NTESINAN:

assimilate or get out

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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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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.

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 once 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 superimposure 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 suppport 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.