

# Free!

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## Indians

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# Indians

*A Review by Sal Gordon*

*Photos by Mike Schilling*

Theatre UNI performed Arthur Kopit's *Indians* November 1-4, 1972, under the direction of George Glenn. Although not as full of spectacle as some former productions, its message was well communicated.

Kopit, in an interview printed in the acting script, explains that it was the Vietnam crisis that prompted this play. "What were we doing there? What were our purposes? To deal with these questions dramatically I had to approach them somewhat obliquely. To write about Vietnam specifically would have had no impact . . . The purpose of the play

was to create a fresh feeling for the confusions of history, the amorphousness of history, and hopefully, to put the Vietnamese situation into a context of American history and American method." One of the final scenes seems to echo this down to the audience: Cody, much against what he knows inside is right, defending his country's Indian policy with vehemence.

Chuck Bowman was outstanding as William Cody. The Buffalo Bill of Kopit and Bowman was a tortured man, pursued by the legend of himself and the ghosts of what he had done to the Indian and the buffalo—unwittingly but still fatally. A complex character; even

in the middle of his grief for the murdered Sitting Bull he confesses his worst fear: "Not so much of dyin,' but of dyin' wrong. Dyin' in the center of my arena with all my makeup on."

The mosaic of time in the play forced Cody's character to jump about from one phase to another, much as a movie is filmed, not in sequence. Bowman rose to the challenge admirably and with great consistency. Cody veers from the ultimate showman to the proud buffalo hunter, to the man visibly shaking with his own torments, to a reluctant government mouthpiece who knows the fallacy of the words he voiced so well. These shifts were easy to follow and believable.



(The sad-eyed Buffalo Bill will haunt me for a long time.) His imaginatively designed horse seemed a part of him, dancing around the arena, as did his hat, which he took off, gestured with, as if it were an extension of his arm. Haunted by the memory of Indians which he feels a responsibility for, William Cody is a study in futility. "If only I could have saved your life," he moans to the "ghost" of Sitting Bull, who turns away silently. The creeping Indians who edge their way into his scenes and his mind, stand in the shadows of the stage in silent accusation.

There was a pleasing variation in the Senators; they were not cut

from the same mold. John Zickefoose showed the most character, developing from the condescending emissary of the benevolent Great Father, eager to do all he could, to a man confused, frightened and angry at the incomprehensible savages. Wild Bill Hickok, played by Hugh Hastings, was refreshingly alive, especially in the President's play. Chief Joseph was by far the most convincing of the Indians, with his dignified bearing and underplayed voice. (I overheard a girl behind me ask a friend, "Is he a real Indian?") Perhaps I am judging from a stereotype of Indians, but it seemed that the actors portraying Indians were not too believable or

authentic; they lacked the poise and restraint, talking, gesturing and laughing more freely and loudly than one would expect. Sitting Bull, however, played by Bob Justis, was a strong and confident chief. The Ol' Time President, Jim Cada, was superbly cast and subtly played as a rather shallow man who saw himself as "a great hunted eagle." Jeanne Hickerson was the sensuous, somewhat earthy First Lady—despite her pink gown. Jane Ryan and Ray Jones as the Italian "Indian maiden" and the be-monocled German Chief Uncas were ridiculously incongruous, much to the delight of the audience.

This was a complex show from the technical standpoint also. The audience entered to see a silent movie being projected onto an on-stage screen, while two sets of slides flashed on and off on the walls next to the proscenium. Scene changes were often signalled by an eerie strobe light; movements a few seconds long seemed to take forever in the drawn-out dream effect of that strobe. The props were authentic in appearance, except where imagination was needed, as in the case of the horses, which were delightfully creative and functional. There was an intricate system of flies used in several scenes, notably the President's play and the barroom. The music was haunting, memorable and appropriate, enhancing the spooky feeling of unreality. The Indian chants and wails the audience came in to, the balcony-shaking drums; the live musicians during the Sun dance, with their melancholy naturalistic-sounding instruments; the raspy Ol' Time President music, and especially the distorted White House and Grand Duke entrance pieces, developed the proper atmosphere for their respective scenes.

Much credit should go to the crews, for this or any show. Without them, the show would have been performed in the actors' own blue jeans, propless, on a bare floor, with only overhead lights, without that glorious music, and probably without any audience, and we would have all missed something superb.