

# One woman's story

*Old ways,  
new ways  
tell Yup'ik tale*



Sam Harr

**STORYTELLER**—Theresa John performs Yup'ik Amaq at the University of Alaska Fairbanks Fine Arts Building. The one-woman Yup'ik woman's life plays at the UAF Lab Theater through Sunday.

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By **MARY FENNO**  
For the News-Miner

Kenkekuvciki qanaaiciqaci yuut: if you truly love them then you will tell them.

The Yupik People of Alaska live by these words, said Theresa John.

"If you don't love them, then you shut your mouth on them," she said. "Even adults, you correct them. The Yupik believe they must learn until they die."

John, 40, a Yupik woman and a professor of Native Studies at the University of Alaska Fairbanks will tell her story, "Yup'ik Arnaq (real woman)" on stage at UAF, May 2, 3 and 4. The one woman show is a collaboration between Theatre UAF, Tuma Theatre and art and Native Studies departments. Like the lives of the Yupik people, blended with the ways of their ancestors and those of contemporary white society, the show will use old ways and borrow new ones to tell the story, John said.

"In our culture you are not supposed to focus on one individual. You are teased if you step out of place, so a one-person show is a different format from our cultural ways," she said.

"While the content is Yupik, the presentation is borrowed from other cultures. I want people to understand we live a rich life. You can read about it in books, but it's not the same—you can't feel the rhythm of the dances or hear the drums."

Writing the show has given John a chance to refocus on the past events of her family, elders and the Yupik people. Born in a tent at fish camp into the traditional ways in the village of Nightmute, her memories are intertwined with the changes that have encompassed the Native peoples of Alaska. Gone are the yearly trips to fish camps and traveling by dog team back and forth, the shamans, the midwives that saw her into the world. Now her family live at Toksook Bay on Nelson Island and do the majority of their fishing from the village and live in two worlds, she said.

"There is still a lot of traditional art and subsistence lifestyle in our villages but when the schools came, the learning structure changed. Those hours that children were taught by their parents and elders where taken by the school teachers and now TV too," she said. "We believe we are who we are because of our an-

cestors. We have to get back to that—teach that—if we don't value our language and our ways, we will lose them."

Though the show is a little over one hour in length, it spans several centuries in time, from before contact with the western world to the present. Asked to give a glimpse of the show, John closes her eyes and shuts out the world before beginning. Dressed in seal skin mukluks, jeans, a T-shirt and a hand-sewn squirrel skin parka, decorated with wolf, wolverine and beaded in the family tradition, she looks every bit the paradox she represents. A powerful presence emerges as John tells the story of the Yupik woman and her people using several languages; Yupik, English, hand gestures, dance and song. When she sobs for what has been lost; the drumming changed to learning piano, the shamans to western religion, the culture as it was, the tears are real. The show is dynamic because it is not acting, she said.

"These are my real feelings," she said. "They are an accumulation of what has been unspoken. Traditionally we don't talk about our feelings."

John is breaking with that tradition to bring an important story to the stage, said Tom Riccio, UAF theater department professor, who with John co-founded Tuma Theatre and is working on the production.

"Theresa is pushing the envelope as a Yupik and more so as a Yupik woman," he said. "It is a very patriarchal society. Drumming was done by men. Some people may question her drumming."

It is important that the Native people have a performing voice and John has been a leader in this area. While the Fairbanks performance is more a workshop, the production will be refined and will travel in the state and then Outside, Riccio said.

"We'll ask for the audience's reactions and brainstorm any changes" he said. "There has been a great deal of interest in the production from the Institute of Native Arts in New York, a group in Japan and others. And we want to take it to community halls in Alaska this summer."

The sets for the production are being assembled with the help of Alvin Amason, an Aleutiq Sugpiak Native and director of Native Arts at UAF. He is using artifacts from his grandfather for the show. He is also making the two-hoop woman's mask from bent willow for John. It is exciting to see the work come to the stage, he said.

"This is an important story that hasn't been done before," Amason said. "It will be interesting to see how she meshes the living images with these objects."

Mary Fenno is a local free-lance writer.