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NAWPA Collection Article

Miami University's Walter Havighurst's Special Collections is a wonderful archive filled with exciting and entertaining historical artifacts. One part of the archive that merits mention is the collection of the Native American Women's Playwrights Archive that was established in 1996. This collection contains an assortment of manuscripts, disks, videos, along with other formats of plays, letters, notes, posters, newspapers, and other important pieces. Dating from 1967 to today, there are thirty-three cubic feet of original materials waiting to be researched. Most of what is housed in the collection is only available in house because much of it is unpublished and in its original form. As the NAWPA collection grows, increasing amounts of research can be done on Native American women and their feminist views.

One extremely interesting aspect of this collection is all the letters and personal statements from the authors. A large portion of the collection is dedicated to the Spiderwoman Theatre. This is not Spiderwoman in the Marvel sense, but from the cultural Native American sense. In the "Who We Are" section of Box 3, Lisa Mayo, Gloria Miguel, Muriel Miguel, Pam Verge, and Eva Bouman give a brief overview of their backgrounds. I found this especially interesting because the box later dives into the work that these women have done. Knowing their background, I think, is very pertinent to the collection as a whole.

These women outlined who Spiderwoman was to them and how she became their inspiration¹

“Spiderwoman, ‘or Spider Grandmother Woman is one of the familiar household gods of the Hopi’... we take our name from Spiderwoman, goddess of creation, the first to create designs and teach her people to weave... We call on her inspiration in the development of our working technique, STORYWEAVING, creating designs and weaving stories with words and movement”.

Using this as their mission statement, these women created a strong feminist theatre that turned personal stories and images into a storyline that people from different generations can relate to.

Also included in Box 3 are general overviews of the plays in the box. These I found very helpful because the members of Spiderwoman Theater wrote them. With feminist undertones and overtones, these plays form the backbone of this collection. For example, two of their shows are adapted versions of other plays, *Lysistrata Numbah!* and *Three Sisters*. These two adaptations take the old works and change them while engaging in the diverse backgrounds of the seven-women company using “their diverse experiences as women, as American Indian women, as lesbians, as Scorpios, as women over fifty and women under twenty-five, as sisters and mothers and grandmothers to defy such old generalizations”.²

Another amazing aspect of the Native American Women Playwrights Archive is the huge assortment of letters. Many of these letters were discussing taking Spiderwoman Theatre to Europe. There was a small demand to take these plays and the troupe to Europe to perform in

¹ Native American Women Playwrights Archive and The Walter Havighurst Special Collections, Miami University Libraries, Box 3.

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the late 1970s. Reading these letters, it was very interesting to see the reasons why they were wanted in Europe and by whom. Many times, it was difficult to find the funds to have them leave the United States and travel to Europe. This often meant that the show could be canceled if it did not make enough money. These letters were correspondences between women in Europe who wanted to promote the theatre and the women of the Spiderwoman Theatre. Often times, the letters acted as legal contracts between the two, “if you accept these conditions, you will be kind enough to return one cope of this letter, dated and signed, which will be recognized as legal contract”.³ These legal contracts outlined the terms for payment, travel, and other expenses that would be accrued on the trip.

This collection has a wide breadth of information covering everything from letters to the plays to legal documents. It touches on legal aspects, especially in regard to a naming dispute with Marvel Comics. It has interviews, it has biographies, and it even contains a large assortment of photographs and images. A trip to the Native American Women’s Playwrights Archive is well worth it for anyone who is seeking to learn about a rich and interesting culture.

³ Native American Women Playwrights Archive and The Walter Havighurst Special Collections, Miami University Libraries, Box 3.