

'Theater to the Bush' Program To Teach Villages Thru Dramas

By DOUGLAS BURNSIDE

If operations proceed as planned, the University of Alaska department of drama will soon take a significant step toward lessening the communication problem that exists between the Alaskan Native culture and the Western culture which is gradually assimilating it.

The drama department, headed by Lee Salisbury, plans to send a small, tightly-knit

group of experienced collegiate actors and technicians to remote villages throughout Alaska this summer. Upon arrival, this group would produce simply staged plays, free of charge, for all who wanted to watch.

It is said that the face-to-face contact of a well acted production speaks far more eloquently than can any film or classroom lecture, and it is upon this assumption that Mr. Salisbury is basing his plans.

There are many excellent scripts available which embody western standards and attitudes, yet illustrate the common problems which bind all men together. It is Mr. Salisbury's proposal to present these scripts to remote bush areas of Alaska.

The group of actors and

technicians is available from the Drama Workshop, and for the past ten years the group has toured two major productions each year to such communities as Juneau, Nome, Ketchikan, Anchorage, and Whitehorse. Their repertoire has included such plays

as "The Lady's Not for Burning," "The Fantasticks," "Look Homeward Angel," "Little Mary Sunshine," "Glass Menagerie," and many more. The group has won Best Production awards at

two international drama festivals in Canada, and, at the last festival, won five out of six awards in production, directing, scene design, and acting for its presentation of Harold Pinter's play, "The Caretaker."

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This project is called, appropriately enough, the Theater to the Bush program. Its personnel would be drawn from the pool of existing talent currently enrolled at the University. Its director, stage manager, and staff writer would be salaried, professional staff with extensive touring experience.

According to Salisbury, "The intent of the project is to bring the village people closer to non-Native environment by demonstrating that all people have common problems. The Natives presently in the bush country have gotten a very fragmented view of Western culture through limited experience with radio, and to a small degree, television."

The proposed itinerary of the Theater to the Bush involves three 18-week tours, from September 14 through January 21 (Fall semester) during 1966, 1967 and 1968. It is hoped that the tour can be offered for credit, but this is not definitely known as yet. The first four weeks of the 18 involve production preparation, consisting of rehearsals, set construction, painting, prop and costume construction, publicity preparation, advance bookings, etc.

Then, for the next ten weeks the tour of the villages and the actual production of the plays would occur. Presently scheduled for visiting are Kotzebue, Nome, Bethel, Unalakleet, Pt. Barrow, Ft. Yukon, Andreuski, Hoonah, Metlakatla, Sitka, Klukwan, Minto and Nenana.

The final four weeks would involve the conclusion of the tour, with local performances of the show throughout the North Star Borough school system, equipment repair and storage, seminar sessions for program evaluation, and finally, the writing of the report.

The intent of the Theater to the Bush is to stress the problems common to all mankind. Suitable scripts would be chosen to emphasize the similarities rather than the differences between peoples.

The Alaskan Native culture is rich in myths and legends which would lend themselves quite well to dramatization,

and could be included in the repertory of the troupe. Limitation of troupe size, plus the unsophistication of audiences would require careful editing of existing material and skillful dramatization of Native legends, but the finished scripts, tested before many Native audiences would prove invaluable to other similar touring groups.

Any village with suitable facilities (a large room with movable seating, electricity and heat) would qualify for a Theater to the Bush visit. The play would be produced without charge, and the troupe would live in public facilities or with families and would pay a nominal daily fee for room and board. Any village, regardless of its financial condition, could host the Theater to the Bush troupe.

The benefits are not all one-sided, however. Troupe members would also benefit from the experience, as the Bush program will require a versatility far beyond that which a normal college drama program requires. Performing under varying and difficult conditions would stimulate adaptability in the actors.

The vastness of the state and the isolation of its villages can be diminished only by providing its village people with more frequent and enriching contacts with the larger society. Theater to the Bush can make a unique and valuable contribution toward this end.