

## Yearning to be heard

Native Voices, a theater initiative at the Autry center, aims to present Native American perspectives. Up next: a reworked classic.

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"Must you leave so early?" a young woman, dark hair streaming to her waist, says as she reaches out to the young man in front of her.

"I must be gone and live, or stay and die," he says. Still, they linger. They kiss.

It's a quick kiss. Too quick.

In the Autry National Center's Wells Fargo Theater, director Kenneth Martines calls a halt to a rehearsal of the balcony scene from "Kino and Teresa," a Native American version of "Romeo and Juliet." He beckons actors Elena Finney and Rob Vestal to the lip of the stage for a quiet confab.

They repeat the scene. This kiss is long and passionate. Martines nods approval.

Opening today, "Kino and Teresa" marks the fifth anniversary of Native Voices, the Autry's resident theater initiative, designed to develop and present plays by and about Native Americans. It will be the program's largest professional production since its 2000 launch at the Autry, seeded with a \$13,000 grant from the Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs.

Today, with an annual budget of \$500,000, Native Voices represents half of the Autry's programs department budget allotment. With the resources and collections of the Autry center to draw upon, it has steadily expanded its reach as one of the country's few ongoing professional production and training entities for Native American playwrights and theater artists.

"When we mapped out our initial three-year plan" in 2000, says Scott Kratz, the Autry's director of programs, "we wanted to make sure we had something that was a visible sign of support for the native community. We couldn't do a Native American exhibit every four months to sustain this relationship, but we could do it through theater."

Stage and film actor and director Randy Reinholz and his actress wife, Jean Bruce Scott, co-founded Native Voices in 1993 as a play-reading festival at Illinois State University. In 1996, "we started looking for a new artistic home that would bring more professional elements together," Reinholz says. The couple served as advisors for the Autry's exhibit "Powerful Images: Portrayals of Native America.

That initial relationship led to Native Voices' 1999 production of

Marie Clements' one-woman play, "Urban Tattoo."

When the organizations officially joined forces in 2000, a series of new play festivals and full productions followed, with such works as "Jump Kiss" by Diane Glancy, Drew Hayden Taylor's "The Buz'Gem Blues" and Joseph A. Dandurand's "Please Do Not Touch the Indians."

"The big challenge now is thinking about the future," says Reinholz, who is Choctaw. "What it means to evolve into a full-fledged theater company, serve this community of artists and work effectively within the support of a major institution."

And that means dealing with "sticky" everyday challenges. Reinholz says that while theatrical credibility is a serious goal - reviews have been mixed - so is the program's "cultural responsibility" for how native people are perceived.

Some subject matter, such as alcoholism, can be particularly touchy. And tribal laws prohibit certain traditions, rites and ceremonies from being shared with the general public.

So, while Los Angeles-based theater professionals such as dramaturge Frank Dwyer are brought in as mentors during play development, cultural advisors are needed to help maintain the playwright's vision while honoring the tenets of Native American law and custom.

Members of the program's growing Native American audience are outspoken at "talkback sessions" during play readings and workshops.

"There's a big community that these playwrights have to answer to," Reinholz adds, "and boy, our elders come, too. It's a delicate balancing act."

Intertribal casts have been another sensitive area. Although Los Angeles' urban Native American population is one of the largest in the country, it is made up of hundreds of different tribal cultures, so mixed casts are a given.

In "Kino and Teresa," playwright James Lujan has Taos Pueblo Indians telling the story of the Indian-Spanish conflict in 17th century Santa Fe. The 16 actors, the understudies, musicians and director represent almost as many different heritages, Cherokee, Apache, Lakota and Aztec among them.

"That's one of the concessions you make," Lujan says. "The important thing is that there is a pool of talented native actors, regardless of tribe."

Native Voices' growing pool of talent has proven to be a mixed blessing. As the company has nurtured and trained actors, Hollywood has come calling.

"Kino and Teresa" lost two lead actors at short notice when Kalani Queypo and Gil Birmingham were cast in Steven Spielberg's upcoming TNT series, "Into the West." Another Native Voices regular, Tonantzin Carmelo, is starring in the series.

"It's a wonderful thing and a horrible thing," Scott says. "As much as you want to do theater, the fact of the matter is that film and television pay the bills."

For television casting director Deborah Barylski, Native Voices is "a dream. They do all the work. They find people from all over the country and Canada and Mexico and bring them together. That's its purpose."

Casting representatives from regional theaters are showing up too. Reinholz and Scott, however, don't consider Native Voices an actors' showcase.

"We do want to champion artists," Reinholz says. "We would be silly to insist that they make a commitment to the theater first, but we're so happy about the people who come back and work with us over and over again."

Queypo, a film and TV actor who has worked in regional theaters in the United States and Canada, returns to the Autry often. "Native Voices keeps my connection not only to the theater but to other native peoples," he says. "I always tease them that I'm like a stray cat: I keep coming back because they feed me, artistically and with peanut butter and jelly sandwiches."

With an eye toward the future, Native Voices has begun focusing on developing working relationships with the Kennedy Center, Theatre Communications Group and local theater companies, among them Boston Court and Shakespeare Festival L.A.

It's a time of "transition," says Martines, "from a novelty or niche kind of theater to one that can stand on its own with theater companies across the country."

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'Kino and Teresa'

Where: Wells Fargo Theater, Autry National Center, 4700 Western Heritage Way, Los Angeles

When: Opens 8 p.m. today. Runs

8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays,

2 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays

Ends: March 20

Price: \$20

Contact: (866) 468-3399, [www.ticketweb.com](http://www.ticketweb.com)