

ATTA: The Little Theater Production that Could and Did



Last month, over a dozen actors from Utqiagvik, Alaska performed in the all-volunteer community production of ATTA, a play that honors Inuit stories and history, and addresses contemporary issues, like suicide and addiction, in the north. I wrote ATTA and directed this summer's production. How and why ATTA happened *now* is an interesting story. It didn't have to happen, and it almost didn't.

This is how it all came together.

In March of 2019, one of my classmates died by suicide. I saw him at a community science meeting at Hopson Middle School the week he died. I hadn't seen him in probably ten years but I knew it was Ben the moment I saw him. After the meeting, I tried to say hi but he avoided contact. He looked down, like he was sad. As he walked by, his face turned stony and he looked straight ahead like he was looking down a long tunnel. That was Monday. He died that Thursday.

"My dad killed himself out here, on the ocean. He did what the old people used to do, just walked out on the ice and let himself die. Like he was a burden. His death is the biggest burden I have to bear." said by Atta, the young whaling captain from the show.

This wasn't the first time someone in my life had died by suicide. I've grown up seeing people take their lives and I too have had lived experience with suicide. Yet, something in me spoke up. I became motivated to look for new ways to help my community heal from suicide. As an artist and someone who majored in the use of theater for healing and social change in college, I decided to look at how community performance art might help.

I spent the next few months researching the use of writing, positive and narrative psychology, group collaboration and the creative process to support healing from trauma, including suicide. I also was trained by the American Suicide Prevention Foundation as a facilitator for bereavement groups for people healing from suicide loss.

Two months later, a high school senior in Utqiagvik died by suicide days before he was supposed to graduate. I knew his mom, we were in high school at the same time. The loss of this young man, and the silence he left behind spoke urgently to the need for suicide prevention work at home **now**. I began working on a framework for a performance-based class that included old and new Inuit stories, Arctic research, and performance. The class culminated in the production of a play I wrote in that celebrates Inupiaq history and resiliency and uses art to creatively heal from suicide loss.

The class, although interesting to many, didn't end up happening – not enough students signed up. We needed at least seven students for the cast and summer is a notoriously hard time to get students to take classes. But something told me to keep the project alive, not to give up just yet.

I knew I couldn't do it alone. To do live theater you need a community of people. Actors, set builders, backstage folks, of course the audience, and many other seen and unseen people. **Did Utqiagvik want to do this show right now?**

"High suicide rates in tribal communities have been linked to a lack of cultural continuity, and low rates have been associated with efforts to revitalize indigenous cultures..." - Lisa Wexler and Joseph P. Gone (2012). "Culturally Responsive Suicide Prevention in Indigenous Communities: Unexamined Assumptions and New Possibilities." American Journal of Public Health.

Quickly, I learned yes, ATTA resonated with people. People wanted to see something culturally-rooted, something with new and old stories, something that spoke to real issues in the north. Real issues everywhere. People and organizations stepped up to loan, donate, collaborate and just give to the project.

We were able to hold two creative qargik* with Utqiaġvik community members and two with students at the Children and Youth Services Center. We explored the history of whaling; the cultural, spiritual and environmental change that occurred from 1850-1910 in Utqiaġvik; and the history and research on ivruliit (sod houses) in and near Utqiaġvik. After we learned about ivruliit, we began building one for the stage!



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What became the stage ivrulik is the result of many creative minds and hard-working hands who built this artistic interpretation of an ivrulik. It was part of the set and stood in the library the week before the show as a community art piece. The materials were loaned or donated from six families and two organizations. The beautifully painted mural in the picture on the left was one of the two stage murals painted by students at the Children and Youth Services Center in Utqiaġvik. Our compelling actors from left to right: Alex Datillo, John Ahkivgak, Erica Khan and Kathy Peacock.

We started building the show's set before it was fully cast. We had the mindset, if we build it, they will come! And they did, although not all at once. Both Erica Khan, the talented actress who played the Iñupiaq Sea Goddess, and Courtney Yemiola, the inspiring voice behind the Speaker character, joined the project in early July. Soon after that, the multi-talented Kathy Peacock agreed to play the wise and culturally-rooted Aaka figure and her son, Edward Sam Edwardson signed on to play the show's loveable harpooner.

Then, there was a lull in casting. Many people were interested but no one wanted to commit to any of the four remaining roles, all male. That didn't surprise me, most Iñupiaq men I know would rather be caught dead than onstage. Performing on stage just doesn't sound Iñupiaq to most people. Even though we had a strong and sophisticated performance tradition for over 3,000 years before Western contact.¹ What is prevalent among most Iñupiaq men I know is suicide loss and suicidal thinking, which is one of the reasons this show has such a heavy male-cast.

"Death is hard on its own. Suicide is almost unbearable for those left behind. Makes you think what life must have been like for the person who died. The world you live in can be a painful place. But only if you forget who you are and where you come from. Only if you stop listening." said by Nuliauk, the Iñupiaq Sea Goddess from the show.

By Sunday, July 14, we were 12 days out from our initial show date of July 26. I remember sitting in my mom's room looking out the window over the tundra thinking, will this happen? Within a few moments, one of the cast members texts me. "...I'm just a little bit in doubt [that] we'll be ready by the end of the month...what are your thoughts?" If we were both doubting the show, should we do it? I listened for an answer from something greater than myself and heard yes, have faith. So I did. I told her, "I've thought about giving up too but I keep holding on because it still could come together."

