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Native American Women's Playwrights

Many materials reside in Miami's special collections department. These materials range from Soviet propaganda to documents relating to Miami's founding to many subjects in between. Perhaps one of the most unique collections at the Walter Havighurst Special Collections, though, is the Native American Women Playwrights Archive. With materials ranging from 1967-present, it offers a broad picture of an often-overlooked part of history. Including manuscripts, posters, flyers, photographs, correspondence, and articles to name a few, the collection offers unparalleled access to Native American women's theater.

One of the pieces that highlights this is the play *Teaching Disco Square Dancing to Our Elders: A Class Presentation*. Written by Larissa FastHorse and housed in the archives, this play, created in 2008, provides an important glimpse into Native American life.¹ In the play, set on a reservation, three middle school students must work on a project together for school. The play deals with many problems traditionally associated with Native American communities, such as alcoholism, and how the characters confront those issues. For example, one of the characters, Martin, is not allowed at his own home when his parents throw parties because they drink too much. His sister who is in 7th grade is allowed to stay because she can drink. Though I am personally unsure of how accurate these occurrences are, given the author of the play being a Native American woman, I can assume that this is an occurrence she heard about or knew people who this happened to, as the play seems to be inspired by her experience of growing up as a Native American. The play also confronts another issue that FastHorse examines in Native American communities: people who are mixed, or half Native American. This issue is explored

¹ *Teaching Disco Square Dancing to Our Elders: A Class Presentation*, 2008, Box 1, Folder 5, Native American Women Playwrights Archive, Walter Havighurst Special Collections, Miami University Libraries.

with the character Amanda. In the play Amanda is half Lakota but was adopted by white parents. As such, she is not accepted by white people or Native Americans. When Amanda is working in the group with the two other kids, they call her slurs such as “mixed breed,” showing how she is a social outcast in school and in society. This is an issue I knew little about, and by highlighting how this tension sometimes exists in Native American society, *FastHorse* informs us more about contemporary Native American life.

Among other materials that highlight the breadth of the collection are a series of documents relating to the Spiderwoman’s Theater, the country’s longest running women’s performance group founded by three Native American sisters in 1976. The documents detailing one of the troupe’s plays, *At the Foot of the Mountain*,² are programs and newspaper clippings, both of which provide a different perspective on Native American life and Native American theater.³ Though a formal script for the play is not included among the documents I reviewed, much can be learned from the other documents. In the program, for example, they detail the diversity of the cast that was performing the play, with each member of the ensemble coming from a different background. One woman is from Hong Kong, one is Mexican, two are Native Americans, one is Jewish, and another is a white woman. In several of their cast profiles, they detail that how by working together they were able to overcome some prejudices they held. Newspaper articles describing the play talk about this as well. Focusing on the diverse nature of the cast and how they confront stereotypes head on through “group body language, individual storytelling, group skits, and various musical excerpts to display both their oppression and

² Ashley Jones, “Native American Women Playwrights Archive: Spiderwoman Theater,” *Miami University Libraries Steward and Sustain Department* (blog), June 28, 2013, <http://spec.lib.miamioh.edu/home/native-american-women-playwrights-archive-spiderwoman-theater/>.

³ Spiderwoman Series, 6 December 1985, Box 4, Folder 27, Native American Women’s Playwright Archive, Walter Havighurst Special Collections, Miami University Libraries.

pride,” one journalist discusses how she was more enlightened after viewing the play. By looking at this it further illuminates how performance can change how we look at the world, and how a diverse cast can be successful, despite what people in Hollywood might think. Everyone involved in the play is also a woman, further showing the narrative skill of women playwrights and how women use theater in order to reveal and comment upon their oppression in society.

Overall, looking through this archive enlightened me to the breadth, depth, and intricacies of Native American theater and how powerful it can be. These two selections from the archive are merely a drop in the water of a vast archive with numerous materials detailing a piece of often forgotten history. I would recommend that every student go to the archives. By better understanding how Native American women have dealt with oppression and what problems they see in their communities, we can work to fix them.