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Identity war

'Buffalo Soldiers' play confronts the struggles of families with mixed heritage



"I'm a large man. There's no way I can hide," says playwright William Yellow Robe. "When you're in a classroom and you're dark and 18 other class members are all white, there's no way you can hide."

Yellow Robe's never really been interested in concealing his identity, formed partly by his mix of American Indian and black heritage. But the road for him and others born into multiethnic families can be difficult.

You're not black enough. You're not Native enough. You don't fit.

These are the struggles of Craig Robe, the protagonist of Yellow Robe's latest play, "Grandchildren of the Buffalo Soldiers," who returns to his tribe's reservation in search of community. As descendants of an American Indian woman and a buffalo soldier, the Robe family has struggled for acceptance in their tribe and with one another.

The play, being staged tonight and Friday at the Lied Center, asks audiences to consider issues of racial and cultural identity, particularly among mixed-heritage families, which, incidentally, are increasing in Lawrence. According to statistics released this year by Lawrence Public Schools, the percentage of multiethnic students in local elementary schools far outpaces those in junior highs and high schools.

"When an audience comes in there, hopefully they might be able to find themes or issues or characters or dialogue that they can identify with," Yellow Robe says from his home in Connecticut. "I hope there are some audience members who like it. And then I hope there are audience members who hate it so much that it will encourage them to write their own play."

"What's happened within indigenous literature is that our voice has been appropriated by non-Natives, and we allow them to do it. But there comes a time when we have to be able to express our own voice and to maintain our own voice."

'Walking one path'

Yellow Robe, who serves as a guest faculty member at Brown University and other institutions and who has written more than 10 plays about Native issues, penned "Grandchildren of the Buffalo Soldiers" at the request of his ailing wife. Before she died, she asked him to write a show that went beyond the typical racial dichotomy.

"The whole issue of 'breed' was always boiled down to an issue of white and native," Yellow Robe says. "They never saw the idea of someone being part Native and African-American or part Native and Asian American, part Native or Latino American. In other words, we were never really accepting the fact that we now had relations with the world."

Personally, Yellow Robe has always been pretty sure where he stands.



Ann Marsden/Penumbra Theatre Company Photo

From left are Donna Cross Couteau Brooks, Maya Washington and James Craven, performers in "Grandchildren of the Buffalo Soldiers," by William Yellow Robe.

He was raised to be Assiniboiné, first and foremost, without denying the three-eighths African-American blood in his veins.

“Part of the problem is that there is this belief of being caught in two worlds, but you’ve got to pick one,” he says. “The logic behind that is if you’re jumping from one path to another path, you’re not really walking one path.

“The play talks about being able to love and respect those aspects of your life and not to hide them and to lie about them.”

Yellow Robe left the Fort Peck Indian Reservation when he was 18 to attend Northern Montana College. He remembers “major problems” there with Native and white relations, and he says things got violent on occasion. But he’s moved on.

“You get to that point where the anger wears off,” he says. “The most important thing is you don’t forget. I always tell my students even if a person has a BA, MA or Ph.D. doesn’t mean they have enlightenment.”

Local ties

Twenty years ago, Yellow Robe says, very little was widely known about the buffalo soldiers, so named by American Indians, who thought the black soldiers — with their dark, curly hair — resembled the regal animals.

“Now it’s the catchphrase of historians,” he says.

In 1992, Colin Powell, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, spearheaded a movement that ended in the erection of a buffalo soldiers memorial at Fort Leavenworth, where one of the regiments of black soldiers began in 1866.

But the relationship between these soldiers and Native people hasn’t been explored much, he says. Nor does the play take a historical look at that interaction. But a tie exists between issues in the show and the past in this area.

“We have a similar situation that happened right here in Leavenworth,” says Phyllis Bass, director of the Richard Allen Cultural Center in Leavenworth.

It seems the oldest recorded black family in the city descended from a black militiaman and his Cherokee wife.

“Her father and brother tried to prevent him from taking her off the reservation,” Bass says.

Nevertheless, the couple arrived in Leavenworth on horseback in 1855, and she never went back to the reservation.

Yellow Robe and the cast of “Grandchildren” toured the museum and gave a talk there on Tuesday. A buffalo soldier exhibit is on display through Monday in the Lied Center lobby.

Cleansing experience

Despite its reference to the buffalo soldiers — revered by some for fighting for their country and reviled by others for killing American Indians — the play really confronts contemporary struggles.

“I’ve always been amazed that when we perform in different communities, some community members will come up to me and say, ‘You know that’s exactly what happened to my son’ or ‘That’s what happened to my nephew’ or ‘That’s the very issue that I’m having problems with now,’” Yellow Robe says.

In this way, he says, “Grandchildren of the Buffalo Soldiers” has value for everyone.

“It is about a young man who returns, but it’s not about racial identity; it’s a question of humanity,” he says. “He comes back to clean his heart — a heart that’s been contaminated by racism, stereotypes, myths and misconceptions.

“So this man goes through this process of trying to cleanse himself of all these poisons.”

Who among us doesn’t have some poison to shed?