



# TALES OF AN URBAN INDIAN

## STUDY GUIDE

# TALES OF AN URBAN INDIAN

## A Study Resource

Preparing students to be audience members: Audience members play an important role in live theatre, for you too participate in the performance. Your laughter and applause, sighs and emotional responses, feed energy back to the actors; there is a communication, a sharing, that is integral to a live theatre performance. Young people who are used to TV or movies might be unaware that speaking aloud, eating and gum chewing, or moving in their seats are not appropriate behaviours in the theatre because not only is it disturbing to other audience members, but also intrusive to the actor who can see and hear them during the performance.

# TALES OF AN

## About The Show

Tales of An Urban Indian is the story of Simon Douglas, a contemporary First Nations male, born on a reserve in British Columbia in the 1970s and raised both on the reserve and in the city of Vancouver. The story is a semi-autobiographical tale about a kid growing up. Told entirely from a personal perspective, Tales of an Urban Indian conjures up an array of characters that come in and out of Simon's life as seen through Simon's eyes. His friends on the reserve, his mother and grandmother, the teenagers in his life, and every other character are all portrayed through Simon's mimicry. At the outset Simon explains that he is just like most people, a regular guy with a very common story to tell. As his story unfolds, layers of his character are revealed, as are the lessons he has learned in life that have molded him into the person he is now, telling the story.

Tales of an Urban Indian is based on Darrell's original full length play which follows Simon from childhood through adulthood. In reworking the play, Darrell has focused on the years of high school which in addition to cultural alienation adds the additional complications of the transitional years of adolescence. Discussions with the director, actor and stage manager in adding another actor to compliment traditional storytelling with 'traditional' dramatic dialogue inevitably led back to keeping Simon's story being told within his own tradition. While this version of "Tales of an Urban Indian" shares title with Darrell's original play, it is also a very different and new experience utilizing multiple artistic views of contemporary First Nations issues. Jackson 2Bears striking video images and the music of Native Hip-Hop artist Daybi are used to reinforce and add counterpoint to the words of the playwright.

## Storytelling

In many traditions, especially the Native tradition, storytelling can be presented through song, dance, costume and performance. Stories can have many functions: entertainment, education, the passing on of history and of culture and of values. Stories have many layers. As we pass from childhood to adulthood we see/ understand/ learn something different every time we hear the story, as we ourselves evolve. In this way, storytelling is a co-creative project and the storytellers/ performers are the catalysts. In a way the story is never done. Even after the production the Story is still growing – in the script, for the performers and for the audience who takes it home and makes it their own.



# TALES OF AN URBAN INDIAN

## NOTES FROM THE PLAYWRIGHT

"Tales of an Urban Indian was written not only to shed light on the experiences of my own life, but to investigate the factors that might lead a young man, Native or non- Native, down a path of self-destruction. I wanted to tell a story in which a First Nations character is not defeated by his victimization, but rather, comes to the realization that all human beings possess the power of choice when reacting to their life experience. It was also important, in dealing with the difficult subject matter that I do in this play, to approach it from a humorous point of view, since humour is perhaps the most important and prevalent survival mechanisms in Native society. Most importantly though, I wanted to write the sort of play that I would want to see: one that is provocative, wildly entertaining, and very funny."

- Darrell Dennis

## **JACKSON 2BEARS**

Jackson 2bears is a Kanien'kehaka (Mohawk) multimedia artist and theorist currently based in Victoria B.C. Canada. 2bears' installation works have been exhibited nationally in artist-run centres, and public galleries, and in group exhibitions internationally.

He has performed his multimedia works across Canada and has released several recordings on CD and DVD in both solo and collaborative contexts. From 2000 - 2003 2bears scored several independent films, including the award winning short-feature Bloodriver by Kent Monkman and Urbannation. He is also a co-founder of Toronto based artist collective Liminal Projects, and Victoria based collective Fort 9. Jackson is currently a Ph.D. student at the University of Victoria.

