

ABOUT PORTRAIT OF MY PEOPLE

Through personal stories and family photographs, professional actor, Erin Kelley, an enrolled member of the Cherokee Nation and a direct descendant of noted Shawnee leader, Tecumseh, shares her experiences growing up in a Native/multi-cultural family. Originally written with middle and high school students in mind, *Portrait of My People* is a Kevin Kline Award nominee for Outstanding Production for Young Audiences. However, *Portrait* has been embraced by all age groups and has been enthusiastically enjoyed by audiences ages 8 to 88.

Portrait begins with the telling of a traditional Cherokee cedar tree story which unfolds into Erin's "two worlds" of personal identity. Kelley, who has an Irish name and physically differs from what may be perceived as a traditional Native American look, personifies that we "can't judge a book by its cover." With a sense of humor, Erin explains how she is often mistaken for other ethnicities based on her appearance. How do society's racial and cultural generalizations form not only other people's opinions of our identity, but how we view ourselves?

Erin was raised by her beloved full-blood Native American grandmother, Violet Carpenter Hunt, and through stories of her grandmother's parents, Benjamin (full-blood Shawnee and a direct descendant of Tecumseh) and Mary Angeline (full-blood Cherokee), Erin offers a personal glimpse into Shawnee and Cherokee history including Tecumseh's Native unification plan, the Trail of Tears, and Indian schools. She also performs Tecumseh's Greenville Treaty speech and "The Teachings of Tecumseh" in addition to the original transcript of her great-grandfather Ben's Dawes Commission interview. One of the most moving portions of the production is The Lord's Prayer performed in Indian sign language.

It is vital that Americans know that Native people are still alive today and have made many valuable modern-day contributions to our society. Erin features the Native people who inspired her when she was growing up: Will Rogers, Maria Tallchief, Keely Smith, and her cousin Mary Mead, who was featured in the 1951 film, "Jim Thorpe, All American."

Audiences have found *Portrait* to be a dynamic production which inspires both students and adults to explore their personal heritage and to embrace all the parts of their own unique identity. *Portrait of My People* runs approximately 40 minutes followed by a talkback. Ms. Kelley begins the performance in contemporary clothing and by adding pieces throughout the performance, finishes in her full traditional Shawnee outfit.

ERIN KELLEY

Actor/Playwright

Erin is originally from Tulsa, Oklahoma and is an enrolled member of The Cherokee Nation and a direct descendant of noted Shawnee leader, Tecumseh. She dedicated the Tecumseh statue in Shawnee National Forest with "The Teachings of Tecumseh," a speech featured in *Portrait of My People*, and recently served on the Nine Community Cinema discussion panel at the Missouri History Museum screening of "We Still Live Here: As Nutayunean," which aired on the PBS series *Independent Lens*.

A professional actor for over 30 years, Erin has been based in New York, Chicago, and St. Louis. She co-founded and co-managed St. Louis's Avalon Theatre Company for seven years. In addition to Avalon, her St. Louis acting credits include roles at The Black Rep, Stages, The Muny, Variety Children's Theatre, and Insight Theatre Company. Her New York and regional credits include roles at Amerinda (American Indian Artists), La MaMa, FringeNYC, Musical Theatre Works, Samuel Beckett, Body Politic, Dallas Summer Musicals, and First Stage Milwaukee. She holds a BFA in Theatre Arts from Stephens College.