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HST 470

### Title

Located on the third floor of King Library, Miami University hosts the Native American Women's Playwright Archive (NAWPA). The archive contains a variety of sources that help tell the story of Native American female playwrights, and through them stories of Native Americans and their experiences more broadly. With the permission of these playwrights, Miami has been able to compile this collection.<sup>1</sup> Trying to explain the experiences of all Native Americans with a variety of sources is highly difficult; however, by focusing on one aspect of Native American experience, this archive lets researchers better understand and explain to others Native Americans' collective experiences. This archive contains multiple plays, information about their authors, information about theater festivals, and personal correspondence which all shed light on the experiences of Native American female playwrights.

Some of the key materials in the archive are from the Spiderwoman Theater group, a theater troupe founded by three Native American sisters that focuses on feminism, storytelling, and indigenous experiences.<sup>2</sup> This theater group was featured as a part of *New Tribe: New York*, a fifteen-month exhibition from 2005-2006 of rotating displays from Native American artists. This exhibition gave them a platform to showcase their works while also bringing attention to the various, and "often unconventional and nontraditional, and sometimes controversial" issues they address.<sup>3</sup> By featuring the Spiderwoman Theater group, this exhibition gave Native American

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Shirley Huston-Findley and Rebecca Howard, *Letter to Monique Mojica*, Special Collections at Miami University.

<sup>2</sup> *New Tribe: New York*, Special Collections at Miami University.

<sup>3</sup> Gerald McMaster and Sandra Starr, *New Tribe: New York: The Urban Vision Quest*. Special Collections at Miami University.

women a voice and a chance for them to explain how feminism impacts them and how feminism could be used to lessen discrimination among Native Americans, particularly indigenous women. The archive houses materials from many Native American female playwrights, but the majority show the impact this troupe has had on indigenous representation in theater in the United States.

The Spiderwoman Theater group still had popularity in 2005 when their work was exhibited at New Tribe: New York, but they had been recognized previously at theater festivals. One was The New Theater festival in Baltimore, Maryland in 1976. This festival focused on “new theaters,” or groups who were not yet widely known and also hosted workshops and other participatory functions for attendees.<sup>4</sup> This festival gave the Spiderwoman Theater a way to present their works with a collective group of other theaters and performing artists to spread awareness about their group. It gave them the chance to gain recognition. The Spiderwoman Theater group had maintained their recognition when they were showcased at New Tribe: New York twenty-nine years later, showing how their work was becoming more widely known.

As the Spiderwoman Theater gained recognition at various theater and arts festivals and showcases, they continued to write and perform plays. One of their plays is *The Banana Bunch*. Taken from a theater review in *The Village Voice*, the play “is a series of riffs about aging and isolation hung on the barely recognizable skeleton of *Arsenic and Old Lace*.”<sup>5</sup> The review criticizes the play by saying it “doesn’t build power or provide quite enough for these talented performers to do,” but it also praises the theater group’s “daring, inventive spirit.”<sup>6</sup> While this reviewer was not completely impressed with this specific show, he or she admired the actresses and the theater group itself, believing that they had the ability to perform more complex shows. The inclusion of

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<sup>4</sup> The New Theater Festival information pamphlet, Special Collections at Miami University.

<sup>5</sup> *The Village Voice*, Special Collections at Miami University.

<sup>6</sup> *The Village Voice*, Special Collections at Miami University.

this review in the archive allows researchers to understand how spectators felt about this play and theater group. The archive focuses on more than just the information about Native American women playwrights; it also strives to explain how these plays are viewed by a variety of audiences.

While the archive focuses on Native American female playwrights, it shows diversity within this specific form of theater. It gives researchers the materials needed to illustrate how a specific group of playwrights can differ in their styles, types of plays, and mediums of presenting their works. Documents from the Spiderwoman Theater group are one of the main collections at this archive and their materials give the history and progression of this group. The archive shows where they have been featured and the different plays they have written and performed along with opinions about these shows. For researchers interested in Native American history, especially that of women, theater, or both, the NAWPA collection contains an excellent variety of primary sources that tell the stories of Native American female playwrights.

#### Works Cited

McMaster, Gerald and Starr, Sandra. *New Tribe: New York: The Urban Vision Quest*. Special Collections at Miami University.

Huston-Findley, Shirley and Howard, Rebecca. *Letter to Monique Mojica*. Special Collections at Miami University.

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