

New play aims to raise awareness

by John Copley

When University of Alberta Education Professor, Diane Conrad, learned that more than a third of the youth incarcerated in Canada's jails in 2007-08 were Aboriginal youth, she was inspired to make a difference. She wrote a play that tells the story about three jailed teenagers, based on real-life characters who she met while working with Aboriginal youth in a nearby provincial corrections facility. Her play is designed to create awareness about the plight of Aboriginal youth incarcerated in Canada's jails.

The production, *Athabasca's Going Unmanned*, is playing in room 4-104 Education North building on the University of Alberta campus from February 17-19, the same time this newspaper goes to press. If you miss the initial performance you can contact the playwright for additional information by e-mailing the address at the end of this article. The play is scheduled for 8:00 p.m. on both Wednesday, Feb. 17 and Thursday, Feb. 18 and again at 2:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m. on Friday, Feb. 19.

The play tells the story about three jailed teenagers, the escape plot they've contrived, and the corrections staff who work with them.

"The story presents a fictionalized, but eloquent account of their experiences," noted U of A Public Affairs Associate Bev Betkowski. "Working with Aboriginal youth in an Alberta corrections facility, Conrad employed drama as a method of social exploration, helping youth to explore their own stories and find their own voices."

The research that enabled Conrad to write the play took place over a three year period in which the educator travelled to the jail once a week for two-hour sessions with its young inmates. Conrad lauded the support she received from prison staff and particularly from the institution's Native Program Coordinator, with whom she worked to help youth rediscover their identities and their pride.

"It was definitely a learning process for everyone involved," assured Conrad during an interview just

days before the play opened. "As a result of my work over the last decade I realize that more awareness needs to be created to ensure that both citizens and governments are working in unison to develop and maintain programs that include Aboriginal cultural and traditional awareness initiatives that will help to give Aboriginal youth the opportunity to overcome their obstacles and their uncertainties."

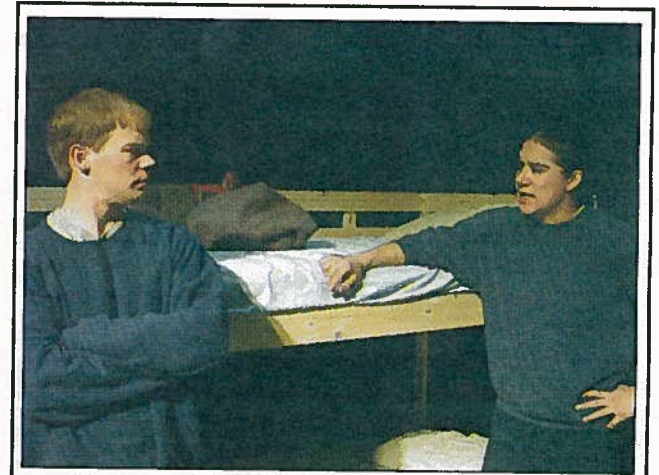
Diane Conrad earned her Bachelor of Education Degree in 1993-94; her first teaching jobs were in the Northwest Territories, where she worked in two different communities. It was there that she first discovered the hardships that Aboriginal Canadians have had to endure for centuries. When she worked with the five to 15 incarcerated youth (most of whom were boys) who came to her sessions each week, Conrad employed drama as the tool which would eventually have her students talking about their life's experiences, current issues and ongoing concerns.

"They looked at magazine images and we talked about what those images meant to them; how they identified themselves. We explored by creating characters and playing roles. We talked about identity, life's choices and alternative paths."

The youth who participated in the weekly classes now have a better idea about who they are and how important they are. *Athabasca's Going Unmanned* is an expansion of those classes in that it creates a new view of awareness that will hopefully catch the attention of policy makers interested in making some real social progress.

There are few initiatives in place right now to make any real difference in the incarceration rates of Aboriginal Canadians, but Conrad said that could change for the better if future programs included initiatives designed to embrace and enhance Aboriginal participation.

"There is a real disparity in the numbers of Aboriginal youth and adults versus non-Aboriginal youth and adults serving time in Canadian jail today,"



Actors Cole Humeny and Sarain Waskewitch star in Athabasca's Going Unmanned.

Photo by Michael Coullis.

Conrad acknowledged. "We need to ask more questions. As a society we need to do more; throwing youth in jail to punish them isn't the answer; the answer is rehabilitation and it just isn't happening. The high percentage of youth returning to jail is an indication that more needs to be done to ensure that rehabilitation is more than just a word." *Athabasca's Going Unmanned* is about society's responsibility to stand up and take an active role in ensuring that young offenders have the opportunity to overcome their dilemmas and take advantage of that second chance that everyone is entitled to.

Athabasca's Going Unmanned was written by Diane Conrad and produced in collaboration with the Canadian Centre for Theatre Creation, Department of Drama (UofA). The play, which is being directed by Ian Leung and was dramaturged by Kim McCaw, features actors Cole Humeny, Richard Lee, Eric Nyland, Sarain Waskewitch, Darlene Auger and Melissa Thingelstad. The production's stage is managed by Dawn Friesen and designed by Daniela Masellis with video segments directed by Clinton Carew.

For more information about the play, or to learn how you can host a performance in your community or school, contact Diane Conrad at diane.conrad@ualberta.ca