chuna McIntyre (Yup’ik) (Parks Exhibition Center)
8pm: Opening Reception - “Stages of Engagement: Indigenous Bodies in Colonial Theatre Tradition,” Native American Arts Festival Invitational Exhibition

TUESDAY, June 25
12-1pm: Kabotie Lecture Series – “Indigenous Theatre: Context and Content,” Bethany Hughes, Ph.D., (Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma) Assistant Professor of Native American Studies in the Department of American Culture at the University of Michigan. (Krone Library)

WEDNESDAY, June 26
12-1pm: Kabotie Lecture Series – “Beyond Decolonizing: Indigenizing American Theatre,” Larissa FastHorse (Sicangu Lakota Nation), award-winning playwright and educator. (Krone Library)
6-8pm: Meet & Greet with Fairly Traceable cast, readings and live jazz (Middle Ridge Winery, 54301 North Circle Dr, Idyllwild)

THURSDAY, June 27
12-1pm: Kabotie Lecture Series – “Indigenous Shakespeare,” Madeline Sayet (Mohegan), award-winning director, writer, actor and educator. (Krone Library)
7pm: Film Night (Krone Library)

FRIDAY, June 28
7pm: Performance, Fairly Traceable, a staged reading by playwright Mary Kathryn Nagle (Cherokee) in partnership with Native Voices at the Autry. (IAF Theatre)
CURATOR’S STATEMENT

Stages of Engagement: Indigenous bodies in Colonial Theatre Tradition

In 1606, the first scripted play in North America was performed in Canada (or, as colonists would call it at the time, New France). The play is Lescarbot’s Le Théâtre de Neptune, an adapted European oceanic performance (traditionally performed at court). The play demonstrated to a returning French leader that the settlement and colonial undertaking was indeed a praiseworthy business and also instructed the Indigenous Mi’kmaq performers and viewers in how to act like dutiful “sauvages.” The play was a collection of speeches given by Mi’kmaq chiefs who pledged allegiance to the French king. After their allegiance was offered up, Neptune himself organized a celebratory feast. Early subjugation of Indigenous people on the European stage did not end there. As years would pass, early American stages aided American efforts to wield power and justify indignities by manipulating public consciousness and opinion in the same way that the internet, film, television, radio and other media do today. It was on these stages where allowances for the poor treatment and erasure of Indigenous people took center stage. Through an early and ongoing practice of misrepresentation, audiences were introduced to Indigenous people as violent, ignorant savages to be conquered and killed, to enslave at will, hypersexualized and eroticized bodies wrought with tantalizing spectacle for all, property to be owned and discarded.

While long debate can swirl around about how “theatre got it wrong” in regard to portrayals of Indigenous populations, the stages of engagement have changed before our eyes in powerful ways that shape a more diverse and inclusive environment both on and off the stage. Considering perhaps for the first time who is behind the scenes, one of the greatest accomplishments made thus far is that much of this country’s theatrical talent happens to be Indigenous. Successes are realized based on raw talent and not glorification and idolization of Indigeneity. These contributions in the world of theatre go beyond what the eye can see on the stage. This shift is realized by the playwright, who writes narratives about the world we live in today, actively creating spaces by Indigenizing theatre space. Contributions are also made by the director, who reimagines theatrical classics to give voice to those who have been silenced. Behind the scenes, costume and set designers literally reimagine new worlds.
through Indigenous lenses. In their purest form, contributions are also realized by elders and youth who educate the world and their home communities while honoring and assuring ancestors that they, in fact, still exist in this beautiful cosmos created for all people.

This exhibition examines stories of two Indigenous men, Asa Benally and Chuna McIntyre, who through the act of performance, and storytelling, expand on our understood notions of what theatre is. Their bodies of work have taken them around the world from New York City all the way to small Arctic villages in Alaska. Woven into their stories is a tribute to the women who have played a central role in their respective careers. Through this review we will demonstrate that the act of expression, as an art form, is alive, well and thriving in Indigenous communities, where we are finally curating our own stories that accurately reflect our proper experiences as modern individuals.

- Shaliyah Ben, Curator

Shaliyah Ben is the Native American Arts Program Coordinator for Idyllwild Arts Academy and Summer Program. Prior to joining Idyllwild Arts, she served in numerous positions at The Heard Museum (Phoenix, AZ) for over 20 years, including as the Director of Public Programming. Shaliyah is a lecturer, educator and promoter of American Indian arts and culture and originally hails from the Navajo Nation; she was born in Shiprock, New Mexico where her family still practices traditional farming practices in the San Juan River Valley.

Original costume designs by Asa Benally (Diné) for the theatrical production, Whale Song, written by Cathy Tagnak Rexford (Iñupiaq)
Photo credit: Julie York Coppens

Nunamta Eskimo dance group performs in full Yup’ik traditional regalia lead by performer and choreographer, Chuna McIntyre.
Photo credit: Greg Lincoln
ASA BENALLY
Diné (Navajo)/Tsalagi (Cherokee), b. 1983

Original costume designs for original theatrical performance, Whale Song, written by Cathy Tagnak Rexford (Inupiaq) (2019).
Cotton, wool, linen
Perseverance Theater, Juneau, Alaska
ARTIST STATEMENT

Storytelling and texture have always been important to me in presenting a story. Even if the fabric of a costume is seemingly simple, upon closer observation you see that there is texture and depth in the weave and in the details. I think texture can take many shapes. There is physical texture, consisting of fabric manipulation or surface details on a costume. Then there is emotional texture. For me emotional texture informs what the physical texture will entail. It’s about forming nuanced connections between those two factors to create story and character within the theater.

