

Program helps young writers find their voice

By LAURA STEVENS
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TORONTO

Founded in 1982, Native Earth Performing Arts (NEPA) is dedicated itself to creating and producing Native theatre and dance productions. In March 2005, the organization expanded its mandate when it launched the Young Voices program, designed to provide young people between the ages of 16 and 24 with new ways of expressing themselves through the written word.

"We try to foster anyone who would be interested, especially if they are just starting out," said Erika Iserhoff, community liaison for NEPA. "We just want to give them a chance."

Young Voices participants get an opportunity to learn what is involved in creating theatre and to meet with and share their ideas with other young writers. They will also take part in an intensive script workshop in preparation for the 19th annual Weesageechak Festival, a Toronto event hosted by NEPA that showcases and develops new works of Aboriginal theatre and dance. The next festival will take place in early 2007.

"The participants of this program will get to see how it is to be working as a practicing artist, just getting experience and what that means," said Iserhoff. "They will also get experience within the Native theatre community."

There haven't been a lot of Aboriginal playwrights, Iserhoff said. "So we wanted to foster that in terms of helping them tell their stories. Everyone has a different approach to what they want to be writing about and some of them tend to integrate traditional aspects of their own culture. Most of them are telling stories from an Aboriginal perspective."

One Young Voices participant, 27-year-old Candace Brunette, who is of Cree and French descent, is writing about her own life and experiences and issues that she deals with in everyday life as a Native woman of mixed blood.

"I started with nothing except for this

uncomfortableness that I had within myself that I had to deal with, my own experiences," said Brunette.

Wandering Womb is the title of her 40-minute piece. She has written more than 30 pages of the story she describes as being about a "young woman who is a non-status by government definition trying to find her place in the world."

"This piece plays a lot with colonization and patriarchy. It looks at how our own people have kind of perpetuated these stereotypes about us. Some of the issues are serious but I try to bring light to it with some humor," Brunette said.

On top of her work with Young Voices, Brunette works full-time at the First Nations House at the University of Toronto as a student recruitment officer. She is also a part-time under-graduate student in the university's Aboriginal studies program, and gives up her weekends to learn more about story creation. Brunette recently attended a two-day workshop that dealt with improvisational movement.

"I like my storytelling process to be organic," said Brunette. "I tend to try and use my body as a tool as much as possible in my writing."

She described her writing as sensual. "It engages not just your mind but also the senses in your body," she said.

"For instance, when you read about a description of something tasting good, your mouth starts to salivate. You want to engage the senses. You want your reader to feel it in their skin. This storytelling, this theatre has real effects on people."

Through the Young Voices program, Brunette said she has become more confident. "Not that I can take over the world or anything but there's a lot of support there."

According to Iserhoff, participants of the Young Voices program need to come into the program willing to do the work and demonstrating that they are dedicated and are going to see the program through. She suggests that if



Candace Brunette is one of the young writers taking part in the Young Voices program offered by Native Earth Performing Arts in Toronto.

individuals are seriously interested in learning more about the program, they should submit any type of written material they have produced.

"Once we have their submission, we will then try and bring them out to some of the workshops to see if that's what they like," said Iserhoff. "Then it would be just continuing with them, trying to support them in the areas that they would like to explore in terms of writing."

For more information about the Young Voices program, visit the Native Earth Performing Arts Web site at www.nativeearth.ca.

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