

The first half of the show is purely informational, says Walsh, to give the audience a history of the Innu and how the white people changed their way of life. But raw emotion and revealing dialogue take place in the second half of the show when the actors trace the experiences of one particular family.

The show is comprised of a series of vignettes that explore the theme of assimilation and illustrate the many ways the Innu are forced to conform or leave.

In one scene, the Talking Heads' song "Burning Down the House" blares through large loudspeakers while photographic images of white people's products, shopping malls, technology, and entertainment are flashed on the set, creating a superimposition over the native background. The four Innu actors remove their traditional native garb and put on the acid-washed jeans and Reebok running shoes of their white peers. The audience witnesses the collision of two radically different cultures and the effect it has on the easily-influenced teenagers.

In another eerie scene, actors wearing expressionless white masks push one of the Innu around the stage while white voices chant over a loudspeaker, "Assimilate or get out."

But the heavily symbolic scenes aren't as telling as the dramatizations of daily life of one Innu family.

The actors moved the audience and themselves to tears when they enacted the conflicts that one Innu family experiences. The influence of white people has permeated every aspect of their lives, and the parents and children are divided in the struggle to maintain the traditional lifestyle. The children eschew

the Innu language and traditional native activities such as hunting and trips to the bush in favour of sports and school-related activities of their English-speaking peers.

When the Innu people go into a local bar, they are greeted by a caricature of the white bigot, played with frightening accuracy by Ottawa actor Gerald Lunz. He taunts them with accusations of living off the white man's system and "having the best of both worlds".

"Are your ways so good?" retorts Anastasia Andrew. "Are you so perfect that we should all be like you?"

It is a question the white man cannot answer.

The white man's ways are not "so good", the Innu people realize. They learn about the ravages of alcoholism on a family when the father, played by Jack Pensahue, starts drinking and abusing his wife. Alcohol, a product of the white society, becomes another factor in the deterioration of the Innu family.

The family reaches its low point when the teenage son attempts suicide, shaking them enough to realize they want their old lifestyle back. They retreat to the bush where they set up a traditional camp and express their relief that the family has resisted the appealing calls of white culture and returned to their homeland. They share a few moments of thanksgiving and peace. But this tranquility is destroyed by a thundering recording of a military plane flying 100 feet above their heads.

During that one traumatic moment, the predominantly white audience and the Innu people on the stage share a common, horrifying experience.

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## Innu people fight by taking their show on the road

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Walsh says *Ntesinan* was aimed at making the public aware of the effects that white Canadians have had on the Innu and other native communities.

"The reaction we want to get from this show is simple. We want to inform people who have no knowledge of the Innu lifestyle about the difficulties they've suffered due to the encroachment of the white people on their lives," she says.

During the summer, the show toured the Labrador communities of Nain, Davis Inlet, Hopedale, Goose Bay and then home in Sheshatshit, where they were warmly received. The show was also featured at an international theatre festival in Sydney, Nova Scotia.

But Walsh says the group is eager to take the show on a tour of central and

western Canada during the fall.

"They are the people who need to see the realities of Innu life," says Walsh.

The group is currently applying for every funding opportunity available, but Marlene Rice, the theatre administrator at the Resource Centre for the Arts in St. John's, says they're not having much luck.

"*Ntesinan* is a social/political project, not a professional theatre production, so we don't qualify for most arts funding," says Rice.

Rice says they are now approaching special interest and social activist groups for funding.

"We have heard from other native groups across the country who are interested in the show but they have no money to give us. I think they would

endorse the project and support us but they can't help us financially," says Rice.

The project has the support of two native groups in Labrador, the band council of Sheshatshit and the Oblate Fathers of the Lady of Snows.

*Ntesinan* is billed as a collective creation conceived by the Innu community of Sheshatshit, but local critics have suggested it is a well-executed propaganda piece.

"This piece is definitely not propaganda. Propaganda comes from the mouth of propagandists but this story comes from the mouths of the people of Sheshatshit," asserts Walsh.

"It's life. If you can call that propaganda, well . . ." she shrugs.