



LOUIS DeLUCA/Staff Photographer

Thomas Riccio draws on his extensive travels to create experimental theater pieces such as *There Is Never a Reference Point*.

# All the world's his stage

**THEATER:** UTD professor puts his global experience to work locally

By **LAWSON TAITTE**  
Theater Critic

**RICHARDSON** — Thomas Riccio spent 15 years in the Alaskan wilderness — not to speak of all those trips to Siberia, Africa and eastern Asia. Now he's transporting all that experience back to suburban Dallas.

The world-renowned expert in performances by indigenous peoples became the head of Story Lab, a new media and performance program at the University of Texas at Dallas, in 2003.

"Fifteen years was good enough — I had never planned to stay that long. It was cold, too!" Mr. Riccio says about his decision to leave Alaska. "I felt almost obliged to bring what I had learned out there on the margin to my own culture. Dallas is wide open — people hear an idea and say, 'Sure, let's try it.' It's a good re-entry point."

Instead of learning age-old songs and dances from tribal elders, he's creating experimental theater pieces. The newest, *There Is Never a Reference Point*, brings to the stage the art and writings of Jamie Dakis, a woman diag-

nosed with dissociative identity disorder. It premiered at the school last weekend and is moving to South Side on Lamar for two more weeks in collaboration with Project X and South Side.

As a University of Alaska professor, Mr. Riccio lived in a riverside cabin he built himself, overlooking the peaks that begin the Alaska Range. He skied or mountain-biked to work. The enormous skull and antlers over his Richardson mantel are from a moose that stood 9 feet at the shoulder; he shot it himself with a band of Eskimos (a term he says the Alaskan natives prefer to "Inuit," which now predominates among the tribes in Canada). He hunted for seals and whales with them.

Visiting all the major Eskimo villages in Alaska, more than 70 of them, he interviewed grandmothers who remembered the way things used to be done in tribal ceremonies and performances.

"In almost all indigenous cultures, the deep structure of what

See **TRAVELER** Page 4G

"Performance is a technology for understanding who we are."

Thomas Riccio

# Traveler on a new journey



LOUIS DeLUCA/Staff Photographer

Mr. Riccio now lives in Richardson, after 15 years in Alaska. The moose antlers came from a hunt with native Alaskans. He also took part in other traditions. "The elders would tell stories, and we'd theatricalize them."

Continued from Page 1G

they are trying to achieve is essentially an expression of space. The Eskimos hadn't had a written language. Their place, in a sense, was a book they had to learn to read," Mr. Riccio says. "The elders would tell stories, and we'd theatricalize them. Rehearsing was not just learning a piece but a transfer of knowledge."

Mr. Riccio says that when native people realized he knew things they hadn't known about their own culture, they soon warmed to him. "Also it's just a matter of being human," he says. "If you're yourself, people will accept that."

Because he valued their past so highly, the native people would unconsciously re-evaluate themselves. Many of the groups felt that Western civilization had completely deprived them of their heritage.

"When I was in Greenland, some of the people said, 'Teach us Eskimo dance.' They had never learned because European set-

tlers 'have taken our drums,'" Mr. Riccio recalls.

Of course, such expertise is not without its perils. Once Mr. Riccio was working in a village at the farthest western edge of the hemisphere. Nobody announced that a dance was about to begin — someone just started beating on a drum. The droning, keening sound of the men's voices chimed in, and Mr. Riccio said to himself, "I know how to dance." So he joined in.

It's easy to picture, since Mr. Riccio, trained as a dancer and a former yoga instructor, illustrates with body movements and elaborate hand gestures, each of which has a traditional meaning.

But the tribal chieftain, suddenly, was bowed over laughing. He said something in a language that Mr. Riccio didn't understand. It took a while for him to persuade somebody to translate.

"He looks like he's on the Disney Channel," the chief had said.

Everyone's a critic these days. Mr. Riccio is full of such anecdotes. When a helicopter dropped him into one Alaskan

village, the elders gave him a sack as a greeting present. It held a Santa Claus outfit, which they expected him to don because they always had an outsider preside over their communal Christmas party so the kids wouldn't recognize one of their own playing Santa.

In Africa, he worked with a local troupe that used puppets to teach people how to avoid HIV infection. The puppets deliberately didn't look like any specific local people or like Europeans, because anyone advocating the use of condoms was immediately suspected of wanting to wipe out future generations of a rival tribe.

Mr. Riccio is convinced that all these experiences have prepared him to help us understand our own changing world. His first big project on coming to UTD was creating a stage version of a video game, for instance.

"Technology is our world now. The major skill we have to learn is how to navigate that world," he says. "Performance is a tech-

nology for understanding who we are. Wherever I am, I try to do work that's local. College is a wonderful place to explore from. You're like MacGyver."

MacGyver, you'll recall, was the TV hero who solved every problem by using his very special skills. It's easy to see why a college professor who faced down a grizzly during a three-day solo wilderness hike, just by turning his body at a certain angle and adopting the right facial expression, would take him as a role model.

E-mail [ltaitte@dallasnews.com](mailto:ltaitte@dallasnews.com)