

NTESINAN:

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Assimilation is a dirty word for many native groups in Canada.

The Innu people of Labrador learned all about assimilation from the white governments of Newfoundland and Quebec. When the English and French governments divided Labrador into two provinces, the Innu were the big losers. The Innu were moved from their traditional camps to resettlement areas like Sheshatshit, Labrador, in the 1950s. First they lost their homelands, but now they realize they are losing something less tangible yet more difficult to hang onto than a land claim. The Innu are watching their white visitors overwhelm their culture.

While they appreciate the concern of well-intentioned white activists, the Innu

want to tell their own story in their own words. That desire brought four young Innu from Labrador to a St. John's theatre this summer to illustrate the plight of their people in the stage production *Ntesinan*. In the first scene of *Ntesinan*, which means "our land" in Innu, the actors succinctly establish the Innu perception of the white infiltration of the communities with one short, chilling exchange.

Ntesinan opens with the entrance of a young Innu man, dressed in traditional native garments. He walks onto the sparse stage and sits on the middle of a log. Behind him, a backdrop symbolizes the harsh beauty of the northern bush of Labrador. A white man swaggers onto the set and with forced affability asks the Innu man if he may sit down on the log. The Innu agrees, but then the white man asks for more space "just to stretch out my

legs," which the Innu gives without protest. The white man requests more and more space, his voice dripping with saccharine congeniality, until the Innu has given up all his space and fallen off the log. The white man then jumps to his feet, warning the Innu man to "stay off of my log."

This three-minute scenario aptly illustrates the native's perception of the white people and the effect they have had on the Innu since their arrival. The natives have been slowly pushed off their land into settlements created by white policy makers. To quell their protests and outrage, the government offered them social assistance and the amenities of white culture. But those concessions do not change the fact that the Innu have been treated unfairly and subjected to invasions of their culture and their native lifestyle.

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assimilate or get out

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Ntesinan was born out of the Newfoundland arts community's desire to help the Innu reclaim their land and their identity. Originally, members of the St. John's theatre group known as the Resource Centre for the Arts (RSA) wanted to do a show as a protest to the increased militarization of Labrador.

Last year, Goose Bay, Labrador, became one of the preferred sites for a new Nato base and was already experiencing increased military activity. Local business people and the provincial government greeted the military with enthusiasm, touting the base as a source of employment and financial expansion for a chronically unemployed province. Peace activists, environmentalists and native rights groups rallied together to demonstrate their opposition, but politicians and business people quickly dismissed their concerns. The NATO base regenerated lingering hostilities between the white Newfoundlanders and the native Innu people.

Newfoundland director Mary Walsh took the idea of a theatre production to the Innu people, who immediately changed the project's focus. Walsh went to the Innu settlement of Sheshatshit to find people to write and produce the show with her. There, she met Jack Penashue, Edward Nuna and sisters Clem and Anastasia Andrew, Innu youth who had some acting experience in high school and, more importantly, the enthusiasm to try a new and somewhat risky project.

"The show was expanded to include all aspects of Innu life because the NATO

base is just one of the problems of the Innu people. You can't make a play about a political issue. A play is about people's lives and this is one aspect of the Innu's lives," said Walsh.

Walsh is an actor and director who gained notoriety as a member of the comedy troupe CODCO and as a cast member of the CBC-TV program *Up at Ours*. Her solo projects have included one-woman shows and her most recent directing project was a play about child abuse. Walsh brought years of experience in directing, improvisational acting and collective script-writing to the project. Her background helped the Innu actors vocalize and illustrate the concerns of their people and develop their ideas into a full-length dramatic production.

The four Innu actors went into the native community to interview their people in the Innu language, since most people over 35 don't speak English. What came out of these interviews was an intensely emotional and enlightening account of life in Labrador for the Innu.

In order to effectively communicate with their audience, the show was performed in English, but Walsh says the Innu actors had problems creating performance art in their second language.

"At first, they improvised in English. But it's difficult to communicate emotionally in a language that's not your own. So they improvised in Innu until they got something that felt good to them and then they translated it into English," says Walsh.