

THE VOICES OF NATIVE AMERICAN PLAYWRIGHTS:

BY JULIO MARTINEZ PHOTOS: KENNETH DOLIN

THE FIRST THING ONE NOTICES when on the stage of the 210-seat Wells Fargo Theatre, located within the Griffith Park-based Autry National Center, is how lively the acoustics are. “This theatre was built for lectures and the sound is so good in here you don’t even need a microphone,” affirms Scott Kratz, Director of Programs for the Autry. “It offers a perfect outlet for live theatre.”

Built in 1988, under the financial support of the legendary western film star Gene Autry, it was initially called the Autry Museum of Western Heritage, a nurturing environment for the study of Native American history and culture. In 2000, the renamed Autry National Center launched Native Voices at the Autry, a theatre company devoted to developing and producing new works for the stage by Native American playwrights. This project brings established, mid-career and/or emerging Native writers to the Autry to workshop material with professional directors, dramaturges and actors.



ARTISTIC DIRECTOR RANDY REINHOLZ AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR JEAN BREW SCOTT

As Native Voices launches its first Equity two-play season, the guiding forces behind the project—Artistic Director Randy Reinholz, Executive Director Jean Brew Scott and Kratz—enthusiastically express their appreciation for the current success of a venture that began almost as an afterthought in 1999.

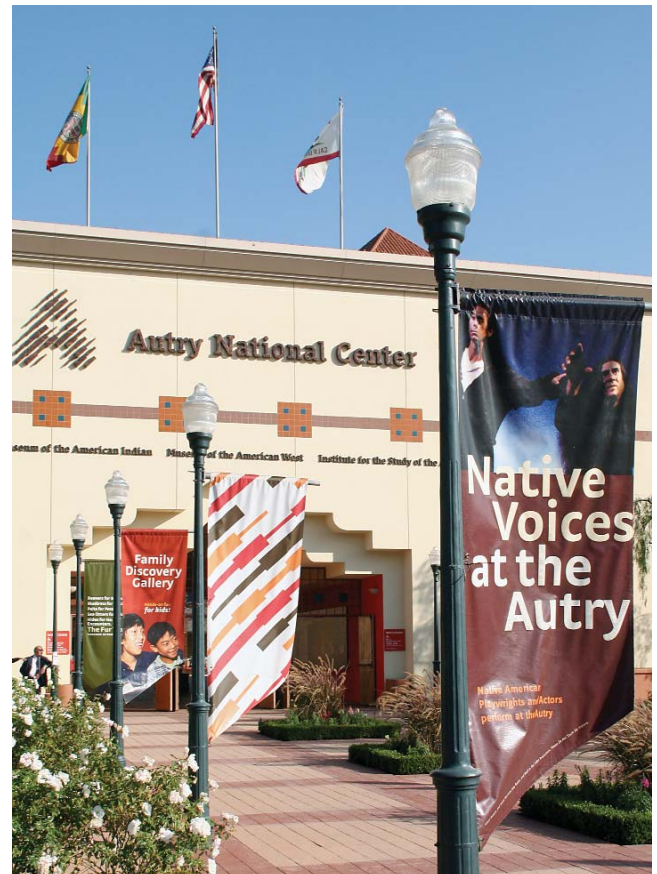
“A bunch of different things haphazardly came together,” says Reinholz (a Choctow descendent) who, along with his actress wife Scott, co-founded Native Voices in 1993 as a play-reading festival at Illinois State University. “In 1999, we came to the Autry as part of an advisory council for Powerful Images, an exhibition of Native American culture and history.

During the council meetings we came up with the concept of doing a play to enhance the exhibition. That play was *Urban Tattoo*.”

The process of performing a play about the Native American experience surprised them, says Kratz. “Once we produced the play we realized it fit the mandate of the Autry on many levels: as a chronicle of the American West, both historically and contemporarily, and as an outlet for the creative juices of artists who were underserved, Native American playwrights.”

Officially launching in the year 2000, the production of Native Voices has been an annual event, originally seeded with a \$13,000 grant from the Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs. It now operates on a \$500,000 annual budget. Despite

“One great success of our efforts is the demonstration of American history” —Princess Lucaj



ENTRANCE TO THE AUTRY NATIONAL CENTER

the commitment of the Autry and community agencies, the triumvirate of Reinholz, Scott and Kratz had reasonable concerns as to the universal viability of a project focusing on a specific aspect of the American experience.

