

The New York Times

THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, JULY 18, 1993

Playhouse Celebrates Indian Heritage

By THOMAS CLAVIN

AS part of an effort to increase theater activity on the East End, producers are looking beyond revivals of musicals and comedies to dramas and original plays on serious issues.

One example will be this month, when the Oddfellows Playhouse in East Hampton presents "Wheels Over Indian Trails," about Russell C. Means, accompanied by events that examine Indians and their life on Long Island.

Like the Bay Street Theater Festival in Sag Harbor, an emerging emphasis on theater at the Art Barge in Amagansett and an increasing number of original summertime stage presentations at the John Drew Theater in East Hampton, the Oddfellows has attracted a growing audience by presenting new, ambitious work. The program this summer has added significance, because it focuses on a particular area of contemporary life.

The playhouse started in 1991, founded by Maria Pessino, who graduated from New York University with a degree in educational theater and studied modern dance at the Merce Cunningham Dance Studio. In the last two years the company has staged about 12 productions, mostly original works involving East End performers and playwrights. This summer's program is unusual in that instead of offering two or three productions Ms. Pessino is focusing on one play and events related to it.

"It's a risk putting all my eggs in one basket," she said, "but it's such an exciting and worthwhile basket. We'll do more productions in the fall. What's been very satisfying since Oddfellows began is the support from the year-round community."

'A Very Personal Motive'

"There's a very personal motive for putting this program together, and that's why I had to take a chance and do it. I wasn't born here, and because of that I've always felt drawn to the people who were here before me and before everyone else. That feeling's gotten stronger, and I needed to find a way to commemorate the native peoples."

An art exhibition, "Indian Territories," opens at the Renée Fotouhi Gallery in East Hampton on July 31, and there will be a benefit for the Shinnecock Cultural Museum, also on July 31. Workshops for children on Shinnecock crafts and folklore will be offered on Aug. 2 and 3, and there will be a forum on Indian women on Aug. 9 and a lecture on the history of Long Island Indians on Aug. 10.

Also on the schedule are two documentaries, "Walking in Both Worlds" and "The Hopi Prophecy." They will be shown on LTV, the public-access cable station in East Hampton on July 28, Aug. 1 and Aug. 12.

Play Opens on July 28

The centerpiece of the events is "Wheels Over Indian Trails," which opens on July 28. Written by Robert Savina of East Hampton, it concerns the life of Mr. Means, a member of the Oglala Sioux tribe, the friendship that the playwright and he formed a few years ago and their concerns.

"I wanted to compare being gay and the issue of gay rights with the issues and problems American Indians face," Mr. Savina said. "Russell was an inspiration, because he's never played the victim, but worked to reclaim his life in spite of discrimination and has stood on his own two feet."

Mr. Means has been highly visible since he became a leader of the American Indian Movement nearly 25 years ago. In his book "In the Spirit of Crazy Horse," Peter Mat-



Oddfellows Playhouse

The cast in rehearsal for "Wheels Over Indian Trails."

thiessen offers this description of Mr. Means in the early days of the movement:

"A former rodeo rider and Indian dancer, he wore traditional long braids and bone neck choker, red wind band, black shirt and embroidered vest, together with a beaded belt and turquoise jewelry, jeans and boots; in this outfit, he looked like a modern version of the tall and striking Lakota leaders of the 19th century, which made him all the more effective as a symbol. Like Dennis Banks, he was eloquent and charismatic, with an instinct for inflammatory statements, and 'Banks and Means' were soon synonymous with the A.I.M. cause all around the country. In the Plains States, it was Russell Means who came to stand for

to New York, Mr. Savina wanted to write about Mr. Means and learned that he was living on a Navajo reservation.

"I wrote up what I wanted to do and sent it to him with tobacco wrapped in red cloth, which is a peace symbol," Mr. Savina said. "He responded, and I flew out to the reservation. He was intimidating at first. Then he warmed up, and we spent four days together just talking and talking. At the end he agreed that we could work together."

