

Aannii

Bruce Naokwegijig N'dizhnikaaz, Mukwa n'Dodem. Wiikwemkoong Doonji-baa. Debajehmujig Eh'Nokii.

Before I was introduced to Debajehmujig at about 8 years old, I remember sitting on my mother's living room floor in front of the T.V with my mother behind me on the couch knitting. We were watching the news, or she was. I wondered, then turned to my mother behind me and asked "Mom how come the people on T.V don't speak in the language?" She simply replied "there are other cultures in the world that don't speak the language so English is the most common language spoken".

So came Debajehmujig Theatre Group. Debajehmujig was started by Shirley Cheechoo in 1983, so that Native people could see the issues and concerns of their lives, reflected outside themselves, on stages in their own community. The company was purposefully intergenerational, bringing Elders, adults, youth and children together to share the stories of their lives.

Growing up on the reserve, I felt disconnected from others, and that under representation of Indigenous people was obvious. Storytelling through performance has been a cornerstone of Indigenous culture since time immemorial. It wasn't until the 20<sup>th</sup> century that Indigenous communities in the northern Great Lakes region were introduced to the Western concept of "theatre".

Debajehmujig took the Western concept of theatre and worked with it to enhance – (never to take away from) – the way that we tell our stories, whether traditional or modern. We understand our ancient connection to storytelling, and acknowledge that here and now, theatre is telling the stories that will shape the way future generations will understand and remember us.

Knowing where we came from, to where we are now, we support the next generation of Indigenous theatre artists so they can see themselves and their own stories reflected on stage, and know that their voices are important, not only to their communities, but the world.

We break down the fourth wall. It is through the eyes and on the breath that we connect with our audiences; our hearts, minds and souls come shining through, and we can hear our stories, your stories. We have all come from some place, young and old. Theatre is the opportunity to share with the world, what our lived experience has been. We strive to do this as a conversation with our audiences, bringing them into our world and sending them back with a new awareness.

If there is anything that we have learned from the pandemic, it's that theatre doesn't live in any specific location. Our stories live within each of us, in our hearts, minds and spirits. Theatre allows us to share those stories with the world.

Miigwetch for letting us have some time to be with you.  
Miigwetch.

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