

For Immediate Release

DATE: January 2019

CONTACT: Kori Radloff, korir@rosetheater.org, 402-502-4641

***Return to Niobrara* juxtaposes history with modern issues in world premiere The Rose Theater**

(OMAHA, Nebr.) The Rose Theater will shine a light on the history of Chief Standing Bear in a world premiere play that has already garnered honors from the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.

The Rose's latest original creation, ***Return to Niobrara***, shares the story of Ponca Chief Standing Bear, who sued the United States government for the right to be deemed a person under the law. The play is framed through the eyes of Standing Bear's great-great-grandson, Steven, a middle school student who finds himself struggling with his own fight for identity. The show runs January 25 through February 10, 2019.

Return to Niobrara, written by celebrated playwright Mary Kathryn Nagle, is perhaps the first play written specifically for children to tackle the life story and legal drama of Chief Standing Bear. In the show, audiences will learn about a time when Omaha took center stage in the country's first civil rights battle. As director Roxanne Wach explains, the Ponca tribe, which once flourished in the Omaha area, were removed from their tribal land after a series of clerical errors and unfulfilled government treaties. The farm-based tribe was marched by bayonet point to Indian Territory in Oklahoma, a dusty and barren land not at all hospitable to their agricultural way of life. On the 600-mile Trail of Tears, disease and weather took its toll, and many people died, including Chief Standing Bear's son and daughter. Standing Bear's son last request was to be buried in Niobrara, motivating the Chief and 29 others to walk his remains back to Nebraska, treading two months, barefoot, through ice and snow.

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The Rose Theater
2001 Farnam Street
Omaha, NE 68102

t (402) 345-4849
f (402) 344-7255
www.rosetheater.org



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Upon their arrival, the Ponca were detained by General Crook at Fort Omaha (now the site of Metropolitan Community College), because they had not received consent from the U.S. government to leave Indian Territory in Oklahoma. Standing Bear then sued General Crook on a writ of habeas corpus, which means that they were unlawfully detained. The government argued that Indians were not persons under the law, therefore, habeas corpus did not apply. Judge Dundy heard the case at 15th & Dodge, with lawyer A.J. Poppleton (which Poppleton Street is named for) arguing the case. After two days, Judge Dundy sided in favor of Chief Standing Bear.

This is part of an ongoing project at The Rose, to bring historical stories about the region to the stage. “This is a project that builds the trajectory we started with *Buffalo Bill’s Cowboy Band* a couple of years ago. We want to mine that identity for all of its complexities and contradictions with the goal of helping children take up the mantle of change. This is a really important opportunity for us to create work that is being done in this community, for this community, about this community and region,” says Matthew Gutschick, Rose artistic director.

Gutschick felt strongly that Nagle was the right person to bring this story to the stage. “Mary Kathryn had already written a play about Standing Bear’s story that was focused on adults and the process that led to his trial, to great acclaim. She was excited about the idea of a story to parallel history with a story about a contemporary kid,” he says.

Nagle is a playwright who also works as a partner at a law firm specializing in tribal sovereignty of Native nations and peoples. As an attorney, she has spent most of her career fighting for the rights of Native people. Born in Oklahoma City, she is an enrolled citizen of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma and serves as the executive director of the Yale Indigenous Performing Arts Program. As a playwright, her work focuses on telling Native stories in an effort to bring needed change. She has had more than 10 plays, primarily portraying stories about Native Americans in history and the modern world. Recently, her play *Sovereignty* received critical acclaim after its run in Washington, D.C., including praise from Gloria Steinem, and she is frequently been called upon to write for Shondaland productions, the storytelling company founded by Shonda Rhimes (*Grey’s Anatomy*, *Scandal*).

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In Nagle's script, the modern-day portion of ***Return to Niobrara*** deals with an issue happening every day in our country, according to Gutschick. "Everywhere we have shared this piece, including at the Kennedy Center, people have had questions about the contemporary parallel and how drawn from facts it is," he says. "It is absolutely drawn from facts. Mary Kathryn Nagle is a lawyer, and the contemporary story is initiated by a kid who is getting picked on pretty mercilessly – and he fights back. As a response to that, the school decides to enforce all of its policies, including a hygiene policy with a hair length requirement. This is a scenario that children, men and women across our country face on a yearly, monthly and daily basis. The play raises a question about identity that has not been resolved."

