

Artist to research Portage Residential School

Posted By Rob Swystun, Central Plains Herald Leader

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Submitted photoDancers rehearse Lara Kramer's dance production "Fragments" in Montreal.

Montreal-based contemporary dancer Lara Kramer aims to research Long Plain First Nation's Indian Residential School Museum of Canada for her dance project "Fragments."

The tool for that research, referred to by Kramer as "movement research," will consist of her own body and senses as she visits the school starting March 16. Her research is funded by the Canada Council for the Arts, and through it she will absorb the architecture and mood of the museum, a place her own mother survived from 1954-57 when it was the Portage Indian Residential School.

Her mother, Ida Baptiste from the Berens River First Nation, will accompany her, the first time she will set foot inside the building since being a student there.

"She's quite nervous about it," Kramer said on the phone from Montreal during an interview with the Herald-Leader.

Baptiste, in a statement that accompanied her daughter's press material for the project, said the

Canadian government forcibly tried to mold her into the perfect being while she attended the Portage Residential School and the Brandon Residential School from 1958-61. She currently lives in Rama, Ont.

"I was a puppet always having to be told what to do and what to think," Baptiste said. "I had no sense of identity or self-worth and lived in fear most of the time. I still struggle with authority figures, relationships and crowds of people."

Kramer's mother isn't the only one that is nervous about being in the building.

"Last night, I woke up in the middle of the night," Kramer recalled, "and I was quite scared." The London, Ont. native attributed her anxiety to a fearfulness of what deep emotions she may find buried in the walls of the old, brick building that sits on the Long Plain urban reserve on the edge of Portage la Prairie.

Kramer will spend five days at the museum in a space provided for her, interpreting those emotions through her movement research.

"I am attending this museum with my mother in part to further research for my creation 'Fragments' and to join my mother in her first trip to the school since its transformation," Kramer said in her project description. "My choreography up until this point has been generated by the stories of the Indian residential schools, including my mother's. By attending the museum, I will connect closer and deeper to the source that I am working with. I will spend some time in the empty space of the museum and explore how the architecture of the old school influences my movement and the content of the work."

On March 20, she will then give a dance performance based on what movements she has developed over the previous days.

Her research at the museum is one step in the evolution of "Fragments," a contemporary dance piece to be shown in Montreal at the Gesu - Centre de creativite on June 11 during the First People's Festival 2009. That will be the one-year anniversary of the Canadian government's apology to Indian residential school survivors.

As there is a history of First Nation cultures passing on history through art, Kramer noted, "Fragments" is her way of passing on a piece of her own history, that being the stories she's heard, from her mother as well as others, of their Indian residential school experience.

Kramer is quick to point out "Fragments" is not the retelling of any one specific story. Rather, she said, it's an exploration of some of the effects these schools had on the children who attended them, specifically the female form, and a way to create a dialogue about what she deemed as a taboo subject.

"Fragments" started in the studio back in September of last year when Kramer hired four female dancers for the project: Tal Minnie Aronson, Marie-Eve Demers, Veronique Gaudreau and Elissar Hanna. Unfortunately, none of the dancers could accompany Kramer, who will not dance in the finished piece, but act solely as choreographer, on her trip to Portage.

The seed for the idea was planted prior to September, though, after an interview with her mother for a school project, as well as her mother's paintings about life at the Portage and Brandon residential schools.

Not wanting to just rely on her mother's stories for inspiration, Kramer brought in local elders to share their residential school stories with her dancers, none of whom are aboriginal, as well as documentaries about the schools and written accounts relating to the schools.

With the work she has done in Montreal already, Kramer said "Fragments" is about half done. The performance at the museum on March 20 will be a work-in-progress demonstration, consisting of a live performance of dance from her time spent at the building, as well as a DVD showing of what she and her dancers have completed in Montreal up to this point. Kramer also wants her mother's paintings to be part of the show, both on March 20 and June 11 in Montreal.

So far, the dancer said, choreographing the piece hasn't been easy as she has never worked with such a specific concept before. Her dancing and choreography up until this point have mainly been just about movement with no real storyline or theme to it, she noted.

Taking the leap into such a challenging concept for contemporary dance was no easy feat for her, Kramer said.

While some of the dance movements are based on her mother's stories and those of others, other movements are just for the sake of movement and sometimes it can be difficult to distinguish what is appropriate for such heavy subject matter, the dancer mentioned.

As the piece evolved, tiny bits of theatricality started to show up, as well as props. There is an old school desk that represents a schoolroom, she gave as an example, and a bit of barbed wire.

"To me, that's a strong symbol of oppression," she said.

She has also been collaborating with a musician for the piece, which Kramer said is made up of isolated scenes, but so far has had no luck deciding on the costumes for her performers.

"I'm hoping this trip to the school will help me with this," she said.

Although the four dancers are not meant to represent specific characters, the dance does seem to be going in that direction, she mused.

"I see evidence of characters developing," Kramer noted.

Although she realizes she can't embody everything the residential schools meant to every person, the piece is, in part, meant to spread the word about this dark piece of Canadian history.

Throughout the project so far, Kramer said, she has met a number of Canadians who didn't know what Indian residential schools were.

Holding the Montreal performance on the anniversary of the federal government's apology is part of a healing process for her, she noted, as she felt a great deal of anger on the day of the actual apology. That anger stemmed from the fact the government didn't verbalize the residential school era as a cultural genocide, Kramer pinpointed, which, to her, meant they didn't fully admit to the atrocities that occurred within many of the schools.

"It feels kind of like a farce to me," she stated.

What will happen to "Fragments" after the June 11 showing is unknown at this point, although Kramer does have a commitment to show part of it in a smaller space in Montreal.

While some of her peers have said she should attempt to tour the country with the piece, the logistics of doing that are daunting, she noted.

Kramer will perform her work-in-progress at the Indian Residential School Museum on March 20 from 2-4 p.m., with an opportunity for discussion after the performance.

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