### **ARTISTS' STATEMENT**

"My current work focuses on the politics of Indigenous identity in contemporary culture, and is informed by my own experiences growing up in urban Canada as a Kanien'kehaka (Mohawk) person.

Typically, my exhibitions take the form of new media installations or performances where I work primarily with video and audio media as a means to reflect on issues of: racism, colonialism, discrimination and Native stereotypes. Of particular interest to me are the ways in which these issues suffuse in popular culture through media such as television, cinema, and advertising. My work often appropriates the conventions of popular media devices in critique of their content by adopting their various forms.

My performance work is primarily inspired by electronic music and dj/vj culture, and uses the form of the remix as a tool for cultural critique. Often emerging as a playful take on popular Native stereotypes, these live remixes function as mixed-media interventions against extirpative and discriminatory representations of First Nations culture. In this way, these multimedia collages are for me a means of discovering a self-reflexive path of engagement with my own Native heritage by way of remixing and reappropriating Indigenous identity for myself.

Similarly, my installation work explores popular mis-representations of First Nations culture and seeks to address notions of cultural belonging for Indigenous people growing up in urban environments outside traditional communities. These new media works incorporate digital images as well as video and sound, and serve as a creative means to resist the destructive cultural caricatures that obstruct the possibilities for an authentic Indigenous identity in contemporary culture."

-Jackson 2bears

### **ABOUT 10 LITTLE INDIANS**

The "Ten Little Indians" (remix) project is a playful cultural critique in the form a 3min animated music video. The motivation behind the work is derived from traumatic childhood memories of the popular children's song "Ten Little Indians". The video appropriates a version of this recording taken from Mother Goose Favorites produced by Happy Time Recordings, and mixes it with hip hop breaks, vocal phrases, and record scratches.



# CHARACTERS & VOICES

- Simon – the main character, this is his story, we follow him from childhood through adulthood
- Josie – Simon's Kye7e (phonetic spelling of the Shuswap word for Grandmother)
- Tina – Simon's Mother
- Agent Williams – from the DIA (Department of Indian Affairs)
- Tom – Simon's Father
- Father Murray – the priest who baptizes Simon
- Nick – Simon's trusted buddy
- Alistair – Tina's boyfriend
- Daniel – childhood friend who is ostracized for being homosexual
- Moccasin Telegraph – the rumour mill, transmission of gossip, the grapevine
- Morse Code
- Old Man- on the reserve
- Kim – popular white girl in school who won't go out with Simon because he is Indian
- Girl – in the Vancouver high school
- Indian – at the Native Friendship Centre
- Bartender - his first encounter on Hastings Street
- Walter – addict on Hastings for 20 years, married to Edna
- Edna - addict on Hastings for 20 years, married to Walter

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# HISTORICAL FIGURES AND EVENTS, IMAGES, SYMBOLS & ALLUSIONS

*Graham Greene* – First Nations actor born on the Six Nations Reserve in Ontario. An actor of television, stage, film and voice, Graham Greene is one of the Nation's most high-profile Aboriginal performers, winner of a Dora Mavor Moore award for his performance in Tomson Highway's *Dry lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* at Native Earth Performing Arts. He has also won a First American in the Arts award, a Gemini Award, and in 1990 he was nominated for a Best Supporting Actor Oscar for his performance as Kicking Bird in *Dances With Wolves*.

*Robbie Robertson* – Mohawk musician, most well known as the guitarist for The Band.

*Buffy Sainte Marie* – A Cree musician, Buffy Sainte-Marie toured North America's colleges, reservations and concert halls in the early 60's, meeting both huge acclaim and huge misperception from audiences and record companies who expected Pocahontas in fringes, and instead were both entertained and educated with their initial dose of Native American reality in the first person. By age 24, Buffy Sainte-Marie had appeared all over Europe, Canada, Australia and Asia, receiving honours, medals and awards which continue to this day. Her song "Until It's Time for You to Go" was recorded by Elvis Presley, Barbara Streisand and Cher, and her "Universal Soldier" became the anthem of the peace movement. For her very first album she was voted Billboard's Best New Artist. Later she won an Academy Award Oscar for the song "Up Where We Belong".