“Much to our delight, we have discovered the stories are strong enough to appeal to a broad spectrum of theatregoers, not just a Native American or museum attendee audience,” says Scott. “We have produced stage works annually since 2000 and now solicit works from all over the United States and Canada. The submissions display the complete spectrum of theatrical styles from tragedy to farce to musical comedy. We develop everything from very new, beginning playwrights with potential to very established playwrights who have been produced.”

The 2006 season features two works. The opening three-person play is *Stone Heart: Everyone Loves a Journey West* (through March 12) by an established writer, Diane Glancy (Cherokee), who is currently on sabbatical as a member of the faculty of Macalester College in Minnesota. “My play looks at the historic 19th century

TWO-PLAY SEASON LAUNCHED AT THE AUTRY NATIONAL CENTER

Education that Native Americans are not just a relic

Lewis and Clark expedition from the point of view of Sacagawea, a teenage Shoshoni woman, and Lewis' African slave York. It is based on my novel, *Stone Heart: A Novel of Sacajawea*."

"I read the journals of Lewis and Clark and decided to travel the same path they covered during their two-year exploration (1804-1806) of the newly acquired Louisiana Purchase. As I followed their 1000-mile journey along the Missouri River, I read their accounts and I discovered Sacagawea's voice. At the banks of the Missouri River, I found a small stone in the shape of a beaver. As I held it, the phrase 'stone heart' came to me. Here was the permission I sought from the land and the river to write the voices they held."

Stone Heart: Everyone Loves a Journey West features the talents of Thirza Defoe (Sacajawea), Tim Glenn (Lewis and Clark) and Jed Reynolds (York), directed by Reinholz. "I really wanted to reveal this great historic event from the point of view of these three extremely diverse entities," affirms Glancy. "There is a moment when all three are viewing the phenomenon known as the Northern Lights. Lewis immediately sees it as a scientific calculation. Sacajawea views it as a spiritual message. But to York, the billowing glow of the lights is a reminder of the sails of the slave ships that obliterated the life of his people."

For Reynolds, who was featured on the cover of *LA Stage* magazine (Issue 24, March/April 2005) for his portrayal of Jackie Robinson in the Fremont Theatre Centre production of *National Pastime*, the experience of participating in a work that chronicles both the African American and the Native American experience

became quite revealing. "The subject matter tends to appear very similar to that of African American material, focusing on unjust oppression. This should come as no surprise since the two ethnic groups are very closely related in the historic treatment from white America."



ACTRESS ARIGON STARR

When Stone Heart: Everyone Loves a Journey West completes its run at the Autry it will commence a nationwide tour starting at the National Museum of the American Indian in New York City and Washington DC in April 2006.

In sharp contrast to Glancy's work, the second production of the Native Voices season features the very 20th century outpourings of the one-person musical, *The Red Road* (March 30-April



PRODUCTION MANAGER PRINCESS LUCAJ AND DIRECTOR OF PROGRAMMING SCOTT KRATZ

30), written and performed by Arigon Starr (Kickapoo, Creek), also staged by Reinholz. "This certainly isn't based on fact," laughs Starr. "This is just a bunch of characters I found swimming around in my mind."

"I will be playing all the parts and performing 12 songs in this show," says Starr. "I have a throwback style that has its roots in the western swing of Bob Wills and Loretta Lynn but I enjoy good music no matter where it's from. The contemporary experience of Native Americans is subject to the same stimuli as everyone else. I aim to show I am a distinct personality who has absorbed her native culture and is now projecting her own identity into this modern world we all share."

The Red Road is also set to go on a nationwide tour following its premiere at the Autry National Center.

This year, the works of Native Voices at the Autry have been recognized nationally. The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts announced its ninth New Visions/New Voices festival to be held at the Kennedy Center May 19 - 21.

This year's festival will highlight a reading of *Wild Horses* by playwright Rhiana Yazzie and directed by Reinholz, developed by the Autry's annual Young Native Playwrights Project. The play takes Rose Mary, a 13 year-old girl from Los Angeles' indigenous people the Tongva, on a magic realist journey as she navigates what it means to be a Native American in a major metropolitan city.

"One great success of our efforts is the demonstration that Native Americans are not just a relic of American history," affirms Princess Lucaj, who is descended from a long line of Gwich'in Athabaskan storytellers and is serving as production manager for Native Voices at the Autry. "We are an evolving culture that has a lot to say about today's world and about the future of this country."

All performances of Native Voices at the Autry will be held at The Wells Fargo Theatre, Autry National Center, 4700 Western Heritage Way in Griffith Park. To RSVP, call 323.667.2000, ext. 354