

Tuma Theater to travel to villages this spring

By MARGARET NELSON

Students in the University of Alaska Tuma Theater will be traveling to 14 Alaska Native villages this spring to perform and pass on what they have learned of Alaska Native culture.

"I think it is very important to learn our traditional ways before they are lost," Alaska Native Lolly Shepard from Nome said.

Tuma Theater (pronounced 'Duma' meaning path or trail in Yupik Eskimo) began in the spring semester of 1979 at the University of Alaska through a course offered in Native theater.

The course was set up to give Native students of the university the opportunity to learn about their heritage through the use of songs and dances specific to their cultural areas. The students then shared what they had learned by performing numerous myths and legends.

The 20 students in the course came from all areas of the state, including

four different cultural areas; Yupik, Inupiaq, Tlingit, and Athabaskan Indian. Tuma's first performance was Storyknife at the 1979 Festival of Native Arts.

And Tuma has not stopped there. Since that time Tuma has traveled to such places as Southeastern Alaska, Oregon, and Washington. Reaction to their shows has been tremendous. Tuma is gathering a large following.

This past March the Native dancers in the Tuma Theater went to Fort Yukon, Alaska, to conduct workshops and perform dances and stories they had learned from their parents and grandparents.

"Our aim," said faculty sponsor Frank Buske, "is the preservation of culture of all of Alaska's Native people."

The preservation of the Native culture is most important to Tuma Theater, and it shows in their performances.

"You can probably remember listening to stories told to you when

you were little by your grandparents and parents," dancer Terry Solomon of Kaltag narrates. "You can probably remember also how they made part of their personality come through the story and how they wanted you to really listen and to learn."

And that's just what the dancers do during their performance. They give part of themselves to the audience.

During the show we will "express to you through song, dance and voice, a glimpse of the Raven as he is seen in the Athabaskan, Tlingit, Haida and Inupiaq tradition," Solomon said.

"When I was young, I'd hear stories from the old people," dancer Joseph Pete from Stebbins said. "Some say those days are gone, but I'd ask myself, 'how can those days be gone when the old people know those days as if they were yesterday.'"

Our Native beliefs have been avoided for too long," Bobby Solomon of Fort Yukon said. "It's our belief, the Native people of Alaska, and we

shall keep it going."

The director of Tuma Theater, Josh Weiser, was very pleased with the performance of his group.

"I think it moved very well... I was watching not only the people who were acting, but the audience reaction. Those little kids were right on their toes—old people too," Weiser said. "They held their concentration all the way through the performance which is really important. And from what I hear that is a compliment from a Fort Yukon audience."

Tuma Theater also participated last March in a conference sponsored by TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages). The conference was important to Tuma because they were interested in showing TESOL the things that the students do in retrieving legends, myths, history and making them available in English.

The Theater just recently returned from a trip to Seattle where they

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participated in the Children's Theater Festival and performed for two schools: McGilvra and Dearborn Park.

Twelve students and Director Weiser plan to leave Fairbanks for the villages on May 9. They plan to visit: Anaktuvuk Pass, Point Barrow, Wainwright, Point Hope, Nome, Kotlik, St. Mary's, Kaltag, Togiak, Bethel, Tanana, Huslia, Eek and Toksook Bay.

Along with "Raven Faces" from past performances, Tuma will take with them two new stories; "Raven and Snipe" and "The Skeleton Woman."



TUMA MEMBERS CHARLES NATONG (LEFT) AND SILAS ALEXANDER ENACT A RAVEN LEGEND DURING THIS YEAR'S FESTIVAL OF NATIVE ARTS. PHOTOGRAPH (c) 1980 BY KURT E. SAVIKKO.