*Pocahontas* – the daughter of Powhatan, the powerful chief of the Algonquian Indians (Powhatans) in the Virginia region in the 1500s. Her real name was "Matoaka." "Pocahontas" was a nickname meaning "playful" or "mischievous one." Most famous for saving the life of English Captain John Smith, when she threw herself upon him and held his head so he wouldn't be beaten to death. She lived a very short life, dying at the age of 22 of smallpox. However, she was important in many other ways as well. Pocahontas struggled to promote peace between the Powhatans and the English colonists. She even converted to Christianity and married John Rolfe, a Jamestown colonist, a union which helped bring the two groups together. Her untimely death in England hurt the chance for continued peace in Virginia between the Algonquians and the European colonists. Her life story was made into a controversial Disney movie in the 1990's.

*Eagle* – a sacred symbol because of the bird's majestic appearance and the fact that since it flies much higher than most birds, it must be closer to the Creator. Symbol of power and great prestige, freedom, good luck and friendship.



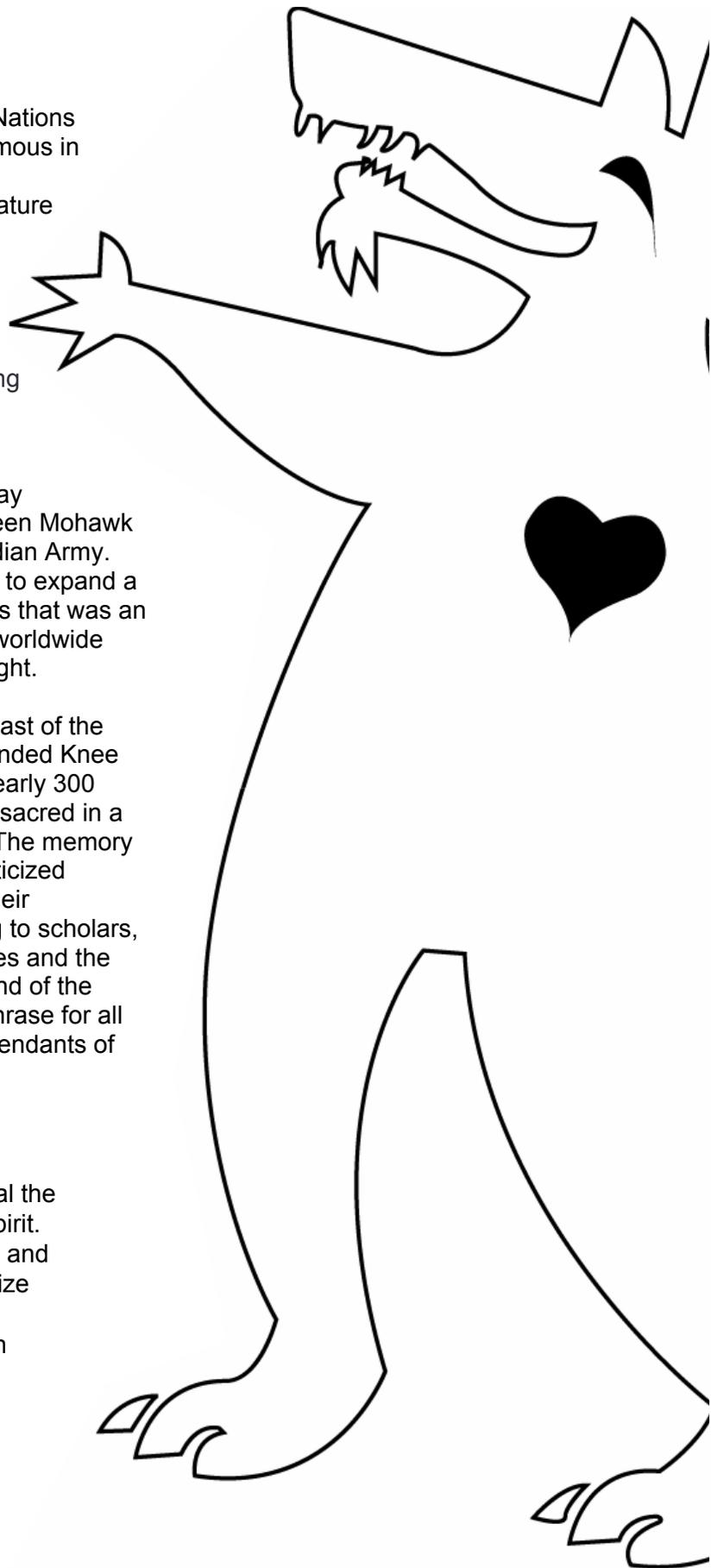
*Elijah Harper* – Arguably Canada’s best known First Nations politician. The backbench Manitoba MLA became famous in 1990 when he held a eagle feather in the Manitoba legislature while withholding his consent for the legislature to vote on ratification of the Meech Lake Accord. Mr. Harper and many of Canada's First Nations felt the Meech Lake Accord would perpetuate the notion that Canada had only two founding races, the English and the French. They felt the accord completely ignored First Nations' concerns. By refusing to allow the Manitoba Legislature to vote on it, Elijah Harper effectively defeated the Meech Lake Accord.