In order to bring an authentic portrayal of Standing Bear's life, ***Return to Niobrara*** features a cast of richly-talented Native American actors, brought to Omaha from all corners of the country. Albert "Abby" Ybarra, who plays Standing Bear, is a registered member of the Pasua Yaqui tribe. Now living in Washington, D.C., Ybarra has a rich resume of stage, television and movie roles. Kenneth Ramos, a talented actor originally from Los Angeles who plays Steven, was raised on the Barona Indian Reservation in East San Diego County and is registered with the Barona Band of Mision Indians. Nathalie Standingcloud, a member of the Cherokee, Creel and Salish-Kootenai Nation from Oklahoma and Allison Hicks, an enrolled citizen from the Prairie Band Potawatomi and Choctaw Nations are also visiting artists performing in ***Return to Niobrara***.

"These artists have been extremely dedicated to this process. We are so lucky to have them visiting with us in Omaha to tell this story," says Gutschick. "The fact that they are interested in this project speaks to the quality of the writing and the authenticity of the voice inside the play."

Authenticity is very important to the cast and crew of ***Return to Niobrara***. Two Ponca consultants have been working with the artists throughout the design process. Parts of the script have been translated into the Ponca language. Michael Murphy, a Native American musician, will perform live music during the show, helping to bridge the transitions from historical events to modern day scenes. Wach reached out to Native artists, several of whom have shared their family's traditional regalia and inspired the patterns and designs used in the show.

"The cast and all the people we have worked with have added so much more dimension to our research, and to the show," she says.

Return to Niobrara was included as a part of the 2018 New Visions / New Voices Conference at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. The show was featured and workshopped at the conference in April 2018. Several of the artists who participated in the Kennedy Center production are now appearing in the world premiere on The Rose stage.

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Return to Niobrara runs January 25 – February 10, 2019, with performances on Fridays at 7 p.m., Saturdays at 2 p.m. and 5 p.m., and Sundays at 2 p.m. The show is recommended for ages 8 and older. Interpretation for audience members who are deaf or hard of hearing will be offered at the 2 p.m. show on Saturday, February 2. Audio description services for audiences who are blind or have low vision will also be available at this performance. A sensory-friendly performance will be presented at the 5 pm performance on Saturday, February 2.

Tickets for ***Return to Niobrara*** are available for \$20 by calling The Rose Box Office at (402) 345-4849 or online at www.rosetheater.org. Rose members receive four free tickets to the production.

Return to Niobrara is sponsored by Children's Hospital & Medical Center, Nebraska Furniture Mart, the National Endowment for the Arts, MapFund, the Claire M. Hubbard Foundation, the Nebraska Arts Council, and the Nebraska Cultural Endowment. The play was workshopped and presented as a rehearsed reading in April 2018 at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts as part of New Visions/New Voices 2018.

About The Rose

The Rose Theater is one of the largest and most accomplished children's theaters in the nation, with a reputation for enriching the lives of children and families through top-quality professional productions and arts education.

In 2016, American Theatre magazine named The Rose one of the 20 top children's theaters in the United States.

The Rose is committed to making the arts accessible to all children, providing opportunities for thousands of children throughout the community to attend shows and participate in classes each year. Over the course of a year, approximately 70,000 people attend the public performances held at the theater, and nearly 30,000 students attend field trip shows annually.

The theater strives to introduce young people to a mix of both traditional favorites and ground-breaking original productions. A number of plays and musicals have made their world premiere on The Rose stage, including *Van Gogh & Me*, *The Meaning of Maggie*, *Pete the Cat: The Musical*, *Sherlock Holmes & the First Baker Street Irregular*, *Zen Ties*, *Leo Lionni's Frederick*, *A Palette of Possibility*, *Thumbelina*, *Buffalo Bill's Cowboy Band*, and *The Grocer's Goblin & The Little Mermaid*.

We take pride knowing that The Rose is the place where children of all ages experience theater for the first time, and we are dedicated to helping them appreciate theater for a lifetime.