UC presents a searing play about Ishi, the last of his tribe

By Frances Dinkelspiel March 8, 2012, 2 p.m.

Two bounty hunters shoot at Native Americans. From left: Evan Bartz, Sanford Jackson. Photo: Ryan Montgomery

In this day and age, when UC Berkeley is cutting staff and its budget and raising student fees, it's hard to imagine a time when the school saw no bounds to its growth.
In 1911, the University of California (there was only one campus then) was enjoying a Golden Age. Benjamin Ide Wheeler had assumed the presidency in 1899, providing the university with the stability and vision it had long lacked. Phoebe Hearst's contest to create a new architectural plan for Cal had led to the construction of stately, Beaux Arts structures around campus. The size of the faculty and student body had grown exponentially.

In that context, perhaps it is not hard to understand the arrogance that led Alfred Kroeber, the head of the burgeoning anthropology department, to install a Native American at the Lowie Museum of Anthropology, then located in San Francisco. His name was Ishi, and he was the last of the Yahi, a tribe that once numbered 400 and lived in the hills around Oroville. Forty-nine when he wandered out of the hills, desperate for food, Ishi would live at the museum from 1911 until his death from tuberculosis in 1916, when he was 53.

Ishi's story and the deliberate slaughter of his tribe is effectively, if brutally, told in John Fisher's ambitious play, Ishi: The Last of the Yahi, now being presented by the UC Berkeley Department of Theater, Dance and Performance Studies at Zellerbach Playhouse. The play closes March 11.

It is an entertaining, although deeply disturbing, play, filled with scenes of prejudiced white men massacring Indians for a $5-a-head state bounty, gunfire, rape, murder, cannibalism, and even academic jealousy. But if you are shocked and disturbed after seeing it, (and at three hours long, you see a lot) then Fisher, the artistic director of Theater Rhinoceros in San Francisco and a frequent lecturer in the theater department, will have attained his goal. He clearly wants to tell people about this unknown chapter of California history: that the slaughter of Native Americans also happened here, not just at Wounded Knee or on the Trail of Tears.

“We are living in the wake of genocide,” one character states early in the play.

All the more reason to puzzle why Fisher has combined the serious, sad, and tragic story of Ishi and his tribe with over-the-top, even ribald elements. In Fisher’s re-imagining of history, Phoebe Hearst is a lusty, garrulous, cigar-smoking patron who complains about her infrequent bowel movements and inability to bed her chauffeur. She is interested in Ishi because, as an object of interest, he can be used to raise funds for Kroeber's museum. “Great buildings are built on great stories,” she says.

Those outlandish scenes are jarring, particularly when they come soon after ones in which the bounty hunters chase Native American all over the stage, shooting at them, slashing them with knives, cutting off their heads and stashing them in sacks in order to get their payment.
I have never seen a TDPS play before so I do not know if UC often hires older, professional actors to perform alongside its students. But the decision to cast Christopher Herold, the director of ACT’s Summer Training Congress and an acting lecturer at Cal, is a smart one. Herold brings a gravitas to the role of Kroeber, which anchors the entire show.

The rest of the actors are Cal students and occasionally some seem too young to play their parts, most notably in the case of Ishi, who was middle aged when he came to Cal but is a young man in this production. Intae Kim does a good job as Ishi, and the acrobatics he and Kayal Khanna, who plays Ishi’s father, do to convey the fights against white men are impressive.

The rest of the cast is also very good, including Matthew Capbarat as Dr. Thomas Waterman, Krobe’s colleague (and whipping boy) in the anthropology department; Gwen Kingston as Krobe’s tubercular wife Henrietta, and Kirsten Luisa Peacock, who plays Dr. Saxton Pope, turned here into a woman. Even though Fisher caricatures Phoebe Hearst, Devon Roe carries it off well.

The staging of Ishi is one of its strongest points. There is a lighted well in the center of the stage and the audience sits on either side. Two sets sit on the ends of the well, with
another resting along part of one side. The effect is to make the audience feel part of the action.

And what action there is. Loud gunfire, smoke, tumbling, and falling. White men chasing Indians. Native Americans crouching in freezing rivers hoping their pursuers won’t see them. The vigorous motion conveys the physicality of the west and the University’s manifest destiny.

In a city filled with great theater companies, including Berkeley Rep, Aurora, the Shotgun Players, and Impact, many theatergoers may not have paid close attention to the work being done at TDPS. Peter Glazer, the chair of the department, has written that he wants to make the department’s work “even stronger, even more visible to the campus and the Bay Area community at large .... We want the Bay Area community that attends theater and dance performances to know us and recognize TDPS as a site for work that stands alongside the best theaters in the area, and at a fraction of the price.”

It is clear that the students, faculty, and directors of TDPS are not afraid to tackle serious subjects to present provocative and entertaining theater. Bravo.

