

Tlingit actor fights identity to play tribesman

By Bill Hess
Tundra Times

When it came time to cast the role of Kadashan William in the award-winning Alaskan play, "Lady Rankin Meets the Pagan," folks in the know said Gary Waid was "a natural" for the part. The 35-year-old Tlingit actor had already proven his dramatic ability in a string of plays, and now he seemed the perfect person to bring life to the role of a fellow tribesman.

For Waid, however, the character of Kadashan William turned out to be perhaps the greatest challenge he has yet faced onstage. "It was not such a natural role as people seemed to think," he explained shortly before a performance of the play. "I worked at it, and worked at it, and worked at it, and worked at it!"

"What made it so difficult for me was keeping the separate realities I was taught from the beginning . . . on stage, you are 100 percent of the character you're playing. But when you walk away from the performance, you strip the character off and become yourself again."

Although Kadashan William lived in Sitka in the 1870's, and Waid lives in Juneau in the 1980's, the actor found so many parallels between the fictitious character and himself, that he had a hard time separating the two personalities.

"Lady Rankin" was written by Alaskan playwright David Hunsaker and was the winner of the 1982 Great Alaska Play-rush competition. It tells the story of cultural conflict as Lady Rankin (played by April Cauthon), a "proper Victorian Ethnographer" has Kadashan William perform the Raven dance for her in exchange for English lessons.

The two recognize the cultural barriers between them and seek to understand one another. Understanding cannot come without dredging up a great deal of pain. The action may be set more than 100 years ago, but Waid found that the misunderstandings between the two cultures and the emotional conflicts to be virtually the same today.

"I want Kadashan William on stage," Waid explains his struggle to get the role down correctly. "I don't want Gary Waid on stage! I want to leave him in the dressing room for an hour!" Waid claims it took him virtually the entire rehearsal period to learn to control his feelings and let Kadashan William come to life on the stage.

Judging from the reviews, Waid was successful. The play

was a hit during its seven-day run at the Red Ram in Anchorage. It had also played to sold-out houses in Juneau's Perseverance Theatre in February and March, but other commitments forced Waid to leave the role to a white actor there.

Annie Stokes Hutchinson of Perseverance Theatre directed the play.

Waid first got into acting about 10 years ago, when a friend convinced him to try out for some minor roles in a couple of plays playing at the Juneau-Douglas theater. Shortly after, Waid left acting to attend college in Washington to further what he figured would be a political career, and to begin raising a family with his wife, Kirsten.

His taste of acting was pleasant enough to inspire a try for a role in "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," at the Perseverance Theatre when he returned to Juneau two years ago. "I auditioned for any part I could get my hands on!" Waid recalls. "I wound up being cast as Chief Bromden (the role played by Will Sampson in the film version)."

Waid stands 5'10" and weighs 160 pounds. Bromden is a gigantic man. "Hell, I haven't got the size," Waid recalls his reaction to landing that part. "Then I remembered that with theater, you can create the illusion of what you want the audience to see."

Waid remembers an audience reaction to the play. "After the lights went down, there was five to 10 seconds of absolute silence before the applause began. That's when I knew we did it, when I knew the audience had gotten the message and had something to think about. There was that silence, that golden silence!" He had been accepted as Chief Bromden.

After "Cuckoo's Nest" Waid landed the role of a Chicago Italian in the newspaper drama "Front Page."

"It was a treat for me to do," he recalls, "to learn I could play the role of 'Diamond Louie'!" Then the Tlingit actor landed the role of Groomio in Shakespeare's "The Taming of the Shrew."

"This was another stretch for me to do. Shakespeare is hard to do. It takes a lot of hard work and concentration."

Maybe, but when Waid took on the part of a chaplain in "Mother Courage," a drama which looks at the effect of war on people over a long period of time, he found himself struggling with his own soul. The war scenes brought back memories of his own exper-

iences in Viet Nam, and forced him to confront problems he had been trying to avoid.

Waid had gone into the war gung-ho, believing in the rightness of it all. "I came back 180 degrees from when I went out," he explains. "I was packed with anger, confusion; because of my participation in it." The anger and confusion just about drove him out of "Mother Courage."

"Do you really want to quit?" Waid recalls his wife Kirsten asking.

"No, but I should!" he responded.

"No," she argued, "you don't want to quit, so don't do it!" With her encouragement, he stuck it out, and got in contact with other veterans who helped him put the war into perspective in his life.

"Theater!" Waid muses. "In its crazy little way, it has been doing a lot for me in life!"

Though he professes great love for theater, Waid has not been able to make a living at it in Alaska, and says he has never really considered doing so. Although he was paid for his performance in "Lady Rankin," and probably will be for some future works with Perseverance Theatre, Waid has

mostly worked for free.

"The dollars fine - don't get me wrong," he says, "but I have never done it for the dollars. I hope I never do. If I do, then I know I'm getting jaded."

Waid has worked at a variety of jobs, and says he has no fear of ever not being able to get a job in Juneau when he needs one. Kirsten works on as a secretary for legislative affairs. "I push a mean hand-truck," laughs Waid, noting that in Juneau there are always offices and people moving around and work to be done.

His former goal of pursuing a political career has evaporated. There is too much stress of a kind which he does not feel he needs in such a job, says Waid.

"I think for the summer, I'll go back to a favorite career of mine," says Waid, "being a house-husband." He plans to take his 10-year-old daughter, Eldri, and son Jake, 8, boating, fishing, to the beach, and whatever.

"I want so very much to be a part of my children's life," he explains, "and I want my kids to love me! Realistically, I know there will be a generation gap between us. I hope there will not be a com-

munication gap!"

