

Princess takes her culture to the white man

Princess Alanis Obomsawin is a gentle but persistent ambassador for her native Indian culture, as she tours and sings to audiences of children throughout Canada.

As she presents the songs, stories and customs of her people and talks about her life, she clearly feels that this should be of more than passing curiosity to her audience — that the western way of life has something to learn from the ways and wisdom of the Indian. But she would not, herself, frame it quite as strongly as that: she speaks simply of wanting to teach white children about Indians and help to eliminate some of the prejudice against her people.

For 16 years she has been singing in theatres, schools, children's camps, prisons and old people's homes, using primitive instruments to accompany her traditional songs of the North American Indians and telling their story. She began singing on the Odanak reserve where she lived, 75 miles northeast of Montreal, and at 24 she made her professional debut with a group of singers in an all-Canadian show in New York. When they asked her she was shy and reluctant, but eventually agreed to go. Afterwards, she backed hastily out of the limelight: "I thought, I've done it once, I'm never doing it again."

She did sing again, but by her own choice she concentrated on child audiences. Even today, she does relatively few adult shows and says she feels more secure with children. "I feel they're more honest," she said in a recent interview at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa, where she was appearing for 2½ weeks.

Her love for children, and a nagging concern that Indian youngsters often do not learn enough about their own culture and people, led her on to develop what she calls "perception kits" for use in schools. The kits contain maps, films and recorded stories about Indian life, usually narrated by an old person on an Indian reserve. She began making them while working as a consultant for the National Film Board. She then went on to make her own films about Indian life.

She is now 41. With many achievements behind her, she believes that before a person can become anything he must know who he is. "You can do many things, you can stand very straight and very well anywhere in the world so long as you know who you are," she says, speaking slowly and softly. But young people are losing their identity. "They don't know what their roots are. Everything is pressure and new things. How can they be good at



Princess Alanis with a group of Cree children at Moose Factory, Ontario.

anything when they don't even know who they are?"

Alanis says her own life has not been so easy: it took her years to develop the quiet confidence she now seems to radiate. At the age of nine she left the reserve with her parents to attend school in Trois-Rivieres, Quebec. As the only Indian child in her class she was taunted and beaten by her classmates. They called her a wild Indian and stared and jeered at her when history classes turned to stories of Indian massacres.

"It was not a happy time. The kids hated me for some reason, probably because they were afraid. But I was never ashamed of being an Indian." She doesn't blame the children. She feels their hatred was learnt from their parents.

Today she has few problems about the children she sings for, usually in Indian, but sometimes in French. She always explains the meaning of a song and the story behind it, so that audiences who don't understand the language won't be bored.

Alanis says she was able to grow up proud and without bitterness towards the white man because she was surrounded as

a youngster by wise old people and "showered by many beautiful things." She was given the title of "Princess" by the old people of her reserve as a compliment, but also on the understanding that she would bring something to her people.

The presence of old people is very important to a child's development, she says, and it is sad to see the spread of family breakdown and white people, especially, seeming to ignore the elderly. They were putting old people into homes younger and younger.

Old people were important to Indians. "The older you are the more precious you are, the wiser you are and the more we need you . . . Society is losing an awful lot by not having old people active in it."

Alanis is slim with dark hair framing her face. She describes herself as a sad person, but says she has lots of hope — hope that things will work out for her people. Progress is being made to eliminate prejudice towards Indians, but "there's so much to be done. I get very discouraged sometimes. And we have a lot of work to do ourselves. I don't want to put all the work on the outsider."