

Exploring the Native American Women Playwrights Archive at Miami University  
By: Alisha Boykin

Miami University Libraries has a large special collections section on the third floor of King Library. Unbeknownst to some students, special collections is home to unique and original writings, photographs, drawings and more. Among these is the NAWPA Collection: the Native American Women Playwrights Archive.

As a theater major, I found these works extremely intriguing and was able to find out more about Native American culture and how it relates to theater. In this article I will explore some of the works that I found in the collection.<sup>1</sup>



Among the hundreds of works in the collection, some caught my eye, including documents on the Spiderwoman Theater and their dispute with Marvel. As some comic book fans may know, Spider-Woman is part of the Marvel franchise, a female spin-off of Spider-Man. But, Spider-Woman is not just your friendly neighborhood supergirl; it is also the name of a Native-American theater troupe.

Founded in 1975 by director Muriel Miguel “Spiderwoman Theater is named after Spiderwoman the goddess of creation of ancient Hopi Indian legend who taught her people the art of weaving” (Kunstler).

In 1980, the women’s theater group was informed that they were not allowed to use the name Spiderwoman because it was trademarked by Marvel. This suit gained a lot of traction in the media, with newspapers questioning the right to the name.

Richard Goldstein took a political stance in his article writing about the actresses’ sexuality: “three members of the Spiderwoman Theater Workshop are lesbians and their work includes overt lesbian content. Did Marvel freak at the implication that Spider Woman could be represented as a Dyke?” Goldstein and other journalists note Marvel’s strained history with the gay community and questions whether this could be an underlying reason for the lawsuit.<sup>2</sup>

Fortunately in the end, Spiderwoman Theater was able to keep their name. As the longest running woman’s performance group in the nation, they have influenced many feminist and Native American performers. The Spiderwoman Theater saw themselves as liberal educators, revealing and celebrating Native-American history and culture.



<sup>1</sup> SPIDER WOMAN PICTURE FROM MARVEL COMIC SPIDERWOMAN THEATER BOX 1

<sup>2</sup> STORYWEAVING SPIDERWOMAN THEATER WORKSHOP AD SPIDERWOMAN THEATER BOX 1

The women's theater troupe often performed comedic routines and ran workshops for the community. This little-talked-about theater troupe has had a huge impact in feminist and theater communities, and the only place I have ever seen them mentioned is in this NAWPA collection.

Not only has the NAWPA collection opened my eyes to a history that has largely been suppressed, but it has also shown me how feminist theater got its start. Through several boxes in the archive you can find partial scripts, advertisements and photographs of the troupe. <sup>3</sup>

Dinner Party

Lisa We need another war. I wouldn't hesitate to send my sons to fight the communists

Muriel It's not Communism that scares me - it's the backlash of the sexual majority

Gloria Military spending is taking money away from food, housing

Muriel Education & health care

Lisa I think a limited nuclear war is winnable

Eva That's right. I'd join the army to get a job I don't care if I get nuclear radiation

Pam Do you go to church? I go to church.

Lisa That's what we need - more morality. All these abortions

Muriel A woman has the right to her own body

Lisa It's murder

Muriel It's murder not to feed them

Lisa You want too much, make it

Gloria Freeze the bombs

Lisa If we want peace, we have to make more bombs

Muriel Reduce now or radioactive later

Eva If they have 25,000 bombs we have to have 35,000 bombs.

Chris They're killing everybody in El Salvador.

Con We have to pocket our back yard

Pam D&K

Lisa Hiroshima / No

<sup>3</sup> EXCERPT FROM ORIGINAL SCRIPT FOR "DINNER PARTY" BY SPIDERWOMAN THEATER BOX 3

The NAWPA collection also includes essays analyzing Native-American culture, how it is perceived in society and the art world. One essay I found particularly thrilling was Jill Dolan's "Advocacy and Activism: Identity, Curriculum, and Theater Studies in the 21st Century".

Dolan says that our version of 'culture wars' centers around what we teach in school. By excluding identities from course topics, then, we allow only the dominant group's (white male) history to be known and understood.

Dolan looks at theater as a way to better integrate the community. For example, in the Miami University theater department, it is important for us to put on works that feature other cultures. Because Miami is a mostly white, upper-class community, Dolan would say diverse works are important to get our community to understand other cultures outside their own. Indeed, for her, this is more important than just putting on popular theater like Shakespeare.

Dolan closes her essay with a powerful statement: "We need to reclaim the terms of the debate, to articulate clearly and passionately how we'll participate in reshaping theatre studies' curriculum to preserve a dynamic interplay among disciplinary knowledge, postmodern understanding of identity studies, interdisciplinary strategies, and the public sphere that gives all of our work meaning" (Dolan)

Reading this work helped me gain a better understanding of how important it is to acknowledge different identities and cultures within our coursework. Something you will learn from reading any of the works in the NAWPA collection is that cultural competency is key. There is so much that is left out of the history books and our coursework that involved other identities outside our own. This collection is a step in the right direction for Miami to shed a light on an aspect of Native American community and provide opportunities for students to learn about histories other than their own.

Miami Universities Steward and Sustain Department of Special Collections can be found on the third floor of King Library open Monday-Friday 8am-5pm. If you are interested in learning more about the NAWPA collection, you can visit its online directory. The specific works I mentioned today are from Dolan, Jill Box 1, Spiderwoman Theater Box 3 Correspondence, Personal Notebooks, Partial Original Scripts and Spiderwoman Theater Box 1 General.