

**Theater group started as economic development project:**

# **Naa Kahidi Theater attracts national attention**



*Wearing costumes and masks, the Naa Kahidi cast gathers outside the Anchorage Historical and Fine Arts Museum (left to right) Diane Benson, Fred White, Gary Waid, Nellie Lord and Charles Natkong, Sr.*

What began as an attempt to strengthen the economy of a southeast community has become an important event in the cultural history of Alaska. The Naa Kahidi Theater, originally from Saxman Island, will soon be performing in the Smithsonian Institute. Its brilliant scripts, handsome costumes and masks and talented Native actors have gained national attention.

Now in its third year, the Naa Kahidi Theater has succeeded in combining the performing arts of dance, music, oratory and story telling. It has logged thousands of miles of travel and hundreds of performances.

A joint venture between Sealaska Corporation and Sealaska Heritage Foundation, the Native theater was founded in cooperation with Cape Fox Corporation. The goal was both to preserve some of the rich culture of the region and to generate income by performances for Alaska's summer visitors in the Ketchikan area.

CEDC played a role with Bush Development Fund grants in both 1987 and 1988. "CEDC's grant was instrumental in establishing the theater, and contributed directly to our success," wrote David Katzeek, president of the Sealaska Heritage Foundation.

The grant program is made possible through CEDC's relationship with National Co-op Bank. A percentage of the earnings from loans placed by CEDC in Alaska are dedicated to grants to help development projects in rural Alaska.

This year the Naa Kahidi Theater is no longer performing to visitors as they step off their cruise ships in Southeast Alaska. The group is on the road. After a series of performances at the Anchorage

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Photo by Malcolm B. Roberts

**Naa Kahidi continued:**

## **"An enterprise activity that speaks to the heart"**

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Historical and Fine Arts Museum in August, they will travel to San Francisco for the Indian Trade Fair which begins September 27. From there, they will appear at various events throughout the west coast. Next spring they will be featured at the Smithsonian.

For the performers in the cast, the theater has meant paying jobs and recognition of their talents. To most of them, however, it has meant a great deal more.

Diane Benson, 34, actress and director, has been with the group for a year and a half. To her, it has been a spiritual experience.

"When we toured Southeast last year with *Keet Shagoon*, the story of the origin of the Killer Whale," she recalls, "the elders responded so positively. We knew we were doing the right thing. It was pretty emotional. We had standing ovations after every performance."

One elder said, "I wish I had seen this when I was young."

She was surprised when elders asked if they could introduce the cast to their young people as sober people. The cast didn't mind. "The show becomes a spiritual thing, and you can't do something like this and drink. Alcohol kills the spirit and the soul."

Benson, a Tlingit of the Sea Tern Clan, studied Shakespeare at UAA. "I have been fortunate to take the skills I learned in the Western culture and apply them to this," she says.

She sees Naa Kahidi as a vehicle to pull the energy of Native people together.

