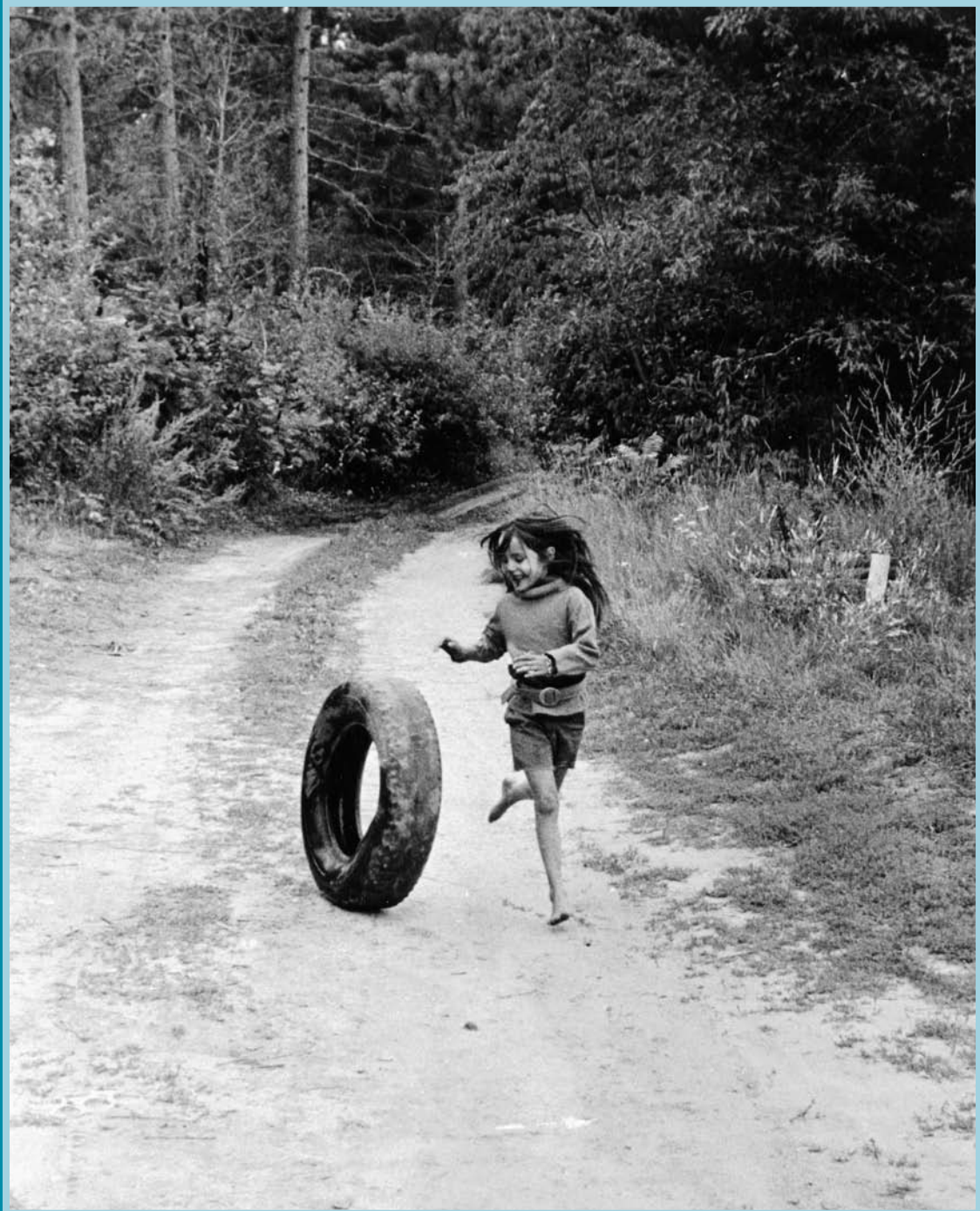


Bush Foundation

Giving **STRENGTH**

for Vibrant Communities and Vital Leadership



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“In the Chickasaw language, there is no word for artist; the closest I have been able to come is *alikchi* (healer).”

M. Cochise Anderson, (BAF’02)



Native artist dares us to remember by Victoria Tirrel

M. Cochise Anderson (BAF’02) wants Native culture to rise out of obscurity, for people to stop saying to him, “You’re an Indian, right? I studied you in third grade.” As a Native film and stage actor, writer, spoken word artist, musician and culture educator, his goal is to be seen as a contemporary performer and not just in an historical context.

