

Community brings Secwepemc stories to life



By Vernon Morning Star

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A young boy looks up to the elderly woman sitting beside him as she works a whittling knife over strips of cedar bark. Applying the jagged pieces to a cardboard tube, she holds up her work for the boy and myself to take a closer look.

"It's going to be full with arrows when I'm done," she says, smiling.

Marie Thomas is just one of the many volunteers using her hands and knowledge of working with the land to help make the props, masks and costumes for a community play about to be staged at the Splatstsin Tsm7aksaltn Teaching Centre just north of Enderby.



In other parts of the centre, which acts as a day care and education centre during other times of the year, visitors and residents are learning the traditional language, music, dance and stories of the Secwepemc (Shuswap) people that will be part of the play *Tuwitames* (pronounced too-weet-a-miss, which means he/she is growing up.) A presentation of Grindrod's Runaway Moon Theatre and the Splatstsin Language and Culture Program, the play goes from ancient times to the present day, and is intertwined with a personal story of a young man trying to find his roots.

"I think the time is right for our stories to be told and this is part of the process to make it happen," said Rosalind Williams, a Splatstsin historian and coordinator of the language program at the Splatstsin Tsm7aksaltn Teaching Centre.



Williams, who has been speaking with Splatstsin elders and documenting stories, history and tradition for more than 30 years, has written the script with Runaway Moon's artistic director Cathy Stubington and Vancouver writer-director James Fagan Tait.

The three worked together 15 years previous on Enderby's community play, *Not the Way I Heard It*. That play saw more than 300 community members take the downtown streets of Enderby, whereas, approximately 65 people are part of *Tuwitames*.

"It was Cathy who approached me 15 years ago on a play about how Enderby came to be. This time I asked if we could do a play solely on Secwepemc stories. Some of the magic happening with this show is the fact that we are the ones doing it. We're the pens," said Williams, who has been especially happy to see participants as young as four on up to 85 from throughout the Secwepemc community, as well as other residents, be part of the process.

"All these young people are so brave. It's a foreign process for them. For many it's their first experience with the theatre. The depth and the sincerity comes out in their roles. We also have our elders involved and they are so dedicated."

Happy to be back in the community is Tait, who first met Stubington when the two worked on shows at Caravan Farm Theatre in the late-'80s, early-'90s.

"It's been so fun, like summer camp again... We started writing in May. It was discuss, formulate and write, write, write. Rosalind knew what she wanted to say and how she wanted to say it. She guided the uber-shape of it," he said. "This takes the concept of a community play model and puts a spin on it. All models are a little different. You invent the wheel every time. They do the volunteering and we offer the special experience. Together we have the opportunity to create a beautiful play."

Tuwitames follows the main character, Kyle, a young man living in Vancouver who is looking for his birth parents and finds that he is originally from the Splatstsin band. Upon his arrival, he goes on a physical and spiritual journey to rediscover his roots.

The play travels to four different time periods: from the present to ancient times, or pre-pre contact, where the people had both human and animal characteristics such as the coyote (seklep) people.

Through the disguise of an owl, said to carry messages of bad news, usually of death, to relatives and friends of the deceased, the play also travels to the time of the '60s "scoop", when social services pulled kids out of the community and put them in foster care, said Tait, adding Runaway Moon's general manager, Lark Lindholm, is playing the role of the social worker, an owl-like figure.

"You palpably see the difference from this bucolic existence in nature to the heart of the community, the children," he said. "The play is full of mythology, humour and heartbreak. It has everything."

Music is also important in telling the story.

At the centre helping to create and incorporate traditional Secwepemc songs is Renae Morriseau, an actress who starred in the Canadian TV show *North of 60* and who now performs with M'Girl Music, an aboriginal women's music ensemble, which recently went on an international tour.

"I did a Skype session with Rosalind who sang the songs for me," said Morriseau, who has performed traditional Cree, Ojibwa, and Mohawk songs. "There's a certain universal truth about the protection of Indigenous languages and song as a conduit for learning language."

Stubington agrees.

"The more work we put into this, the more depth and meaning there is. We're learning something new and also documenting and revitalizing the language through song. The kids are also learning the language through song," she said.

The wider community can see the spectacle when *Tuwitames* is presented in a field with the forest as a backdrop right outside the Splatstsin Tsm7aksaltn Teaching Centre, located on Canyon Road off Highway 97A, behind the Quilakwa Super Save Gas Station and Store.

The play runs nightly Aug. 6 to 10 at 7:30 p.m. Tickets are \$20/adults, \$10 for youth and seniors and \$5 for children under 12. Call 778-443-4000 or visit www.runawaymoon.org for info.



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