

Acting makes her hungry to show Aleut culture

By BILL HESS

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Before the rise of the Ayatollah Khomeini, Aleut actress Jane Lind performed in the ancient Persian city of Tehran for the Shah of Iran. Now, she is preparing to launch a two-month expedition into the Bush country of her native Alaska, where she will not only be performing in front of rural audiences, but will be teaching playmaking skills to young people in the communities she visits.

Despite the glamour the late Shah was famous for, Lind's trip into the Bush could be considered a step up. The performance for the Shah was just one of many Lind put in during a three-year tour of Europe and the Middle East. Under the direction of Andre Serban, she performed in three Greek plays, hitting such far away places as India and Israel.

Always, she observed the strong cultural heritages in the places she visited. This only served to remind her of other cultures, cultures which existed in a land cold in climate but warm in spirit, half a world away.

"It made me even more hungry to show my heritage," Lind remembers. "I could see how big our land is, with its many cultures. I felt as yet unused theatrically."

The traditions of her Aleut people were basically being ignored in drama, Lind knew, and, although perhaps to a slightly lesser extent, so were those of other Alaskan groups, such as the Tlingits, the Athabascans, the Eskimos and other groups.

"As we went from place to place, images of what could be done just kept knocking me in the head," Lind recalls. Now, perhaps, some of those images can take a more solid shape. Lind will be working with Dana Hart, a professional actor who has been working with Alaska Repertory Theatre's rural "Playmaking" program since it began three years ago, to teach dramatic skills.

She will also be helping village youth develop their own plays.

In the past, student plays have been based on traditional stories as well as on their own feelings about what is happening in Rural Alaska in modern times.

"I am overwhelmed to think of what this project is going to do," says Lind. "What excites me about it is the looking up of old legends, and the feeling of having pride about who you are that this can help bring."

Lind began acting very early in life. In 1969, she graduated from the Institute of Native American Arts, a high school in Santa Fe, New Mexico. While there, she performed in many plays, including classics such as "Oedipus the King," and theatricals illustrating Indian stories and legends, such as "Butterflies are



Jane Lind, Aleut actress.

Free," and "Sly Old Bag."

At the school, she caught the attention of a very prominent woman in the Southwest, who told her she had a great deal of talent and should develop it. With her encouragement, she joined a Native American theater group which traveled extensively in the plains and some western states, performing largely for Indian audiences on reservations.

Then she attended New York University on scholarship for three years. Although she had not yet finished school, when the First Native American Theater Company opened in New York, Lind found the opportunity to work there too tempting to resist.

"They still wanted me to come back later and get my Bachelor of Fine Arts degree," Lind remembers. "I didn't think they would ask to see my diploma when I showed up somewhere for an audition." Lind opted for experience.

Not only did she participate in the drama tour which took her to the mideast, but Lind studied in Paris for a time under the tutelage of Peter Brook, whom she describes as

"one of the great men of theater."

"I left Paris very enriched," she says. Brook brought in actors from all over the world. A workshop was formed where the techniques and forms used by actors from diverse places and cultures were analyzed.

For example, says Lind, the ways she vocalized sounds were compared to the way Japanese in attendance did.

Lind also went on another tour of the Great Plains, and has been involved in some small film and television parts, as well as in many plays.

She was once involved with a performance of "Black Elk Speaks" in Oklahoma. There was an Indian boarding school nearby, where the students had already been scheduled to be bused to another place to see another show.

"We don't want to go to the other one, we want to go to 'Black Elk Speaks,'" Lind recalls the students' reaction. So strongly did they feel that they began selling their jewelry so that they could buy tickets and just skip the bus trip.

When Lind and the other Indian actors heard about

this, they refused to go on until the students were refunded their money so they could buy their jewelry back. They then staged the show for free.

"I saw the hunger of identifying with who you are," Lind recalls. "And the pride that can bring."

If there was pride, there was also prejudice, blatant prejudice out on those plains. "We were snowed in in Omaha, Nebraska," Lind explains. "There was a cattle baron. 'You better not walk down the streets in Omaha,' he told us. 'Someone will shoot you!'"

Whether she would have or not before, Lind walked down the streets of Omaha. "I feel a little bit of that same attitude in Alaska," she laments.

While working with the First Native American Theater Company, Lind became involved with a play which she fears may have relevance to Alaska come 1991. The company was started by a Kiowa from Oklahoma named Hanay Geigomaha.

Geigomaha was a playwright and centered all of his works on Native America. They dealt with legends, alco-

hol, stereotypes, anything relevant.

Some of his work deals with what Lind calls the "present land sales," in Oklahoma and Alaska. Indian-owned land in Oklahoma has been taken out of being held in trust by the federal government. The Indian owners can sell it at will. "Whenever someone needs a little money, they sell a little bit of land," Lind explains. "There is always someone, Chevron or other oil companies, ready to take it."

With the land goes heritage, and the little remaining (legal) interests the people hold in the land.

"I see that as being very close to what is happening here," says Lind. "After 1991, it will be interesting to see what happens." That is the year that lands and shares held in Alaska Native Regional and Village corporations will lose the protection they now have. Anyone will be able to buy or sell stock in the corporations that own Native lands, and the lands and corporations will be subject to taxation as well.

After Lind finishes up the Alaska Repertory Theatre tour of the Bush, she plans to return to her home village of Chignik Lake for a visit. She has spent precious little time in Alaska since she left at the age of 12 to attend Chemawa, Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding school in Oregon.

She will then return to the Lower 48 where, if all goes well, she will appear with David Carridine in Tulsa, Okla. for a production of "Black Elk Speaks."

"I'd like to take anything I can get," she explains her goals after that. "Even in soap operas. I'd like to take on any roles, a doctor, a lawyer; which will show that there are other races in the world besides Caucasians. One day, Lind is hoping to find a good role where she can bring out her Aleut heritage."

She witnessed the value of such work when she met the old people of the Plains. "The Elders kept coming up to us. They would have tears in their eyes, and they would say 'we never thought this would happen in our lifetime, where the young people would be picking up these things.'"

Some say the Aleut culture is dead, killed first by the Russians, and then the Americans. Lind knows better. "Our own culture has been depleted? Usurped? Whatever word you want to use to describe what happened. Still, in our being, it's there. Our mannerisms are still there. It just needs the right spark to bring it out."

"I'm an Aleut, yes. But I'd like to be known as a damn good actress; who can do great in the classics or anything. But when that part comes along, that special part for an Aleut woman, I will be ready!"