

Incarceration rates of Aboriginal youth inspire campus theatre production

by Dawn Ford

February 12, 2010 - (Edmonton) Following three years of drama-based research with youth as part of the Native program at a provincial youth corrections facility, a new play, *Athabasca's Going Unmanned*, written by U of A researcher Diane Conrad aims, to raise awareness about the disproportionate incarceration rates of Aboriginal youth across Canada.

"In 2007-08, Aboriginal youth accounted for 33 per cent of those sentenced to custody, whereas they make up only six per cent of the total Canadian youth population," says Conrad, associate professor of drama/theatre education in the Department of Secondary Education.

According to Conrad, these statistics reflect a human-rights issue that needs to be addressed.

"Government reports explain high incarceration rates as related to low education levels, low employment status, substance abuse and mental-health issues. My research suggests that these are symptoms of the real root causes: the systematic injustices of poverty and racism in our society; inequitable treatment of Aboriginal youth by police and the courts, and generational trauma; the effects of cultural genocide, which includes residential schools," she says.

Set in jail, the play tells the story of three incarcerated youth and an escape plot they've hatched, and three corrections staff who work with them. Through video projection and live performance, it examines the needs of the youth and the prospects for offering them programming with transformative potential.

"Through acting out their experiences, individuals can become more aware of the motivation behind their behaviour and the societal issues that underlie it," says Conrad, who began writing the play last January.

"By being involved in doing drama with incarcerated youth for three years, I was living the research. The play practically wrote itself," says Conrad, who in 2006 won the SSHRC Aurora Prize for her creative and innovative research.

The play is being produced in collaboration with The Canadian Centre for Theatre Creation, the Department of Drama and play director Ian Leung and dramaturge Kim McCaw; it is a Canadian Actor's Equity Association Guest Artist Policy project.

The research study, *The Transformative Potential of Drama in the Education of Incarcerated Youth* is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The play will be performed in the new Canada Foundation for Innovation funded Arts-based Research Studio, 4-104 Education North.

Performance dates are Feb. 17 at 8 p.m., and Feb. 18 and 19 at 2 p.m. and 8 p.m. Tickets will be available at the door for a suggested donation of \$10, with proceeds going to the Young Offender Centre's Native program.

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Diane Conrad

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