

Tuma Theatre:

An endangered program

Tuma Theatre was a 3 credit course at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks. The class consisted of Yupik and Inupiaq Eskimo, Tlingit, Haida and Athabaskan Indian students. The course gave the Native students the opportunity to dramatize their legends, myths, folktales, history and contemporary issues. It offered students a chance to express personal feelings concerning Native identity using both traditional and western modes of dramatic presentation.

The students have traveled extensively with the troupe. In addition to their performances, they have conducted workshops. They performed at the Alaska Federation of Natives Convention in Anchorage in October, 1979 and 1980.

Through the funding of the Kellogg Foundation the Tuma Theatre was able to take the show on tour for two weeks in May of 1979. They traveled to Sitka, Mt. Edgecumbe, Juneau and Seattle where they performed for the National Bilingual Conference. They also went to Portland where they represented Alaska in the West Coast Children's Theatre Festival and finally to Bethel. In October, 1980-81, they returned from a tour to San Francisco, Los Angeles, Hawaii, and New Zealand.

Last year, an evaluation was taken of the performances in the school districts. Tuma Theater performed for a total of 4,542 in the elementary schools. Out of the 95 teachers that evaluated the performances, 28 said it was "outstanding" and 42 said it was "excellent." Some of the comments the teachers had were: "The stories were very interesting and it was great to see Alaska Native kids proud of their heritage"; "a good presentation of a different culture"; "the best I've ever seen!" When asked the question if the teachers wanted to see Tuma return to their schools, their replies were: "Children seem to want to know more about the Native culture"; "We have several Indian and Eskimo children in our school, their culture should be shared," and "I think all children could benefit from these performances." "One way to preserve a culture and educate people of our universal heritage."

There are some questions as to whether Tuma Theater will be offered at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks this year.

The funding source for a director has not been appropriated for the continuance of the class. Students have signed up for the class and funds are available for the traveling performers. Letters have been written to the Dean of Arts and Sciences at the University of Alaska in support of Tuma Theatre. One letter said, "It is very exciting to see young college students join with others to share their cultural heritage with our elementary students." Another letter from the Alaska State Council on the



Yupik Raven Mask

Scene from "Raven Feeds"

Arts urges UAF's continued support and sponsorship of the Tuma Theatre. The Alaska Association for the Arts wrote: "The Alaska Association for the Arts unanimously supports Tuma Theatre." Another letter from the Institute of Alaska Native Arts reads, "It is regrettable that Alaska's only performing arts group representational of all Alaska Native cultures should no longer receive support from the University. . . . I would

urge you to reinstate the funds for Tuma Theatre. The value of the group is far more than monetary, for the retention and promotion of Alaska Native Cultural Heritage cannot be measured in dollars. The enthusiastic response of those who have viewed performances, and the growth of students who have participated in the program, provide ample evidence of the strength and beauty of the Tuma Theatre."