*Oka Crisis* – In the summer of 1990 there was a 77 day confrontation in the small town of Oka, Quebec between Mohawk Indians, the Quebec police, and eventually the Canadian Army. The violent clash was triggered by the town’s attempt to expand a local golf course through a wooded stand of pine trees that was an ancient Mohawk burial ground. The Oka Crisis drew worldwide attention, catapulting Native land rights into the spotlight.

*Wounded Knee* - known as the event that ended the last of the Indian wars in America. On the snowy banks of Wounded Knee Creek (Cankpe Opi Wakpala), December 29, 1890 nearly 300 unarmed Lakota men, women and children were massacred in a highly charged, violent encounter with U.S. soldiers. The memory of that day still evokes passionate emotional and politicized responses from present-day Native Americans and their supporters. The Wounded Knee Massacre, according to scholars, symbolizes not only a culmination of a clash of cultures and the failure of governmental Indian policies, but also the end of the American frontier. Wounded Knee became a catch phrase for all the wrongs inflicted on Native Americans by the descendants of Europeans.

*Hasting and Main*-gritty downtown part of Vancouver.

*Sweat Lodge* – A purification ritual to cleanse and heal the body. It heals the mind, bringing clarity. It heals the spirit. The ceremony is said to purify the organs of the body and the mind. The interior of the sweat lodge can symbolize the womb of Mother Earth. Held also to celebrate major events, such as the changing of the seasons, in gratitude to Mother Earth.



# VOCABULARY, EXPRESSIONS, TERMS, IDIOMS

*Sobriety* – the state of being sober, abstaining from alcohol and drugs

*Lacto-ovo vegetarian* – someone who does not eat meat, but does eat dairy and eggs.

*Macrobiotic* – A diet followed to maintain a balance between foods seen as yin (positive) or yang (negative). The diet progresses through ten levels, becoming increasingly restrictive. Each level gradually eliminates animal products. The highest levels eliminate fruit and vegetables, eventually reaching a diet strictly consisting of brown rice.

*Four Directions* – the four corners of the earth, north, south, east and west, the number four is held sacred in most tribes.

*Sharing Circle* – A process in which each person has an opportunity to speak in turn. It is used in seeking consensus in decision making, resolving conflicts between participants and building community trust.

