

## NATIVE THEATRE SCHOOL

### **Purpose:**

The focus of the Native Theatre School is on the student in the community. By providing theatrical training in a Native context and encouraging students to create plays based on their own understanding of their traditions and cultures, it provides the technical and artistic background necessary for a career in the theatre and also nurtures self confidence, self expression and cultural identity.

### **Objectives:**

It is the objective of the Native Theatre School to produce graduates who have personal and technical skills necessary for professional participation in the performing arts. NTS graduates also have been given the opportunity through the art of theatre to explore and strengthen their identities as Native Canadians. NTS graduates are practitioners of this contemporary incarnation of the oral tradition called Native Theatre.

### **Description:**

The Native Theatre School coordinates two interactive programs. The Core Program provides intensive workshop instruction in theatre skills. The Community Tour Program provides access to theatre for Native audiences with an emphasis on communities outside urban centres as well as practical experience for students in the Core Program.

### Background

#### A Historical Perspective

Seventeen years ago when Native Theatre School was first formed, Native artists - visual, theatre, film and literary were not recognized by "mainstream" culture. There were no Native playwrights, theatre companies, filmmakers - distinctly recognized for producing works that gave voice to First Nations concerns and expressed a culture that is 30,000 years old on this continent and has survived 500 years of devastation almost annihilation. Native actors worked in isolation and were reduced to performing roles of "Tonto" and various other stereotyped roles that perpetuated an image held by dominant culture of either the noble savage or the drunken Indian.

In 1991, professional Native theatres have emerged across the country, from Spirit Song in Vancouver - Tukwakin Theatre in Edmonton, De-Ba-Jeh-Ma-Jig in Manitoulin, and Native Earth Performing Arts Inc. in Toronto. Numerous other Theatre Companies are beginning in smaller communities and reserves across the country. Native writers, Tomson Highway, Daniel David Moses and Maria Campbell, have received national and international acclaim, and awards and Native Earth Performing Arts Inc., recently opened an award winning play, "Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing" at the Royal Alexandra Theatre in Toronto, and has been invited to tour to England, Germany and the Soviet Union. Three times in the last ten years three Native plays have won the Chalmers Award and/or the Dora Mavor Moore awards for "Best Play", and twice two Native Canadian actors have been nominated for Academy Awards.

### The Vision

Twenty years ago, in 1972, the Association for Native Development in the Performing and Visual Arts was formed under the Executive Directorship of Cree Elder James Buller to support the survival, development and maintenance of Native culture through traditional and contemporary arts. It was the first of its kind.

In 1974, under the vision of James Buller, Native Theatre School was formed, Jim believed that if a National school or Centre was formed for the Development of Native Theatre Artists whereby young theatre artists from across the country were brought together and were given strong cultural training, combined with total theatre training, that within twenty years this country would begin to experience an explosion whereby Native Theatre, Native playwrights and Native actors would spring up and make their voices heard.

In less than twenty years we are experiencing the realization of that vision, and all of the Native Theatres that have emerged across the country were founded by Native Theatre School graduates.

In 1983, Native Earth Performing Arts inc. was formed by a group who had been working and meeting through ANDPVA.

We believe that the Native Theatre School has proven itself successful as a National Centre for the Development of Native Theatre and Native Theatre Artists. It has produced theatre that is rooted in the Culture, is of high quality and its Theatre and Artists are innovative and exciting and have made a strong impact on the Canadian Theatre scene.

The Present

We are concerned with the continued and future development of Native Theatre Artists and with the changing and expanded needs of Native Theatre.

The first generation of Native Theatre artists has emerged for this present time and we must now concern ourselves with the survival, development, and maintenance of the next generation.

We have noted that dominant culture training of Theatre Artists is not serving Native Theatre or the development of Native Theatre Artists nationwide and that only a handful of Native Theatre Artists survive a theatre training program, most drop out before the first year of a training program, and often feeling suicidal. And yet, these "drop-outs" are some of our most talented Native Theatre Artists, who have trained at Native Theatre School and go on to work successfully in Native Theatre and films and receive National acclaim.

With the National success of Native Theatre, we find ourselves with more jobs available for Native Theatre artists than we have Artists trained. At present, Theatre Artists are being sent on tours, and are performing in major regional Theatres with no prior training. They are going on talent alone, which is very hard on them, and is not healthy for the future development of Native Theatre.

Most of these Theatre Artists on Tour and those performing in regional theatres have applied for Theatre School this year.

We believe that the future development of Native Theatre is inextricably tied to the development of our Theatre Artists and that at the core of our success are our cultural programs.