



Pawakan Macbeth translates the Bard into an Indigenous tale

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Allyson Pratt as Kâwanihot Iskweh in Pawâkan Macbeth.

DONALD LEE

The two groups began each day with a smudge – an herb-burning ceremony to cleanse the space. Then, a bonding ritual. Two people would look each

other in the eyes and shake hands, say “good morning,” before moving down the line to the next person. Often, they would embrace. Sometimes there were tears. By the end of it, all felt seen, supported and ready.

Then they went to their separate rooms to work. Sometimes the howls would bleed from one space into the other – a reminder of their shared, but separate, journeys.

Each group of theatre artists was involved in a Plains Cree reimagining of *Macbeth* – different versions, by the same playwright. One production is headed to communities on Treaty 6 territory, followed by a tour to the Northwest Territories in March. The other is destined for the Stratford Festival.

“This is at its core a different view of the world than maybe another culture would bring,” says Antoni Cimolino, artistic director at Stratford. “Hallelujah.”

The adaptations were conceived and written by Renelitta Arluk, who is of Inuvialuit, Dene and Cree descent, and founder of Yellowknife-based Akpik Theatre, which focuses on decolonization and using art as a tool for reconciliation. Arluk, who directed the world premiere of *The Breathing Hole* at Stratford in 2017, is also director of Indigenous Arts at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, where this side-by-side development work took place in January.

Pawâkan Macbeth is a radical departure from the Bard’s original text. Set in Cree territory in 1870s in what is now called Treaty 6 territory in Alberta and Saskatchewan, it is told from the Plains Cree perspective. Instead of witches (or “weird sisters”), there are coyote-like creatures called Wiyoyowak. They are, in a sense, minions for the Wihtiko, an insatiable cannibal spirit. They deliver the prophecy that Mahcikosisan will become leader of the band – as it was foretold Macbeth would become king.

Unlike Shakespeare’s toil-and-trouble witches, the Wiyoyowak do not appear every now and then, chanting over a cauldron. They are ever-present and on the move; less funny, more terrifying – and have a significant function in the play.

Arluk’s play transposes every element in Shakespeare’s canonical original.

“Renelitta has reinvented the work ... toward a fully Cree story, in which all the characters and narrative emerge from Plains culture and a larger Cree cosmology,” says Michael Greyeyes, the Plains Cree director/choreographer who was leading the Stratford-bound workshop, and who will direct the production at Stratford with Arluk. “With each iteration of her script, Renelitta has moved more forcefully toward this Indigenous world, and less and less of

the Elizabethan work remains."



Aaron Wells as Macikosisân and Allyson Pratt as Kâwanihot Iskweu

DONALD LEE

The work was born when a theatre company that teaches Shakespeare on reserves asked Arluk if she would do a two-week residency at Frog Lake, east of Edmonton, teaching *The Tempest*. Arluk agreed, but as it turns out, the school wanted to do *Macbeth*, with the Wihtiko, the cannibal spirit, in place of the ambitious Scottish throne-seeker, exploring the same core theme: greed.

Arluk brought in Cree elders to share stories about Wihtiko with the youth, and over two weeks, they created not a full version of *Macbeth*, or even close, but something that engaged the community in a significant and meaningful way.

"When I walked away from that, I was really inspired ... and I thought, 'What was it that made this so successful?' And so I thought, 'I wonder if I can do this on a professional scale. And I wonder if I can actually adapt *Macbeth* using Wihtiko the cannibal spirit as this form of greed,'" Arluk says during a recent interview at Banff.

She started dismantling the script, asking herself, "What is human? What is man? What makes man vulnerable to the cannibal spirit? What makes us vulnerable to that dark?," she recalls.

"That's when it started coming back together. I feel like I pulled off all the meat and muscle and sinew and then I looked at the bones and restructured

the bones and then started putting the Indigenous perspective into that structure.

“And that’s how the Wiyoyo were born.”

The Wiyoyo are animalistic hybrids – not totally in the human or spirit world. They’re known as coyote howlers.

The version of the play that Arluk first crafted is condensed, with no intermission and six cast members, all of whom are Indigenous. It is billed as “a Cree Takeover ... inspired by the youth of Frog Lake First Nation.”