Anderson and other Indian actors banded together after acting school to form a theater ensemble, *Chuka Lokoli* (“community” in both the Chickasaw and Choctaw languages). They recognized that the roles they had to look forward to were two dimensional, saying words written by non-Natives that represented their culture in ways that Anderson described as “cheesy or hokey or outright wrong.” Those plays “had nothing to do with us as human beings. It made us economic hostages. We just realized that if we didn’t tell our stories from our perspectives for our people, no else would.”

As an example, Anderson mentioned *The New World*, a 2005 film that retells the John Smith/Pocahontas story. “Here’s a major release and the Natives are still there as the backdrop. To me it’s not subtle racism.” He went on to reference *Into the West*, a 12-hour miniseries produced by Stephen Spielberg and Turner Network Television, which was heralded as an historically accurate and culturally sensitive telling of the westward trek of white settlers. “In the first 20 minutes, all the Native girls are falling on their knees over the white traders.” Later, Anderson’s friend reminded him, “It wasn’t written for you.”

The trail to Minnesota

A Chickasaw and Mississippi Choctaw from Oklahoma, Anderson grew up on the West Coast. A quest for cultural reverence and understanding came naturally to him—his grandmother wrote the *Chickasaw Analytical Dictionary*, the definitive compilation of the language.

His 20-year journey to reclaim his Native heritage has not always been a conscious one. While he’s done some book-based research, his learning from the elders has been the most profound. He said they helped him understand “what things we’ve lost and held onto and how we’ve bridged those two together.” From them he’s gathered stories of “alienation, loss, struggle, perseverance and triumph.”

After theater school in New York and stints on and off Broadway, a commission from The Playwrights’ Center brought him to Minnesota. Today he splits his time between performing for national audiences at such venues as the Kennedy Center in New York and the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian in D.C. and sharing his art with his hometown audiences in New York City, Oklahoma, Oregon and Minnesota. “When people ask me where I’m from, I say the four directions.”

Anderson is busy. His 2002 Bush Artist Fellowship made possible *The Kemosabe Therapy*, his first spoken word CD, which he said he wrote in response to the “grip mainstream media has on Native

peoples' images." In the performance, he uses a mix of traditional (drum and flute) and contemporary music (hip hop) to soften his audience so they're not so defensive when he breaks the fourth wall and begins talking to them about the truth as he sees it. The CD was nominated for the 2005 Indian Summer Music Awards. You can hear an excerpt from *The Kemosabe Therapy* on the Artists Fellows page at www.bushfoundation.org.

He's also just returned from an eight-month tour of the world premiere of *Grandchildren of the Buffalo Soldiers*, directed by Lou Bellamy of Penumbra Theatre. Another project, his play *Braided Lives*, recently got a staged reading at Saint Paul's Great American History Theater. It honors the strength of Native women and is the first play he's written that doesn't have a part for him. Anderson is readying the script to send to the Native Voices program of the (Gene) Autry National Center in Los Angeles. The program provides support and a collaborative setting for Native American playwrights to develop their work and see it fully realized.

Those who forget history . . .

Some are outraged when Anderson draws a parallel between the terrorist attacks of September 11 and the Trail of Tears, the forced removal between 1830 and 1906 of Native people from their homelands. And yet the feeling expressed often in the wake of 9/11—that we would never be the same as a nation—fits just as aptly the reactions of Native people to the loss of thousands to starvation, exhaustion and brutality at the hands of the military. By attempting to set the contemporary and the historical in contrast to each other, Anderson creates an opportunity to reimagine the Native culture as more than just a backdrop against which European culture "civilized" North America.

"The Trail of Tears didn't happen one morning and end three hours later. It took years and years and it affected 39 tribes. It was a concentration camp. We were lied to—talk about who were the terrorists." He wants "to make a reference for people that's undeniable. I can't afford to be vague or underground. I can't leave it up to the audience to get what they want. I want them to get that there is a correlation" between an event they

understand and the one just like it that they don't. Anderson wants people to come to the place where they say, "This did happen before." He believes these "common threads in our mosaic of diverse experiences" can be a meeting ground for cultural understanding.

Becoming the elder

Anderson believes the young people hold the most hope for cultural respect and understanding. He is a cultural partner with the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra's CONNECT program, which sends him into Twin Cities' public schools to talk about Native culture and perform Native music. The questions kids ask him at these and other cultural residencies have made him better at telling his own story, and he thinks the information he shares gets these kids researching their own backgrounds. Even with college-age students, he sees a lack of defensiveness because they don't yet feel responsible for having made the culture Anderson is holding up to the light.

Besides, he said, "If my people are less than one percent of the population, I need every ally I can get." ❁

You can hear an excerpt from The Kemosabe Therapy on the Artists Fellows page at www.bushfoundation.org.



Third-grade students at Longfellow Community School in Minneapolis watch Anderson perform.