

Agee

The Native American Women Playwright's Archive: Miami University Special Collections

From the theatre to books, to film, the media has been a historically hostile environment for Native Americans. They have been portrayed as barbaric, ignorant and naive savages who are violent by nature and separate from larger society. Such stereotypes have permeated mainstream media for the last 200 years. However, Native American artists have been producing their own pieces that contradict simple stereotypes and give realistic versions of Native American culture and identity. This is true for Muriel, Gloria and Lisa Miguel who produced and performed *Winnetou's Snake Oil Show from Wigwam City* in the 1980s. "It's the culmination of all these feelings of our culture being taken away from us" said the authors about their piece. The sisters wrote the play as a reaction specifically to Indian hobbyism. This was the trend of Non-Indian people dressing up as Native Americans and attending powwows and dances which began in the twentieth century and continues to this day. The play critiques this practice and makes fun of American and German obsession with Native Americans. The troupe spoke directly to Indian hobbyists in their authors note saying, "They suddenly knew more about Indians than the Indian people themselves." With this play and others, the Miguel sisters set out to create art to combat the stereotypes of Native American people that were so popular. Even their own parents earned money by performing traditional dances and snake oil shows because they struggled to make ends meet. The women developed their ideas and founded the Spiderwoman Theater, the first Native American Women's troupe. In addition to excellent performances and captivating plots, the troupe was a champion of feminist ideals. The troupe not only questioned the role of the Native American in society, but also challenged gender roles, discrimination and systemic

poverty. Due to their diligence and excellence, the Spiderwoman Theater Troupe became the country's longest running women's performance group.

Many plays from the Spiderwoman theater are preserved at Miami University in the Native American Women Playwrights Archive. Founded in 1967, the Archive aims to acknowledge the achievements of Native American Women Playwrights by preserving their work and encouraging research and remembrance. The Archive is also meant to celebrate these women and encourage continued writing and performance. Many unpublished plays are housed in the collection both digitally and in print. In addition to plays, the collection includes biographical information on playwrights, advertising materials and other ephemera, and correspondence relevant to the creation and maintenance of the archive.

In addition to Spiderwoman Theater, the Native American Women Playwrights Archive houses materials from lesser known authors. Annette Arkeketa is one such example. A member of the Otoe-Missouria Tribe of Oklahoma, Arkeketa's motivation for creating is self-definition for Native Americans and educating others on the reality of Native American experience. She writes, "My personal feelings about writing is that it is necessary for our Indian people to write and produce great works about ourselves." She goes on to acknowledge the importance of visibility for Native Americans and the significance in passing on culture to Native American Youth. Similar to Spiderwoman theater, Arkeketa addresses Native American issues in her work. In her play, *Ghost Dance*, Arkeketa illuminates the tragic past of Native American grave defacement. Her intervention is the result of Indian cultural items and remains being objectified and studied by scientists for many years. Native American tribes have demanded the return of

their ancestral remains and items, but the issue remains controversial. Arkeketas attacks this issue with a tragic drama that ends with hope for the future. She writes, “The play was created to bring understanding to all communities about how the robbing of our ancestors’ graves affects our people.”

The materials in the NAWPA archives represent the voices of Native American people. They also address issues that Native Americans have faced in the United States for many centuries. Any scholar looking to study Native American identity would find a lot of useful information in the NAWPA archive. By examining the art of Native American playwrights, scholars can learn how Native Americans see themselves, and how they want to be viewed. By studying Native American characters, scholars can understand the archetypes that authors want to represent. Additionally, scholars can gain insight into issues that Native Americans want to address. Patrons who would like to view the collection can do so during business hours in the Special Collections department at the Miami University King Library.