



Tulsa-born playwright Vicki Lynn Mooney jumps into Oklahoma debut

New York-based playwright Vicki Lynn Mooney couldn't help but hear her great-grandmother's voice in her head when she started on her "Broken Heart Land" trilogy.

"I think the spirit of my great-grandmother was saying 'Tell my story, tell my story,'" Mooney drawled with a laugh. "I would go to bed at night thinking about the play, and I would wake up the next morning and I'd know exactly what to write."

Although Mooney's "trilogy of tragedy" uses her family history as a jumping-off point, Thursday's world premiere performance of her historical-fiction drama "Hoop Jumper" at the Civic Center Music Hall's City-Space Theatre will mark a moment of triumph for the Okla-



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homa native.

"This is my very first play to be seen in Oklahoma, and I couldn't be happier," Mooney said. "It's a great,

great opportunity for native playwrights, because this isn't the kind of work that's picked up by mainstream theaters."

"Hoop Jumper" will be the main stage production of Oklahoma City Theatre Company's Sixth Annual Native American New Play Festival, which will include staged readings of five other plays, a children's storytelling and craft activity, a panel discussion and a free Indian taco luncheon. The festival is set for Thursday through Saturday and May 21-23 at the Civic Center.

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Above: Mariah Webb and Russ Tallchief star in the world premiere production of Tulsa-born playwright Vicki Lynn Mooney's "Hoop Jumper."

Below: Shawnee Brittan, back, Mariah Webb and Russ Tallchief star in "Hoop Jumper," the main stage production of Oklahoma City Theatre Company's Sixth Annual Native American New Play Festival.

PHOTOS PROVIDED



Festival: Plays showcase American Indian writers

FROM PAGE 1D

Rachel Irick, artistic director of OKC Theatre Company, said the Native American New Play Festival is one of the few events in the country showcasing new works by American Indian writers. Part of the company's mission is to promote cultural diversity.

"I feel like we have a responsibility. Our company is called Oklahoma City Theatre Company, and we should be doing something that is essential Oklahoma, that is inherently Oklahoma. It's good to do things that push us into challenging areas," Irick said.

"I'm a white person, I don't have any Native American ancestors really to my knowledge, but I've really caught a passion for telling these stories."

Along with the period piece "Hoop Jumper," which will be fully staged after winning the festival's 2014 script competition, this year's lineup will include staged readings of the historical story "In My Father's Eyes," the contemporary tales "Lucky in Hollywood" and "Day We Were Born," and last year's honorable mention, "As Needed for Pain," a one-act play that traces the evolution of Kiowa women over five generations into the present.

"What we need to do with this festival is encourage as many playwrights as possible ... and keep expanding year after year," Irick said.

Family ties

A Tulsa native of Cherokee descent, Mooney said the first seven pages of "Hoop Jumper" pull directly from the testimony her great-great-grandfather, John Shepherd Burgess, gave before the Dawes Commission. In the late 1800s, the Dawes Act authorized the federal government to survey American Indian tribal land, divide it into allotments for individual native households and declare the remainder "surplus" that could be opened up to white settlers.

"His testimony just haunted me, and he wanted his story told. But it's just based on his testimony; I know absolutely nothing about his real life. So, I was able to fictionalize everything beyond that," Mooney said in a phone interview from her home in Dobbs Ferry, about 20 miles outside New York City.

"In these plays, I always want-



From left, Russ Tallchief and Mariah Webb star in the world premiere production of Tulsa-born playwright Vicki Lynn Mooney's "Hoop Jumper," the main stage production of Oklahoma City Theatre Company's Sixth Annual Native American New Play Festival.

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ed to talk about what the expectations were of what the Dawes Rolls would bring and what they would take away and then what they (American Indians) actually got. It was not a good trade. ... They lost their sovereignty and millions of acres of land."

Since her father worked in the oil fields, Mooney said she grew up in "Oklahoma at large" and attended at least one different school every year, although she had a sort of home base at her grandparents' farm in Avant. She didn't know much about her Cherokee heritage until she researched her genealogy about 15 years ago.

"I'm only a 64th (Cherokee), so I'm not steeped in it. How-

ever, we would go hunting for wild onions every spring and scramble them up with scrambled eggs ... and my grandpa would speak occasionally in Cherokee to the old men about town," she said.

"I was able to trace my bloodlines back to like 1640 on the Cherokee side on my father's family, and I found so many fascinating stories, not particularly about my family but just an untold history. And those stories need to be told, and that's what I'm basing all of the writing on."

'Trilogy of tragedy'

"Hoop Jumper" centers on Weli (Russ Tallchief), a mixed-

blood Cherokee man, who enters into an arranged marriage with Florence (Mariah Webb), a much younger white woman, at the behest of her father, Josiah (Shawnee Brittan), a schemer who has come to Indian Territory with a wagonload of young daughters he wants to marry off to native men in the hopes of gaining control of their land allotments. But Weli's checkered past is brought to light when his father-in-law manipulates him into applying for the Dawes Rolls.

Although "Hoop Jumper" is chronologically the first play in Mooney's "Broken Heart Land Trilogy," it is actually the second one she has written. The middle

GOING ON

Sixth Annual Native American New Play Festival

● **Featuring:** Performances of "Hoop Jumper," staged readings, Saturday children's activities and panel discussion, and May 23 luncheon.

● **Where:** Civic Center Music Hall, 201 N Walker.

● **Registration:** Deadlines are Monday for Saturday's children's event and May 19 for the luncheon. Call 626-6605.

● **"Hoop Jumper" tickets:** \$20 each, or two for \$20 for Thursday performances. Call 297-2264.

● **Information:** www.okctheatrecompany.org.

installment, "Broken Heart Land," was featured as a staged reading at the 2012 Native American New Play Festival, and another reading is planned for this year's event.

"Broken Heart Land" was inspired by Mooney's great-grandmother, Alma Vena Burgess Gipson, who was only 12 years old and grieving her father's recent death when she was married off to a 26-year-old boarder. The writer again used her family history to continue the fictional tale of Weli's daughter, Alma, who is pushed into an arranged marriage at a tragically young age and fights against the machinations of her greedy grandfather Josiah.

She has finished a final first draft for the trilogy capper, "Blood Boundary," which will complete the tale by following the fictional Alma's son James, who decides to stand with his mixed-blood relatives amid the racial turmoil of 1920s Tulsa.

"It is a trilogy of tragedy ... but I do have a sense of humor in it. My favorite scene in 'Hoop Jumper' is a love scene that begins with a delousing," Mooney said with a laugh.

"They're good, solid dramas that I don't want to say that they educate, because I'm not an educator — but that's what they do. They're teaching. My whole point of writing all of these plays is to get people to think a little differently, to be open to more compassion."