

'Hoop Jumper' at OKCTC Native American New Play Festival

Anna Holloway • Published: May 29, 2015

Oklahoma City Theatre Company (OKCTC) hosted its sixth annual Native American New Play Festival from May 14-23, 2015. In addition to staged readings of this year's Festival winner and runner-up scripts, the company produced last year's winning script, "Hoop Jumper" by Cherokee playwright Vicki Lynn Mooney, a Tulsa native who now lives and works in New York.



Russ Tall Chief as Weli and Shawnee Brittan as Josiah in OKCTC's production of "Hoop Jumper"

The story of Weli, or William to White world, is drawn from Mooney's family history. We first see him forced to justify his heritage, and that of his children, to officers of the Dawes Commission, in order to qualify for the land allotments created when the Federal Government seized and re-distributed tribal lands. This vignette serves to introduce the tensions of the play and the context of those tensions.

Russ Tall Chief gave us a Weli who is very much a part of his time and heritage and who loves his wife very much. A large part of Weli's life and energy goes toward trying to keep his wife happy, which is a more daunting task than one might expect. Tall Chief performed Weli as a talented dancer who doesn't always know the steps, or even the style of dance, but who fakes it pretty well. This was a delicately balanced piece of acting; Weli's confidence and the social and personal pressures that constantly undercut it were laid out for the audience. These pressures affect his relationships with everyone and his eventual choices as a husband, a father, and a member of an oppressed nation.

Weli's wife Florence, a White woman, was married at her father's urging when she was quite young so that she could become Cherokee by marriage and qualify for land; the text of the play tells us that she is at least 15 years younger than her husband. Florence was played with appropriate chilliness by Mariah Webb. At times willing to be seductive and at other times willing to be compliant, Webb's Florence was a young woman unhappy with her life and trying desperately to find something in it to like. Webb's stiffness and hesitation underscored the conflicts in Florence's world.

Florence's father Josiah, played with studied venality by Shawnee Brittan, is a model of greed. Maintaining his grasp on his daughters' lives, Josiah plans to use them to acquire land for his family, as if the Indian men they married and the children they bore were inconsequential playing pieces. Brittan's slightly forced performance deprived Josiah of any human virtue or paternal concern; all of his actions seemed focused on the one goal of getting his hands on land.

Weli's Aunt Jane is the mother figure who raised him and many other youngsters in the community. Played with warmth and acerbic charm by Angela Startz, Aunt Jane offers guidance and support while trying to head off Weli's tendency toward anti-social behaviors from his past—law-breaking and drinking in particular. Startz conveyed Jane's maturity and maternality with humor and stability. She was a grounding presence in each scene that featured her.

Deron Twohatchet and Roy Lumpkin played Weli's sidekicks from the bad old days. Both delivered their parts admirably. They enacted a clear difference in attitude and body language between the Native people and the White settlers, once again underlining the tensions and conflicts of the situation. As the two Dawes commissioners, Kenny Harragarra and Timothy Francis also delivered on those tensions in the opening scene.

Most of the action took place in the front yard of Weli's house. The unit set was well designed to remind us that Native people in the Oklahoma territory lived in frame houses and drew well water and cooked in pretty ordinary kitchens. Some of the conversations took place in a wagon as Josiah was driving one person or another to or from somewhere; the time to make the set change was mildly intrusive, but given the constrictions of the Cityspace Theatre, they were also understandable. The lighting design was appropriate and sensitive to time and mood, successfully placing us at noon or evening or late night.

Overall, the production was a lovely introduction to Mooney's planned trilogy of plays on her family history in Oklahoma. Part two (for which the trilogy is named), "Broken Heart Land," premiered in New York City last fall, and a special reading of the play was featured at the Festival.

Next year's Festival dates have not been released, but the Native American New Play Festival is usually in mid-late May. Plan to attend!