

## EVENTS



*Julia Parker, Pomo/Coast Miwok, demonstrates to University of California, Berkeley students and community members how to make acorn mush.*

# After Controversial Ishi Play, University of California, Berkeley Co-Sponsors Indigenous Peoples Day Celebration to Promote Healing

Marc Dadigan • October 30, 2012

Last spring, the University of California, Berkeley, produced a historically inaccurate and graphically violent play about Ishi, the famous California Indian, which caused some American Indian viewers to openly weep and condemn it for perpetuating racist stereotypes.

Though a group of graduate students who led the protests against the play didn't succeed in stopping the production, they did engage the university's Department of Theater, Dance and Performance Studies (TDPS) in an ongoing dialogue.

This led to TDPS co-sponsoring an interactive Indigenous Peoples Day Celebration October 8 at the university that included elders from many tribes speaking about their people's history and hopes, poetry, dancing and demonstrations in making baskets and acorn mush, important elements of many California tribes' cultures.

"We wanted to do something that would start atoning for the Ishi play, and that would create awareness that there are Native students on campus and in the community who are still here," said Peter Nelson, Coast Miwok, a graduate student in anthropology.

One issue with the play, Nelson said, was that American Indian students on campus and in the community were never consulted about it before it debuted.

He along with ethnic studies graduate student Tim Molino, Pomo/Coast Miwok, and other members of the university's American Indian Graduate Student Association were instrumental in leading the criticism of the play, "Ishi, the Last Yahi," which was written by non-Native John Fisher and depicted Ishi as a child murderer and abuser of women.

Fisher said previously that the play is "fiction based on fact," and that he wrote it to raise awareness about the California genocide.

Ishi was born in Northern California around 1860 at the height of the Gold Rush, and lived the last of his years housed at the university, where he was studied and interviewed by anthropologist Alfred Kroeber. He died in 1911 and is known among Native communities as a kind man who remained faithful to his traditions despite enduring significant traumas as his people were wiped out.

Nelson said TDPS provided most of the funding for the event and helped promote it to make it a campus-wide celebration.

“We wanted them to know we don’t just get angry and then disappear,” Nelson said. “Through this whole process, we wanted to engage with them and help educate the department.”

TDPS Department Chair Peter Glazer, who said he didn’t stop the Ishi production last spring because of freedom of speech issues, attended the October 8 event, which included dancing by the Manchester-Point Arena Traditional Dancers and a poetry reading by Muriel Antoine, Lakota.

He said it was the first time he had seen an event highlighting indigenous culture on campus.

“At one striking moment, when the singers began and the dancers emerged from upstage into the large space, in front of an audience of students, faculty, guests from the Berkeley campus and friends and families of the performers, I felt exhilarated and lucky to simply be in the room,” he said in a statement released by TDPS.

Related article:

[Provocative, Misleading Play About Ishi Opens Wounds From California Genocide](#)



Comments

Comments are closed.