_Ishi: The Last of the Yahi_ opened on Friday, March 2 at Zellerbach Playhouse on the UC Berkeley campus and will run through Sunday, March 11. Performance times are as follows: March 9, 10 – 8pm

**TICKETS:** $15.00 – General Admission; $10.00 – Students, Seniors and UC Berkeley Faculty/Staff. Group discounts are available for ten or more: $10.00 General Admission, $7.00 Students/Seniors. To purchase tickets, visit [tdps.berkeley.edu](http://tdps.berkeley.edu). For assistance, contact the box office at [510-642-8827](tel:510-642-8827) (Fridays between 1pm and 4pm) or at [tdpsboxoffice@berkeley.edu](mailto:tdpsboxoffice@berkeley.edu).

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Dave Buehler  3 years ago
Anybody know who holds the film rights to this script? Hope it's not just UCBkly.

Annie  5 years ago
This is one of the few responses I've read that actually sees what the play shows and says. The 'truth' as best as can be ascertained is that Ishi became mythologised.

In his own time Ishi entirely refused to tell anything of how his tribe/family was completely exterminated.
And his degrading situation as a living museum exhibit was brushed away in later eager attempts to re-evaluate the anthropologist Kroeber’s actions and to place the uncomfortable events in a warm glow - mostly revisions achieved by Kroeber’s own second wife, revisons eagerly embraced in the desire to retrospectively award respect.
The way people cope with and fight back against genocide and pure racial hatred are not necessarily through noble or even morally acceptable acts. I had thought Berkeley consisted of a largely sophisticated and informed population. The great majority of responses to the production have unfortunately been beyond wrong-headed.
Thank you for this exception.

mf · 5 years ago

I’m one of the many people who’ve signed the petition mentioned in a comment below. The reason that I signed it is that my acquaintances and colleagues who identify as California Natives (I am Caucasian and have no claim to the heritage) have argued persuasively that this play is thoroughly misguided in its effort to bring issues of Native mistreatment to the fore.

The main line of argument that I’ve picked up on, and (I think) the grossest problem this play has, is the fact that Ishi was NOT the last of his kind. Ishi was one of the Yahi, and the Yahi form part of the Yana tribe, which additionally has several closely related groups still living nearby (the Wintu, for instance). His people, who decidedly still exist, were absolutely not consulted here and there are many unsavory things attributed to Ishi in the course of the play that are not true or apocryphal, such that he ends up with fitting in with the unfortunate "noble savage" archetype common in fiction dealing with Native Americans.

The playwright has manhandled the history specific to the oppressed and should know better. I know that due to this misrepresentation, along with the violence, there were members of the northern California Native community leaving the theater in tears— that sort of a misappropriation should not stand at an institution like Berkeley if it has any claim to inclusivity of the groups that the play claims to speak out for.

lifeboatb · mf · 5 years ago

I think it depends on how you look at it. Is anyone disputing that Ishi was the last of his immediate tribe and family? To say that he was not the last of the Yahi because the Yahi are part of a larger group is getting into semantics. The play, as I remember from a previous production, has Native characters other than Ishi, so it doesn’t imply that he’s the last Native American anywhere. But his case was special because he had been living apart from the European-American culture, but was later forced to interact with it.

Guest 1 · 5 years ago

This review starts out with an opinion of the writer. I stopped reading much further past that.

Abenaki47 · 5 years ago

I saw this story many years ago on TV...being a true story I am glad to see it brought to peoples attention the suffering the people native to this country have gone through over the centuries...that prejudice is still around today ...I wish someone would bring to light what was done to the abenaki in vermont there is plenty of documentation.

Pennie · 5 years ago

There is a petition to cancel the play, Ishi, The Last of the Yahi here: http://www.ipetitions.com/p... The Native American community is upset that Ishi is so
grossly misrepresented in this play.

Guest Pennie · 5 years ago

A more critical review:

Ishi: the Last of the Yahi: A UC Berkeley Production that Perpetuates Gross Violences Against Native Peoples

http://nativeappropriations...

Guest · 5 years ago

Very informative and useful theater review. I hope you will continue to offer these.

I spent some formative educational years at the early Black Pine Circle school in Berkeley and a teacher I had for three years in a row (by misfortune!) was a self-styled Ishi expert who claimed to be writing a book about his life (this was in the mid-1970s when there was a big Native American vogue). He took his classes on week long camping trips to Ishi country in which we viewed firsthand "Ishi's World".

Later in life, I came to learn to my disappointment, that significant aspects of the Ishi story were at best questionable and, more likely, a complete hoax. It sounds like this play seeks to perpetuate the Ishi myth more than to expose the holes in the excepted narrative.

p.s. Minor typo: "The rest of the case is also very good..."

Gabereal88 Guest · 5 years ago

Just curious, what aspects of Ishi's life are a hoax? Can you elaborate, or point me to some factual resources? This UC play looks interesting to me, but I don't want to go if it's based on untruths.

Performance Gabereal88 · 5 years ago

The play is very much a work of "historical fiction." It's based on historical facts, but takes quite a bit of creative license, imagining those parts of Ishi's story that Ishi himself left untold, as well as the motivations for people doing what they did.
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