

12thNight.ca

Liz Nicholls on theatre

---

## Shakespeare reimagined into Cree cosmology: Pawâkan Macbeth

Posted on [November 20, 2017](#)



**By Liz Nicholls, 12thnight.ca**

“Whenever you do indigenous theatre, it’s never just theatre,” says Renelitta Arluk. “It’s theatre *and....*”

The Inuvialuit Cree Dene actor/ playwright/ director/ artistic director — and the Banff Centre’s new head of indigenous arts — is talking about the way indigenous theatre reverberates with cultural connections, traditions, mythologies, history, practices.

And so it is with Arluk’s *Pawâkan Macbeth: A Cree Tragedy*, opening Thursday on the Westbury Theatre stage in an 11-actor collaboration between Akpik Theatre, the Northwest Territories’ only professional indigenous company, and Edmonton’s Theatre Prospero. It reimagines Shakespeare’s swift, brutal, escalating tragedy in the harsh wartime world of the Plains Cree in the 1870s. The Scottish lord who discovers in himself, and embraces, a dark and murderous ambition, egged on by his wife, is a great Okihcitâw warrior. Macikosisân is consumed by an evil cannibal spirit, Wihtiko, who urges him (and his wife) on to assassinate the Chief.

The inspiration, says Arluk, came from an Akpik/Theatre Prospero residency at the Frog Lake First Nation.

“The original idea was to adapt *The Tempest*,” she says of the late Shakespeare romance. “But (the kids) told us ‘we just don’t relate to it; we don’t see how our culture fits into it.... What we *can* connect with it the cannibal spirit of the Wihtiko and the greed of *Macbeth*’. The idea came from the students ... and I of course took it to the max!”

“The Elders were so responsive to the process they supplied shirts for the men, breast-plates, headdresses,” says Arluk. “I was so blown away by the generosity and the unity; it brought together Elders and young people.... It was such a positive experience with such dark material I wanted to try adapting it for the professional theatre!”

Since then Arluk, a Fort Smith native who grew up in Yellowknife — as a pre-schooler, she was raised nomadically by her grandparents on the trap-line — has led residencies in other Cree schools across the country. “None of them ever included the spirit (of the Wihtiko) the way Frog Lake did,” she says. “I thought that was interesting: they believe the spirit exists; it’s part of their cosmology, their culture, not something from way long ago!”

Arluk, the first Aboriginal woman (and the first Inuk) to graduate (2005) from the U of A’s theatre program, “grew up hearing stories of the Wihtiko....” Where she’s from, in the Northwest Territories, “it was a fear tactic mostly, told to kids so they wouldn’t stay out late.... It’s not just Cree, it’s part of every indigenous culture, with a different name everywhere.”

The attraction to one of Shakespeare’s darkest plays, and to the question of whether the witches are an external manifestation of Macbeth’s own lethal ambition, isn’t surprising to Arluk. Her mother is a residential school survivor, and Arluk knows something about “generational pain passed down,” as she puts it.

In her *Macbeth* adaptation, Arluk says she’s asking “what makes a man? what makes a man vulnerable to the Wihtiko? Is it inherent? Is it inherited?”



Bruce Sinclair, Allyson Pratt, Curtis Peeteetuce in Pawâkan Macbeth. Photo by Marc J Chalifoux Photography.

“There’s a more female focus in my version,” she says. Lady Macbeth, for example, who isn’t exactly a model of maternal instinct in Shakespeare, “is seven months pregnant.” And as for the witches, playful tricksters in Arluk’s adaptation, they get more stage time than Shakespeare’s play gives them. The script is a weave of Cree and English: “there’s enough Cree you feel you’re in another world, but not so much you feel you’re getting lost,” says Arluk.

“It’s all about the resurgence of a culture.... We have to embrace the dark as well as the light. You don’t learn what’s bad, you don’t learn what’s good, until you have both. We have to find balance.”

The production, co-directed by Barry Bilinsky and Mark Henderson, has assembled “a cultural team” that has reached out to Elders. “We’re diligent about following protocol,” says Arluk. “We smudge before every rehearsal; we have done sweats together.... We have incorporated everyday living, of the culture, into the play. Because we’re dealing with such a dark spirit, we’re careful to treat everything with respect and consideration.”

Arluk is calling the Edmonton run of *Pawâkan Macbeth* a “workshop production” — “we want to see what we have” — with plans for an official premiere next fall, probably in Edmonton, followed by a tour to “indigenous communities that don’t normally have access to theatre.”

Arluk took up her new position at the Banff Centre last week, fresh from the success of Colleen Murphy’s *The Breathing Hole* which premiered this past season at Stratford in a production she directed. A large-cast indigenous production, with a polar bear protagonist who spans some 500 years of Canadian history, *The Breathing Hole* served up another kind of first, too: Arluk was the first indigenous woman to direct at the festival.

The multi-disciplinary artist brings big plans to the Banff Centre, where indigenous arts are now a full-time commitment (up from six months a year). Arluk, who’s already consulted with Kevin Loring (the head of the National Arts Centre’s new indigenous theatre program), is in charge of the whole panoply of indigenous arts. She’s particularly pleased, she says, to be charged with “bringing back indigenous theatre to Banff. It hasn’t been there for over a decade.”

“It’s a very exciting time for indigenous artists in this country.” Stay tuned.

## PREVIEW

*Pawâkan Macbeth: A Cree Tragedy*

**Theatre:** [Akpik Theatre](#) and [Theatre Prospero](#)

**Written by:** Reneltta Arluk

**Directed by:** Barry Bilinsky and Mark Henderson

**Starring:** Gilbert J. Anderson, Theron Auigbelle, Mari Chartier, Lancelot Knight, Nathan Loitz, Sophie Merasty, Joel D. Montgrand, Curtis Peeteetuce, Allyson Pratt, Mitchell Saddleback, Bruce E. Sinclair

**Where:** Westbury Theatre, ATB Financial Arts Barns, 10330 84 Ave.

**Running:** Thursday through Sunday

**Tickets:** 780-409-1910, [fringetheatre.ca](#)