BIOGRAPHY

Asa Benally was raised on the Navajo Nation in northern Arizona. His grandmother, a traditional Navajo weaver, and his father, a silversmith, fostered his love and appreciation for art and design. Asa is a graduate of Idyllwild Arts Academy who went on to achieve his BFA at the prestigious Parsons School of Design in New York City and his MFA in costume design at Yale University School of Drama in 2016. His design aesthetic is derived from an interest in history and strong individuals. He lives and works in New York City. Credits include Coriolanus and The Seagull (Yale School of Drama); Cymbeline (Yale Repertory Theatre); Whale Song (Perseverance Theatre); The Winter’s Tale; Tricks the Devil Taught Me (Minetta Lane Theatre); A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Measure for Measure (Frog and Peach Theatre Company); Far Away, Platonov (Columbia University); The Crazy Shepherds of Rebellion, The Secretaries, Roberto Zucco, Trouble in Tahiti (Yale Cabaret); Father Comes Home… (Juilliard); Peer Gynt, Big Love (Amherst College); The Brobot Johnson Experience (The Bushwick Starr); She Loves Me, The Saringa Tree (Creede Repertory Theatre).

AsaBenally.com
ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE
Dancing in Yup’ik culture shares stories as well as asks for well-being and gifts from nature. The dances demonstrate the understanding that everything in the environment, animals, people and even rocks and dust have an awareness or Yua.

Chuna McIntyre performs traditional Yup’ik dance and song accompanied by percussion on a hand drum. Adorned with traditional garments and accoutrements, Chuna uses masks and traditional objects to illuminate the customs of his ancestors. The performance begins with an “Entrance Welcome Song” as Chuna enters the space singing. A singer and drummer accompanies Chuna for the entrance. He formally addresses the audience in an ancient ritual of welcome, releasing long streamers made out of freeze-dried seal gut. Chuna then tells the Yup’ik story of Brother Sun, Sister Moon and performs the dance using two dance fans with tiny masks representing the sun and moon. The story tells about a time when the world was all in darkness and older brother rose into the sky and became the sun. Little sister, crying, ran after her brother and also went up into the sky, becoming the moon. The performance culminates with the poetic Yup’ik Moon Song.

Nighttime has come to me, darkness has come to me, 
but the moon came to me and made me happy. 
My people who look at me, my ancestors back there who look back to me, 
everyone is in the moon and they swing back and forth and they are indeed happy.

-Chuna McIntyre

BIOGRAPHY
Chuna McIntyre (Yup’ik), was born and raised in the tiny village of Eek, Alaska, on the shores of the Bering Sea. It was there Chuna learned the ancient traditions – the dances, songs and stories of his Eskimo ancestors. He first became aware that dancing was part of his culture from the stories his grandmother told him in which animals sang and danced. When Chuna was a young boy, she taught him his first dance, the Arctic Squirrel Dance. Singing and dancing was an integral part of Chuna’s village life when he was growing up. His grandmother carried the tribe’s old knowledge through the stories, dances and songs. It was a natural transition that she passed these traditions on to her grandson.
Chuna is now the founder and director of Nunamta (“Of Our Land”) Yup’ik Eskimo Dancers, a company which has traveled the world sharing Alaska’s Indigenous cultural heritage. Chuna’s performing has taken him far from Eek: to the Smithsonian, the Kennedy Center, France, Russia, New Zealand and Siberia. Chuna is as well known as a graphic artist and craftsman as he is a musician and dancer. He works in many types of media, and has been exhibited in public buildings throughout Alaska and across the continent. Chuna has crafted the cultural garments and accouterments he wears using traditional materials and designs he learned from the elders of his culture and from historic collections.

**DANCE FANS**

Why do Yup’ik hold fans when they dance?

According to Chuna McIntyre (Yup’ik) “Dance fans are used in dance to beautify oneself. You cannot present yourself to the spirit world empty-handed! You need to hold something beautiful in their (the ancestors) presence. One must be well dressed and proud of their representation to make the ancestors happy, to dress well and use the proper accoutrements pleases the ancestors”.

Both men and women have their own special kind of dance fan. Men’s dance fans are made of circular wooden rings. The hoop represents consciousness, the five feathers of a men’s dance fan represent our five digits and the three beads is the trinity, which is all of us. A women’s dance fan is also made of wood but has fine caribou whiskers and feathers that fan out from the fan.
SPECIAL THANKS TO

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Joe Baker (Delaware) and Gerald Clarke, Jr. (Cahuilla)

Director of Adult Arts Center & Native American Arts
Heather Companiott

Native American Arts Coordinator / Curator
Shaliyah Ben

Chuna McIntyre
Loan of personal collection

Exhibition Design
Cristie Scott, Parks Exhibition Center Manager
Brooke Brasile, Gallery Assistant
Eric Bulrice, Bailey Frees and Teagan Hammel, Lighting Design

Perseverance Theatre
Loan of Asa Benally costume designs from Whale Song

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