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## Science & spirit in Saskatchewan

Kenneth T. Williams's play, *The Herd*, may be rooted in Ibsen but its themes are purely Indigenous

By Bailey Stefan

AN ALL-Indigenous cast is set to bring to life a story of politics, economics, science and spirituality.

*The Herd*, opening at the Citadel Theatre April 9, is a 2020 play by Cree playwright Kenneth T. Williams set in a Saskatchewan First Nation, where the overlap between Indigenous spirituality and Western science comes to a head when twin bison are born in a single breeding season.

Williams was commissioned by Toronto's Tarragon Theatre to write an Indigenous adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's 1882 play *An Enemy of the People*, in which a small Norwegian town is overwhelmed with the moral and economic implications of allowing a contaminated spa to continue operating.

With the core idea of resource extraction and the economic implications of protecting something key to a community's well-being, Williams also drew inspiration from an earlier short story he wrote about a Cree veterinarian purifying a buffalo herd when multiple white bison calves are born in a single season.

In Canada, all commercial bison herds are mixed with domestic cattle DNA and it is illegal to sell pure bison herds because of the lack of population and resulting lack of genetic diversity. There are currently several operations in Alberta and Saskatchewan to [revitalize the population](#) of purebred bison.

"This is a First Nations community that creates this commercial bison herd for their own commercial purposes, and then suddenly, this happens," Williams says.

"I thought, Okay, this would actually be an interesting question. If this happens, what would our response be?"

This is the first time that *The Herd* will be performed on stage. Originally set to premiere in Tarragon's 2020 season, it was postponed to 2022 because of COVID – save for an audio reading released last summer.

The production boasts the unique claim of having Indigenous actors in every role – even though not every character is Indigenous.

*'A cast this size being totally indigenous, being on that stage is quite an event in itself'*

“A cast this size being totally Indigenous, being on that stage, is quite an event in itself because it hardly ever happens,” Williams says.

Cree actor Todd Houseman, who plays a character named Coyote Jackson, agrees: “There is a legacy of non-Indigenous people playing Indigenous people, which I think the creative team was really tapped into when they thought about casting,”

“There’s just an extra level of kindness or generosity that can come from somebody who has the actual lived experience of the person that they’re playing.”

*The Herd* also has an Indigenous crew, including Samantha McCue, an Anishinaabekwe and Ned’u’ten costume designer.

“As a designer, I tend to have a niche in Indigenous productions,” McCue says. “And I was interested, because it [the scientific-spiritual debate] is not a conversation I normally see in productions, in this specific context. But it does affect the day-to-day lives of Indigenous people.”

The cast and crew are looking forward to *The Herd’s* debut on an Edmonton stage. The city is home to a large Indigenous population and the Citadel is hoping to see that reflected in the audience.

Although the play is meant to be enjoyed by people of all backgrounds, Indigenous theatregoers will have a different experience, Williams says.

“There are shortcuts and shorthand that we know with each other. Our level of conversation is at a different point. I don’t have to explain to someone the entirety of why the white buffalo calf woman prophecy is important.

“If it was completely settler eyes, I’d have to go through a flowchart of why this is an important thing. There would be that lesson part.”

*The Herd* is set to premiere at the Citadel Theatre on April 5. Tickets can be purchased [here](#).

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