*Medicine Wheel* - The Medicine Wheel is an ancient symbol of all creation, of all races of people, birds, fish, animals, trees and stones. The Medicine Wheel teaches us that all life moves in a circle, the circle symbolizing the earth, the sun, the moon, the cycles of life, the season, and day to night. Each person's journey to self-fulfilment lies within. There are many different ways that this concept is expressed, all reflecting the importance of wholeness and balance and the significance of the number four in Aboriginal life: four seasons, four grandfathers, four directions, four elements. The Medicine Wheel has no beginning and no ending, at the centre of the wheel is Creator, who sits in perfect balance.

*Apple Indian* – Red on the outside, white on the inside.

*Uncle Tomahawk* - A Native person who harbors prejudice and self-hate against their own people, and supports anti-Native sentiment and laws.

*Marxist-Leninist* – an emotionally charged term used to describe extreme radicals or revolutionaries. An advocate and follower of Marx and Engels and Lenin; a communist.

*Anarchist* – someone who is an advocate of anarchism, a political theory favouring abolition and overthrow of all civil governments.

*Lotus Land* – an idyllic realm of contentment and self-indulgence, slang name for Vancouver.

*Dream catcher* - A hoop made from willow or other material with a web that has a hole in the centre, and with feathers hanging down from the hoop. The web can be decorated with stones and/or beads. Traditionally, dream catchers are hung above the bed where they catch bad dreams in their web.

*Two-spirited people* – In Aboriginal tradition, two-spirited persons were considered to be visionaries and healers who possessed both male and female spirits. Now it refers to Aboriginal men and women who identify themselves as having same sex attractions and desires.

*On the Dole* – receiving regular relief payments from the government

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# QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER AND DISCUSS

How do the many characters help develop the story?

How does the Urban landscape go against popular Native stereotypes?

Discuss the theme of Native Pride/Anger vs. Liberation and Limitation.

How is history affected by personal memory?

What is meant by the following statements?

“That’s what happens when white people get scared. Things disappear.”

“At that moment I started to realize the difference between being an elder, and just being old.”

“When you’re at the bottom, everything is up.”

To what end does Darrell use comedy in this play?

How does Darrell use comedy as social criticism?

Describe and identify some communities that compare to living on a reserve.

Theatre is very much a collaborative art requiring creative problem-solving and team work. What you see on stage results from a melding of the ideas, expertise, imagination, creativity and hard work of many people on the creative team.

What are the challenges of designing a set for a play that must be able to be sent on tour, packed and unpacked into a van at least twice a day?

What will work theatrically? What is possible to tour considering limitations of travel (van), time (school block), and unknown resources available at each venue? Consider the varied sizes of auditoriums and the intimacy of the actor-audience relationship.

Using Jackson 2bears artist statements, how do the video images add to or detract from the action and words of the actor’s character(s)?

What are the shared messaging between playwright, video artist and musician?

What are the components that go into a stage production and what are the responsibilities of the creative team responsible for putting a piece of theatre together?

What do you think are the challenges of having the playwright be the star of a one-man show?



**TALES OF AN URBAN INDIAN IS A SEMI-AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL PLAY.**

**OTHER EXAMPLES OF SEMI-AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL PLAYS AND MOVIES:**

*The Glass Menagerie* – Tennessee Williams  
*SubUrbia* – Eric Bogosian  
*8 Mile* – Eminem  
*Brighton Beach Memoirs* – Neil Simon  
*Almost Famous* – Cameron Crowe  
*The Business of Fancydancing* – Sherman Alexie  
*The Slums of Beverly Hills* – Tamara Jenkins  
*In America* – Jim Sheridan  
*Mambo Italiano* – Steve Galluccio  
*Postcards from the Edge* – Carrie Fisher  
*Antwone Fisher* – Antwone Fisher  
*Thirteen* – Nikki Reed  
*My Big Fat Greek Wedding* – Nia Vardalos

