

Daily News-Miner

The Voice of Interior Alaska

FAIRBANKS, ALASKA, THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 20, 1997

PIPEDREAMS

Play paints series of pictures of pipeline construction days

DEBBIE CARTER Staff Writer

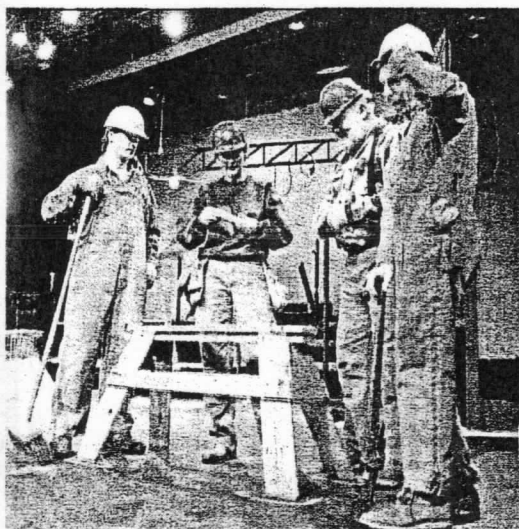
Tom Riccio has been hearing pipeline stories for years from friends.

"So many stories, so many great stories," he says.

So when the Fairbanks Drama Association considered which play to produce this fall, Riccio thought about pipeliners.

Riccio—the department head for the theater department at the University of Alaska Fairbanks—began collecting material for "Pipedreams" in spring. He read testimony from the pipeline hearings and invited former pipeliners to talk to him at

See PIPELINE, Page C-2



John Tragia/News-Miner Intern

TELLING TALES—Rehearsing for the Fairbanks Drama Association's production of "Pipedreams" Tuesday evening at the Alaskaland Civic Center are cast members, from left, Tony Evans, Gina Kalloch, Fred Weiss and Guy Van Doren. Opening night is Friday at the Alaskaland Civic Center at 8:15 p.m. Tickets start at \$10.

PIPELINE: Riccio collects wealth of stories

Continued from Page C-1

It was as if floodgates opened. Stories spilled out and just kept coming. One woman drove from Delta to tell her story. Two workers at the second meeting got into a heated exchange about the pros and cons of "wobbles," work slowdowns organized by the union. Every story sparked another.

For months Riccio came home to 10- to 15-minute messages on his answering machine. He's still getting a few. In all, he believes he has a thousand stories—from surveyors, welders, former prostitutes, laborers, carpenters, a journalist and many others who worked on the pipeline.

"It's a problem of wealth," says Riccio.

Riccio will share the wealth Friday as "Pipedreams," premieres at 8:15 p.m. in the Alaska-land Civic Center theater. Other

curtain times are Saturday at 8:15 and Sunday at 2. "Pipedreams" will also be produced Nov. 28 and 29 at 8:15 p.m. and 2 p.m. on Nov. 30.

"Pipedreams" is a series of vignettes drawn from former pipelers and other witnesses to the era. Twelve actors play 30-35 characters. Their stories are held together by a radio disc jockey, who provides commentary and news bulletins about the pipeline.

The play's characters spring from the material Riccio gathered: a crazed Christian who believed that the pipeline was prophesied, even ordained by God, surveyors who were chased by grizzlies, workers who gambled their entire paycheck, women trying to get a start in construction. And workers willing to do just about anything to get hired on.

One man wanted desperately to be hired, but he did not want to be "another warm body," a laborer. He told his prospective employers he had a degree in

mechanical engineering from the University of Southern California. In truth, he had never set foot on the campus.

"I did have a BS degree..." he told Riccio, and it wasn't a bachelor of science.

He had just finished a year of auto mechanics school and felt that entitled him to something.

A contractor hired him as a materials handler at a pump station. Two months later, his bosses considered him for a promotion. They discovered his phony credentials and he thought he was history. Instead, his bosses commended him for his good work as a field purchaser. They just didn't want to hear any stories about a Ph.D.

Riccio says all the stories in the play are true stories, but some are melded together—shaded or tweaked to fit better in the play.

One man, a welder with the 798'ers, called Riccio to say he had a list of nicknames. He did—four pages.

That developed into a scene in the play, where workers talk about nicknames and how they developed: Grape Vine, who knew

what everyone was doing, and School boy, who had a Ph.D. Slick Henton oiled his hair back and Romance Scott had five girlfriends and probably two wives.

"Pipedreams" is a collective project, says director Riccio, who describes his role as "gatekeeper or priest."

Three members of the cast are former pipelers. Several cast members have written their own material or have made suggestions on how to improve the play, which changes a little every rehearsal. Other pipelers have helped out.

Gina Kalloch plays "Gina," a Native woman who is trying to find a place in construction work.

Kalloch wrote her lines, which were based on her work experiences. She was the first Native woman journeyman out of Carpenters Union Local 1243.

She was in junior high during the pipeline construction, but she drew from her experiences working up North and in town, trying to break into construction and handling difficult bosses and coworkers.

Kalloch, a veteran of several other FDA productions, says it has been hard to play herself.

"It's almost like turning yourself inside out. Normally you're stepping outside yourself."

Guy Van Doren, who plays himself, as well as a welder, an operator and a laborer in "Pipedreams," also contributed material to the play.

He was a single parent working out of Laborers Union Local 942 in 1974. As a culvert foreman on the Haul Road, he earned about \$1,100 a week—a lot of money at the time.

Another culvert foreman, a young man fresh out of the military, felt overwhelmed with the amount of money he was earning.

He told Van Doren he had

\$20,000 he didn't know what to do with. Van Doren advised him to invest in British Petroleum—he figured the price of the stock would increase when the oil started flowing.

"To this day, I don't know if he did," says Van Doren.

"If he did, he'd be a very wealthy man." BP stock was \$4 at the time and trades for about \$90 today.

Since Van Doren had to pay bills and raise a family, he couldn't follow his own advice.

Van Doren, now a legislative research analyst for the borough, says the play is very representative of the pipeline.

"People that were up here," he says. "They're going to remember a lot of things."

Riccio, who specializes in oral history and indigenous theater, has worked among the Zulus of South Africa, Greenlanders in Denmark and Siberian actors in Yakutia. In each case, he encouraged the indigenous people to develop theater unique to their place. As co-director of Tuma Theatre, he has also worked with Alaska Native students developing stories for their productions.

"Pipedreams" was a logical progression of his work, he says.

"We are doing stories indigenous to this land."

Riccio says this is true community theater. The pipeline is a significant event that shaped the town and the area.

"It underlines who we are here in Fairbanks."

Although "Pipedreams" is set in pipeline times, some of the debate regarding the construction project remains contemporary—as reflected in pro-development and anti-development testimony before the Department of Interior.

"It's still the same debate we have today," says Riccio.

The play is suggested for mature audiences—because of the swearing, which was a natural part of pipeliner talk, says Riccio. The language has been toned down, however.

Tickets for "Pipedreams" are available by calling 456-PLAY.