The two developed an outline for Mr. Means's autobiography, but after no publisher expressed interest, they turned it into a film script. That, too, found no takers.

Mr. Savina, who by then had had a play produced Off Broadway, decided to turn elements of Mr. Means's life and their encounter into a theater piece. That went unproduced until Mr. Savina met Ms. Pessino.

"I applied for a job at Oddfellows last summer," he said. "I didn't get the job, but when I told Maria about the play, she was immediately interested."

'Instant Personal Connection'

"It flashed in front of me," Ms. Pessino recalled. "It was the story of the life journeys of two fascinating people, both of whom had felt displaced and had worked to reclaim their lives. There was an instant personal connection for me."

As time went on Ms. Pessino reached farther to organize events focusing on Indians, especially those on Long Island, who were among the first to encounter European settlers and to see their traditions, lands and populations dwindle.

An example is the Montauk tribe, which a judge in Riverhead declared extinct early in this century, although members of the tribe still live on the South Fork. The events this summer will include Montauks, Shinnecocks and Mattinecocks, in addition to Indians from off Long Island.

"I had to overcome many suspicions to put this program together," Ms. Pessino said. "A typical reaction

was, 'What's in it for her?' And I had to prove myself. Eventually, I convinced the Indian communities that I would get nothing out of this except a learning experience that I wanted to share, and some trust was built between us."

"I look at it as a way to spread awareness, an opportunity to dispel myths about Native Americans," said Robert Cooper, a Montauk and Town of East Hampton Councilman who will partake in the July 17 lecture. "It's very unusual to have a program like this that brings together on Long Island this area's indigenous people and Native Americans from elsewhere to freely discuss our history and concerns."

Roberta Hunter, a Shinnecock who is a Southampton Town Councilwoman, said that for several months she had been helping to organize the series of lectures and forums. Ms. Hunter, former director of the County Human Rights Department, will moderate the forum on Aug. 9, "Year of the World's Indigenous People: Women's Perspective."

She will be joined that night by Asiba Tupahache, a Mattinecock; Sherry Blakey, an Ojibwe who runs an education program on the Shinnecock Reservation, and Elsa Stamatooulou, is director of the United Nations Center for Human Rights.

"Very few people are cognizant of the fact that this is the Year of Indigenous People, so this series gives us a chance to focus on native Americans and indigenous people elsewhere," Ms. Hunter said. "I was impressed by Maria's commitment to explore many aspects, and I think for the people of East Hampton and Southampton the program represents an opportunity to think and reflect about Indian issues."

The most prominent Indian participant is Mr. Banks, an Anishinabe who co-founded the A.I.M. and was scheduled to share a lecture last night with Mr. Cooper.

Growing Public Interest

"I waited to call him until I had all my homework done and felt I could state a strong case," Ms. Pessino said. "Then it turned out he was warm and pleasant, and after my pitch he immediately said yes. The possibility that the lecture and some of the other events could be controversial didn't bother him, and now I'm not scared at all."

Because of "Wheels Over Indian Trails," much of the focus will be on Mr. Means, who said he had not seen the final version of the script but did read a draft. "I'm honored to have a play written about me, especially since I'm still alive," he said. "I'm going to attempt to be there for one of the performances and hope not to be overwhelmed."

'Heightened Public Interest'

"Dances With Wolves," "Black Robe," "Last of the Mohicans" and other recent movies have heightened public interest about Indians, and Mr. Means has been in demand as an actor. In "Last of the Mohicans," he played the chief who adopts the character played by Daniel Day-Lewis and he has been in Utah for the last few weeks making "Wind Runner" in which he plays the ghost of Jim Thorpe. He also completed a picture for Oliver Stone this year.

For Ms. Pessino, the play that she is directing and her program express feelings she has had for her adopted home since arriving from Cuba 15 years ago. "I've always been aware of who was here before me," she said. "And as interesting as the 350 years of Long Island history is, I keep thinking of the people who were here first. I'm hoping through this program to convey to audiences the bloodcurdling reality of what the Native Americans here have gone through and that they're still a strong and important presence."