The second version, the one prepared for Stratford, is more comprehensive – 2½ hours, the whole Shakespeare shebang – more in line with the festival’s usual dramatic offerings.

This version got its start at a playwrights’ retreat at Stratford in 2015, which Arluk was attending.

“Antoni asked what’s everyone working on. And I said I’m adapting *Macbeth*. I’m taking it over, is actually what I said.”

Stratford’s Cimolino was intrigued. They met, talked about it further and she was eventually commissioned to write the work.

“The same kernel led to two different ideas developing out of it,” Cimolino says. “And I think one is helping the other.”

At Banff, Cimolino was deeply moved by the way the day began, with the group smudges and handshake/hug ceremony.

“Having experienced 40 years in the theatre, there’s some days you come into rehearsal and people are afraid and there’s egos and there’s agendas and stuff and I thought: ‘Why don’t we start this way every day?’ Because it totally centres you,” Cimolino says.

Stratford has been working with Indigenous artists and Cimolino says he is committed to interpreting Shakespeare with an Indigenous perspective. “I think we’re going to, over time, help redraw the lines of what is Canadian Shakespeare,” he says. There are other works in development as well.

“This is an important moment in the Canadian theatrical landscape,” says Greyeyes, who founded Signal Theatre and is an actor (*Woman Walks Ahead*), choreographer and on faculty at York University. He calls this a golden age for Indigenous creation and artistic leadership.

"I think for Stratford Festival, that has its own kind of traditions, that has its own kind of canon, the things that it privileges, I think it's a very bold and daring proposal to bring a work like this, to bring a work like Reneltta's, to a national stage."

The work is likely bound for the festival's 2021 or 2022 season. Greyeyes is excited about the wider implications for the repertory company: a large Indigenous presence, not just in *Pawakan Macbeth*.

"They've said many times, nearly in every meeting I've had with them: We don't want a production like this to be parachuted into our season, meaning, there's an Indigenous cast that work on this show and are not included as vital members of an entire season," Greyeyes says.



Joel Montgrand, centre, and Sophie Merasty, right, play the Wiyoyowak, coyote-like creatures who stand in for Macbeth's witches.

DONALD LEE/BANFF CENTRE

On a Friday in January, the Banff Centre hosted an invitation-only sneak peek of Arluk's ambitious twin shows.

In a large studio, the work-in-progress bound for Stratford was presented to an audience that included Banff Centre president and chief executive Janice Price, along with a group that had travelled from the Ontario festival, including Cimolino.

First, Greyeyes put the 16 performers, most of whom are Indigenous, through an unrelenting movement workshop, also working with choreographer

Santee Smith. The actors were doing the 2½-hour routine daily, swinging kettlebells, hefting Bulgarian bags and performing punch-swing-curl moves with a steel mace.

“It’s a good way to build the company,” Greyeyes told the audience. “Everyone’s suffering together. Everyone despises me.”

Following that, the actors, now sweaty and limber, performed a couple of scenes.

The first was the introduction of the Wiyoyowuk. One moment, we were witnessing the actors working out; the next, they had transformed into something else, something less human. They hunched closer to the floor, sniffing out prey, howling, creeping stealthily toward those of us sitting on the edge of the room. I could feel myself leaning back in my chair as they approached. It was unsettling in the best kind of way.

In the second scene, the Wiyoyowuk confront Mahcikosisan and his friend and ally Mosapew with their prophecy that Mahcikosisan will become the leader of his band.

“As a Cree director and choreographer, he has interpreted the characters and scenes of Shakespeare’s play and found such profoundly haunting images,” Cimolino commented afterward. “There is real terror in what he’s creating. The fine detail in his work yields brilliant results and I believe will make for unforgettable theatre. I wish Shakespeare could see this beautiful work.”

The group then travelled to the theatre next door, where the other cast performed three scenes from the more condensed version, to wild applause. During the Q&A that followed, one audience member asked Arluk if there was anything in her training that allowed for such elasticity in creating these works. The playwright didn’t miss a beat with her answer.

“I was born a storyteller,” she said.

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