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

- ? Addiction  
[www.addiction-rehabilitation.com](http://www.addiction-rehabilitation.com)  
[www.thetreatmentdirectory.com](http://www.thetreatmentdirectory.com)  
[www.alcoholics-anonymous.org](http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org)
- ? Kids Help Phone - 1.800.668.6868  
<http://kidshelp.sympatico.ca>
- ? First Nations  
[www.nativeweb.org](http://www.nativeweb.org)  
<http://mcsrt.org/resources/native>
- ? Aboriginal Youth Network  
[www.ayn.ca](http://www.ayn.ca)  
  
[www.schoolnet.ca/aboriginal/issues](http://www.schoolnet.ca/aboriginal/issues)  
[www.saymag.com](http://www.saymag.com)  
[www.spiritmag.ca](http://www.spiritmag.ca)  
[www.nativeearth.ca](http://www.nativeearth.ca)
- ? Homosexuality  
[www.freetobeme.com](http://www.freetobeme.com)  
[www.avert.org](http://www.avert.org)  
[www.teenadvice.org](http://www.teenadvice.org)
- ? **Indian School Days**, by Basil Johnston Toronto : Key Porter Books, 1988.
- ? **Indigenous Knowledges in Global Context: Multiple Readings of Our World** Toronto: University of Toronto, 2000.
- ? **The Community Apart: A Case Study of a Canadian Reserve Community.** Lithman, Yngve Georg. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba, 1984.
- ? **Songs for the People: Teachings on the Natural Way: Poems and Essays of Arthur Solomon.** Edited by Michael Posluns. Toronto: NC Press, 1990.
- ? **Inside Out: An Autobiography by a Native Canadian** Tyman, James. Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1990.
- ? **In Search of April Raintree** by Beatrice Culleton. Winnipeg: Pemmican, 1984
- ? **Monkey Beach** by Eden Robinson. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2001.
- ? **Slash** by Jeannette Armstrong. Penticton, BC: Theytus Books 1985.
- ? **Green Grass, Running Water** by Thomas King. Houghton Mifflin Co. 1993.



## **Our Mission Statement**

Green Thumb Theatre creates and produces plays that explore social issues relevant to the lives of children, youth and young adults. We provide theatre that celebrates the language and stories of today's generation and culture to stimulate empathy, debate and critical thinking.

## **A Profile of our Organization**

Green Thumb Theatre was founded in 1975 to develop original Canadian plays for young audiences. Since that time, Green Thumb has emerged as one of Canada's leading theatre companies for young people, producing excellent material for audiences and artists, and contributing to the growing body of work evolving in this field. Green Thumb demonstrates a new excitement and potential for children's theatre.

After more than 30 years, Green Thumb Theatre is still at the forefront of the Theatre in Education movement, using the emotional impact of live performance to educate and empower young people. We challenge our audience to re-examine their beliefs and prejudices and to define their feelings and aspirations.

Green Thumb believes that young Canadians face the same scope of issues, problems, concerns and interests that adults do; however, many young people are disempowered from effectively confronting difficult or complex situations, a result of societal, systemic or cultural beliefs and discriminations. As Canadian society diversifies it is more important than ever that people respect each other and each other's differences.

## **Green Thumb Statistics**

Each year we tour every school district in British Columbia, performing to more than 125,000 children. We regularly tour across Canada and the United States, and we tour abroad with some productions. We have created original productions subsequently staged by 200 theatre companies worldwide and translated into Chinese, French, Spanish, German, Danish, Hebrew and Japanese.

In our 30 seasons of touring & mainstage shows, we have performed over 15,000 times to 4,000,000 people in every province and 2 territories in Canada, 36 states in the U.S., Ireland, England, Scotland, the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden, Hong Kong, Singapore, Australia, New Zealand, and Mexico