

## Dance preview: Grandmother's story becomes powerful Native Girl Syndrome



Angie Cheng and Karina Iraola in Lara Kramer's Native Girl Syndrome, part of Expanse 2015

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BY SALENA KITTINGHAM, EDMONTON JOURNAL MARCH 10, 2015

### PREVIEW

#### NGS 'Native Girl Syndrome'

**Choreography:** Lara Kramer

**Part of:** [Expanse Festival](#), running Wednesday to March 15

**When:** Friday, March 13 at 8:30 p.m. and Saturday, March 14 at 7 p.m.

**Where:** Westbury Theatre, ATB Arts Barns, 10330 84th Ave.

**Tickets:** [fringetheatre.ca](http://fringetheatre.ca)

Lara Kramer was researching her dance creation Fragments, her 2009 breakout hit themed around her mother's experiences in a native residential school, when she stumbled upon a written passage describing in detail the 'native girl syndrome.'

"This term was used by a nun and a school teacher at one of the residential schools in Canada commenting on our people," says the First Nations dance artist. "The statement read something like this: 'Once she leaves this school, she is going to fall victim to the native girl syndrome. She's going to be in and out of jail. She's going to be an addict. She's going to be an alcoholic. Her children will go through the system. She'll be in an abusive relationship.' It was this long list of characteristics of someone clearly struggling but what stood out for me was how the description was pretty much on point for my grandma."

Kramer kept that term inside her for a long time, knowing it would be a source for future artistic processes, but it was also something she needed to explore personally to connect to her lineage. Kramer had only met her grandmother once, as a nine-year-old.

"It was such a key moment in my childhood, as that was the same time my mom took us to the residential school she attended as a child. It was boarded up at that time. I remember it being a very

fragile trip. It was hard to see my mom be so emotional, to see her go back to those dark memories from her past. ”

In 2013, Kramer channelled her grandmother’s story into a potent piece of dance theatre called NGS ‘Native Girl Syndrome.’ The politically charged work, performed by Montreal dancers Karian Iraola and Angie Cheng, makes its way to Edmonton as part of an eclectic Expanse Festival lineup from across Canada, including local physical theatre artist Nancy McAlear’s new creation The Contract, featuring Richard Lee Hsi, Ainsley Hillyard and Vincent Forcier, and Edmonton’s Kate Stashko performance of The Matryoshka Series.

Kramer says her aim with creating NGS was to delve into how her grandmother ended up on the street. What she really wanted to execute with the work was to bring to life two distinctive, multi-dimensional characters.

“There is this one moment where one of the characters is a little bit more lucid and looking inward to the memories of her children and the loss of them. It is this moment in the piece when I think most people have empathy. That’s part of her story. A lot of the work is visceral and very demanding in terms of its explicit visuals and the embodiment of addiction.”

When asked about casting non-aboriginal dancers to interpret her NGS choreography, Kramer says she wanted to work with strong performers who are familiar with her artistic evolution and who have the maturity and stage experience to develop the subject matter with sensitivity.

Having been on the faculty of the Indigenous Dance Residency at the Banff Centre, Kramer says the question of selecting non-First Nations artists to interpret her work has been posed to her several times before. Her response is more pragmatic than a political statement.

“I am one of a very few number of First Nation contemporary performing artists based in Montreal. I think that right off the bat is the reality. There are more First Nation performance artists working across Canada, but again, that just brings up the resources and funding issues.”

Initially, NGS was danced by Karian Iraola and her cousin Patricia Iraola. “I had worked with them previously and had seen them perform. I liked this idea of them being cousins and performers, and that they had some history with my work.”

Patricia Iraola was pregnant at the time of the NGS creative residency, commissioned by the Canada Dance Festival, and as the pregnancy progressed, the movement vocabulary proved to be too physically demanding for her to premiere the work.

Angie Cheng stepped into the role only weeks before of opening night in Montreal in 2013. She and Karian Iraola will perform it in Edmonton as well.