



Mike Mathers/News-Miner

TUMA TEACHER—Assistant Professor Tom Riccio directs the TUMA Theatre, a traditional Native performance group at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Riccio sometimes

plays this drum during classes while students dance in traditional Native styles.

Professor helps Native students

Culture abounds in TUMA Theatre

By **WENDY HOWER**
Staff Writer

Deep in the basement of UAF's Great Hall, a dark little room pulsated with the beat of Tom Riccio's skin drum.

A dozen people swooped around him in a circle, transforming their bodies into ravens, caribou, dog mushers, salmon fishermen or rabbits at Riccio's command. Then he turned out the lights for a sweaty jam session on drums and beer-can shakers.

It's obvious this Italian American from Cleveland has won the trust of his Alaska Native students. In TUMA Theatre class, Riccio teaches students the songs, drumming rhythms and legends they probably didn't learn as children.

"It's like he's giving us skills; he's giving us tools with which to present our culture," said Melanie Brown, a 25-year-old student.

Brown, who grew up in Anchorage, is getting to know her Inupiat-Yupik-Alutiiq-Russian roots through Riccio.

"It's not like he presumes to know; he's not trying to be an insider," Brown said. "It's like

THOMAS RICCIO

- **Title:** Director, TUMA Theatre
- **Age:** 39
- **Marital status:** Single
- **Education:** Boston University, master's degree in theater education
- **Hobbies:** Zulu dancing, vegetarian cooking and play directing
- **Quote:** "This is the best way for me to serve both the art form and the people. . . . And I'm happy doing it."

we're all learning together." Another student, Willm Brown, 24, who grew up in the Inupiat Eskimo village of White Mountain, said Riccio encourages her to put her own mark on each performance.

"He's so dynamic in the way he teaches," she said. "He has such a good understanding of the human element."

For the past five years, Riccio, 39, has traveled the world to perfect his method of "mining" the theatrical heritage of indigenous people. He talks to elders, learns the dance steps, collects stories and practices playing the instruments. Then Riccio helps his students convert these traditions into performances.

"I do it with respect, and with

See **RICCIO**, Page B-2

RICCIO: Professor helps students understand their culture

Continued from Page B-1
the idea of giving it back," Riccio said.

Someday, Riccio wants to establish an international center for indigenous performing arts. There, Yupik Eskimos, South African Bushmen, Maoris from New Zealand—groups from around the globe—would all work and perform together.

Riccio's mission took him to Yakutsk, Russia, in 1992, where he organized workshops for members of the Sakha National Theater. In the workshops, many learned folk dancing and played the traditional "khumous" mouth harp for the first time.

"Wherever I go, I try to find the primary rhythm of the group I'm working with," Riccio said.

Also in 1992, Riccio brought a group of Kotzebue Inupiat to Denmark, where they taught drumming and dance steps to Greenland Inuits who had forgotten their own ancient drum rhythms after hundreds of years of contact with whites.

"This is the best way for me to serve both the art form and the people," Riccio said. "And I'm happy doing it."

Indigenous people need to know their cultures are wonderful and important, he said.

"Sometimes an outsider needs to say it," he said.

Last summer, Riccio danced

with traditional healers of two tribes of Bushmen in the lower Kalahari Desert of South Africa, and worked with them to develop a performance group. They allowed Riccio to videotape dances that lasted 13 hours through the night because he told them he was protecting their dance—and would give them a copy of the tape.

A Khwe healer, Manfred, would vibrate his body tirelessly, wearing a hyena headdress and spiky feathers on his shoulders.

"This guy—he and I would go jogging," Riccio said, pointing to a video of Manfred on TV. "This entire costume came to him in a dream."

Early last spring, Riccio traveled to Zambia, where he brought together actors representing nine tribes for a touring show of storytelling, dancing, puppets and masks.

In Durban, South Africa, last fall, Riccio worked to bring to life a traditional Zulu myth in a comedy performance that toured the poverty-stricken townships. One South African journalist likened Riccio to a modern-day Pied Piper.

To call his audience, Riccio put on giant white foam hands and ran between the shacks, waving his arms. One member of his troupe beat on a Zulu drum.

Fascinated, folks ran in from the fields and their homes, thronging Riccio and his players.

It was "a rush" to hear laughter from people who had never seen theater before, he said.

"They're looking at me like, 'What the hell is this?'" Riccio said, laughing.

No matter that Riccio could not speak the language. He made funny gestures, mimicked people and wore a silly gladiator helmet—and got lots of laughs. The performance was based on a Zulu legend about a five-headed snake, "Makhanda Mahlanu."

"I can dance Zulu pretty good," Riccio said, smiling.

When Riccio's workshops end, he hopes the people continue performing.

"It's real important that I leave the structure with them," Riccio said.

Before coming to UAF in 1988, Riccio was artistic director at the Organic Theater Co. in Chicago. A former colleague, Richard Friedman, remembers how Riccio used a real chainsaw in his production of Shakespeare's violent "Titus Andronicus." For another show, Riccio scrounged a donation of two tons of kitty litter to create a sandy beach, Friedman said.

"Tom has a great amount of leadership and vision," Friedman said in a phone interview from Chicago. "He wasn't one of those guys that liked to make all of the decisions

and walk away from it." After 10 years of directing in Cleveland, Boston and Chicago, Riccio burned out on big-city theater. Western theater is no longer art, he said, but the confirmation of a wealthy, sheltered lifestyle.

Riccio's TUMA Theatre, in contrast, brings families together for shows where it's OK for children in the audience to scream and cry.

"It's fine," Riccio said. "Actually, it adds to it."