Waid found that in playing the role of Kadashan William, he was able to learn more about his own culture. "I lost some of my Nativeness because my mom lost it herself," he explains. "She went to school and got it disciplined out of her. It was rulers across the knuckles or hair pulled if she dared to speak Tlingit or Haida. To this day she can't speak it, although she can understand what they're saying when she's at a feast, sitting with her friends."

"It's going to come back. The kids are ready! I'm ready! The revival is ready! We're getting rid of the old idea of how wrong it is to be Native!"

"But the ones with the knowledge have been so conditioned to keeping it inside, it is hard for them to release it. Not that they don't want to, they do!"

"But it's so hard to find the educators to get the kids ready. When you find a teacher there are 60 students. In Juneau, they are trying a new idea, you go to learn with your kids; I am planning to go myself with Eldri and Jake."

Waid's father was from Oklahoma, and his wife is Nor-

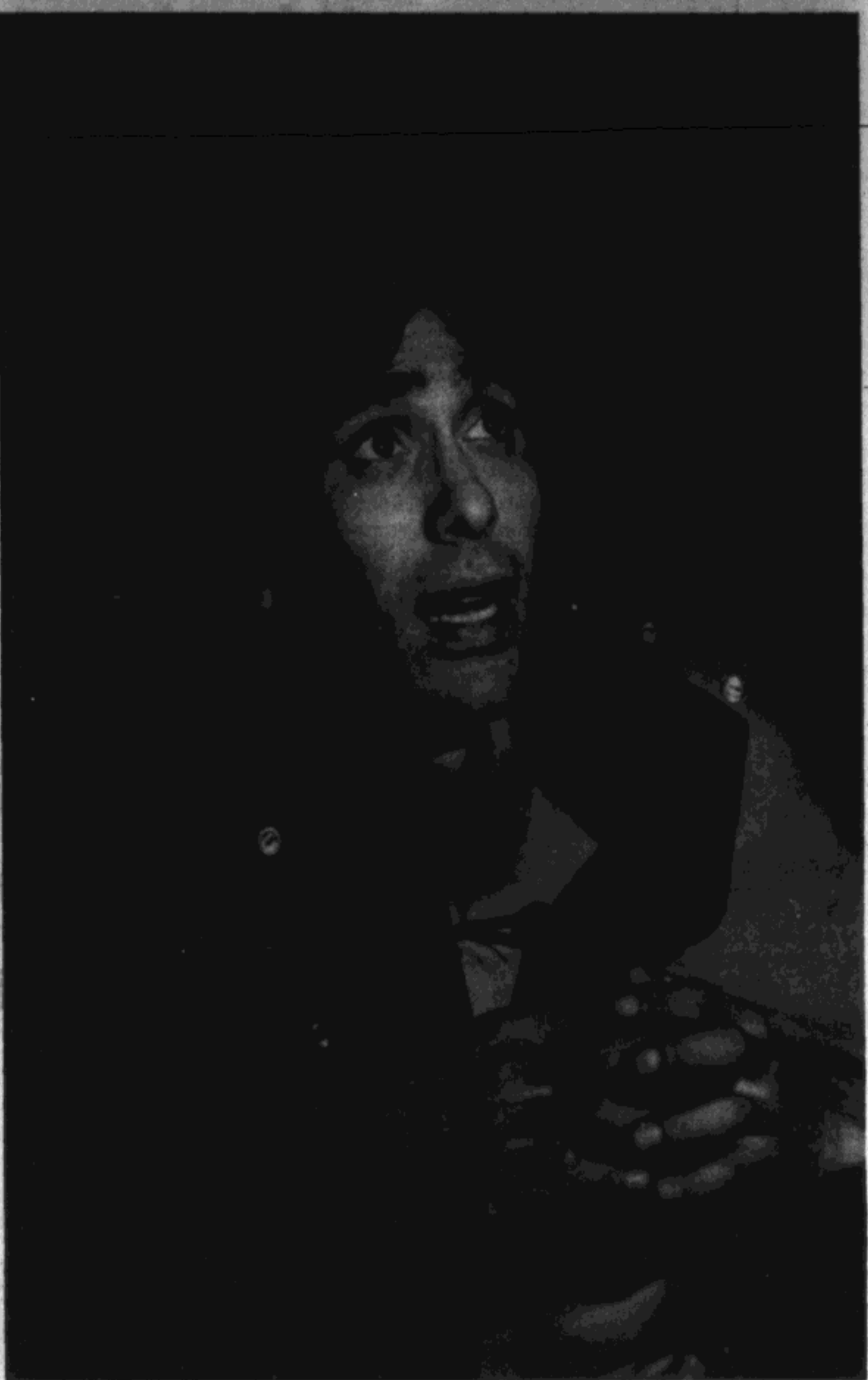


PHOTO BY BILL HESS

For Gary Waid, the role of an ancestral tribesman was more difficult than any other part.

Klansman part difficult for actor

(Continued from Page Three)
wegian. Yet he believes that when it comes to being Tlingit, the spirit is more important than blood quantum. He notes people with no Indian blood at all whom he believes have found the spirit of the regions; such as Hunsaker, the playwright, and others.

Waid also points out that while it is important to go back and find out about the old ways, the Native culture was

evolving even before the white man came. Artists, he says, need to express what they feel even when the expression takes on new forms not known in the old days.

He recalls a friend of his whose art work was criticized severely by a traditional artist, because of his experimentation with new forms. "Baloney!" Waid says. "He's an artist. He's Native. What more do you want!"

Like Kadashan William, Waid has fought the identity battle himself. "Then and now, we have this struggle," he emphasizes. "What am I? Am I Native? Am I white? Am I somewhere in-between?"

"I used to think, 'I look Indian. I am Indian! But my father was white! Until one day it hit me like a ton of bricks! Gary! You are Gary Waid! You can be anything you want to be!'"