

Tuma plays succeed with non-traditional theater

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A word of advice to the Utetmun and The Child From the Sea audiences: Leave your everyday world and ways of thinking at the door.

Anyone who won't let go of concepts like "traditional theater," "English language," "mortality," "cause and effect," or the idea that spirituality only inhabits human beings, will probably be lost and disappointed.

Those who are willing to make the sacrifices for an hour and a half, however, will experience a highly imaginative and rewarding spectacle. This year's Tuma theater productions are striking in their unity, depth of meaning, as well as sight and sound imagery.

The first show in the program, Utetmun, was written and co-directed with Tom Riccio by Paul Jumbo, a junior and theater major at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Utetmun, which means "going home" in Yupik, explores a boy's search for self as well as for his roots. The Boy (Paul Asicksik) finds revelations along the way are often painful, like the recollection of a Great Sickness at the turn of the century, which wiped out entire villages overnight. Personally, the Boy struggles with outside enculturation by toys ranging from a basketball to a Nintendo Gameboy.

The second play, The Child From the Sea, was adapted for stage and directed by Tom Riccio. In contrast to Utetmun or even last year's Qayaq, this play explores a complex landscape of a spiritual development, from self-denial and fear to acceptance and love. The Child (Wilma Brown) is handicapped and guided by Mother (Melanie Brown) but has to first overcome her appearance, considered so horrific by members of the community that many of them die upon seeing her.

In time, the Child is accepted into a community of little green men by being accepting herself. Striving further, the Child asks the Eagle (Karen Kielsen) for a set of wings but has to first shed the belief that she is ugly, a belief she has lived with for many years. In the last scene she is invited to dance in the sky, where a final act of revelation, acceptance and unity takes place between the Child and the Mother.

If these plot summaries seem unsatisfactorily vague, it's because the stories are much better told through non-verbal means like dance, drum beat, masks and animal sounds. There is very little dialogue in these plays, and when there is talking, very little of it is in English.

Several elements in both shows were particularly impressive. Por-

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trayal of humans, animals, and spirits in both shows indicated long hours of preparation and exploration on part of the 17 actors. How does one play a tree? Or a role of death? All the actors, especially the ones in lead roles, generated a sense of connectedness with the visual and mental images they were projecting.

The costume design, by Diane Swanson and Brenda Nelson, showed a great imaginative range done with the utmost subtlety, with subdued electric earth tones as the primary colors. The set, by Betsy Sinkola, was an ultimate in simplicity, yet highly functional for the purpose.

The flipside of not buying into the Tuma reality is that both of these one-act plays can be looked at as a novelty, something non-Native audiences can never really grasp, which in turn leads to looking at the plays as kind of a museum exhibit on Native arts.

This is a regrettable attitude, although not uncommon, as the Western way of thinking tends to categorize things it doesn't understand as inferior and an object of curiosity, at best.

Tuma is not traditional theater by any means, and those who expect entertainment or something easy to sit through, would be better off by staying home. These two plays require you to let go of your every day reality and live through a new concept of the world in order to understand them. The reward for trying, however, is a great one.

Utetmun and The Child From the Sea play Feb. 27-29, March 1, 6-8; weekdays 7 p.m., Saturdays 3 p.m. and 7 p.m., Sundays 2 p.m. at the UAF Fine Arts Theater. Prices are \$10 general, \$5 students, seniors, military. Tickets are available at the UAF theater department, the UAF Wood Center, Carrs Foodland, Hoitt's Music, Eielson and Fort Wainwright recreation centers.

FAIRBANKS
Daily News-Miner
The Voice of Interior Alaska
FAIRBANKS, ALASKA, THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 27, 1992

THURSDAY
NATIVE ARTS FESTIVAL BEGINS
Kalekchegone Page C-1

24 Pages
5K Per Copy