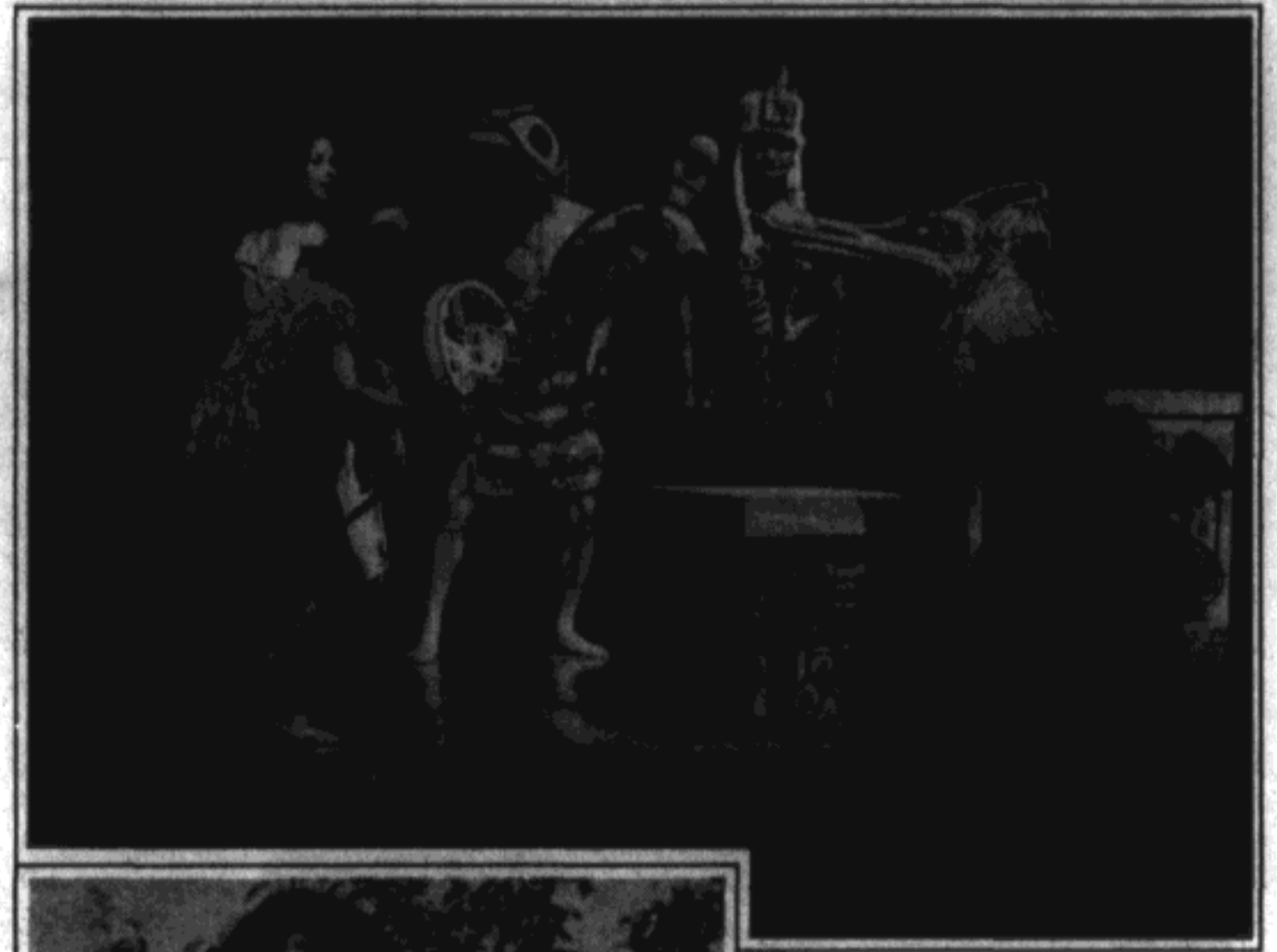
"It gives people a lot of hope," she believes. "Kids say, 'I could do that. This is one of *our* stories.'"

This year the cast is doing *Gunakadeit* (The Sea Monster), a dramatic adaption of a myth told round the world. Written by Dave Hunsaker in consultation with Tlingit elders and scholars, it is a story of love and honor and betrayal and redemption. The script is written and performed in a combination of Tlingit and English.

Naa Kahidi has meant work and income for carpenters, technicians, mask and prop makers, stage managers and actors.

But to Diane Benson it's much more than a job. "It's our art. It's our culture. It's our life."

The leadership of CEDC couldn't be happier. President Perry Eaton sums it up, "Enterprise activities that speak to the heart of the people are the best of all."



*(Above) Naa Kahidi Theater performances were well received by elders and drew standing ovations during tour of Southeast communities.*

*(Left) Director and actress Diane Benson sees the Naa Kahidi Theater as a vehicle to pull the energy of Native people together.*

Photos by Malcolm B. Roberts