* I define a creative qargik/k as a space in which one or a group learns, practices and/or performs indigenous history, perspectives and/or art. ¹ Thomas Riccio (2003). Reinventing Alaskan Native Performance. Edward Mellon Press.: Studies in Theater Arts, Vol. 17.



© Erica Khan, 2019



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Meet our courageous whalers! From left to right on the left picture: Edward Sam Edwardson, Wesley Unalina Kennedy and Anton Edwardson. In the picture on the right, we have the same line up plus our Search and Rescue (SAR) characters, Kathy Peacock and John Ahkivgak (who is hidden by the whalers). Quyanaqpak to the North Slope Borough SAR Department and Maria Esparza who lent us her SAR vests and Etta Fournier lent us some of the whaling qatiginisi's (white parka covers).

And it did. After reading part of the play, my brother, Anton Edwardson, who has never acted in his life and hates crowds, said he'd play one of the whalers (he ended up playing the character based off our dad which made me smile). My son, Wesley Unalina Kennedy, decided the play was worth a try after his uncle Anton said he'd do it. Una agreed to play Atta, the young whaling captain whose father died by suicide. And just like that the 2019 Umik Whaling Crew was created. Without their commitments, we wouldn't have had a show.

Although we had all the characters needed for our whaling story, we still needed an Aapa (translated as "father" for our show) and Kuvit, the bird-man character from the sea goddess story. With a renewed sense of faith, we moved the show dates to August 3 and 4 to give our actors more time to rehearse and find the last two cast members. Luckily, the show snagged Alex Datillo, a fantastic actor, to play Kuvit, and John Ahkivgak, a magnificent storyteller, to play Aapa. These two actors had less than a week to prepare and performed wonderfully.

"If you can sit through the pain, you'll hear the beating of your heart, like a drum, and remember: you are a part of something much bigger than yourself. With each beat of your heart know that your spirit is unbreakable. You will persevere. You come from a bloodline that can do all things." said by Nuliauk, the Iñupiaq Sea Goddess from the show.

We had close to 100 people attend both nights, which wasn't bad for a show that came together in three weeks and happened during one of the biggest cultural festivals on the North Slope. I'll be back to direct and produce a new Iñupiaq play (for kids) next summer. I'm writing the play this fall.

The play will be an adventure, led by kids who get lost and find their way home traveling through Alaska's North Slope. They will recall stories and memories from their elders, talk with animals (like swans!) and even interact with a flying whale from an old story! The play is also sure to include plenty of Iñuit history, stories and science. We hope to see you there! 🐋



*This show was dedicated to my father, **George Saḡḡan Edwardson**, whose stories, character and love are the foundations from which the play itself was built, and my mother, **Debby Dahl Edwardson**, who taught me to see the world through artist eyes.*

-- Aaluk Edwardson
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Want to see more ATTA images?
 Check them out online at www.aalukedwardson.com/bright-shores

Aaluk and her dad after the show. © Clara Kiouss

QUYAGITUTIÑ: TO BE THANKFUL TO YOU

The production could not have been possible without the time, energy, donations and loaned material of so many people.

First and foremost, I'd like to thank the cast.

They all rehearsed long hours, stepped bravely out on stage and performed beautifully.

Quyanaqpak (big thanks) to our cast (in order of length of time with the project):

Erica Khan, Courtney Yemiola, Kathy Peacock, Edward Sam Edwardson, Sophia & Daniel Ahkivgak, Anton Edwardson, Wesley Unalina Kennedy, John Ahkivgak, Alex Datillo, Annabel & Tuku Kalayauq, Qilaavsuk and Saġġan Vadiveloo, and Steve Clarke.

I'd also like to thank Heather Herron and Courtney Yemiola with the North Slope Borough Children and Youth Services Center (CYS) who eagerly supported two creative qargi's with students living at CYS. The creative work they did was beautiful. We were grateful to have their artwork in the show. I was overjoyed to have the opportunity to teach cultural history and facilitate creative work with students at CYS this summer, I hope to come back and do more creative qargis.

Tuzzy Library and Iļisaġvik College made the show possible in the first place.

After the class was cancelled, Tuzzy Library agreed to host the show as a community event at no cost. Without a venue, we would not have had a show. They also both helped with printing, costumes and space for rehearsal. **Quyanaqpak Jerica Niayuq Aamodt with Iļisaġvik & Rita Anderson with Tuzzy Library in particular!**

Our first sponsor for the show was The Fur Shop. They donated much of the material we used for the ivrulik, costumes and the set. The Fur Shop was our first sponsor and really helped. Thank you Stacy Bowen and The Fur Shop for your generous support!

ACE Hardware in Utqiaġvik also stepped up to the plate early on to help us with the material we needed to make our fantastic set. Without their donations to the project we wouldn't have had an ivrulik or the material needed for the beautiful murals done by CYS students. **Quyanaqpak ACE Hardware!**

The Alaska Commercial Company (AC) donated snacks and water for the hard-working actors to enjoy during rehearsals and the show. Their donations nourished our performers in times we really needed it. **Laura Thomas and the North Slope Borough Health and Social Services Department also donated snacks. Quyanaqpak to AC And NSB Health and Social Services!**

This project was supported by so many individuals and families. Thank you all: Rachel Naņinaaq Edwardson, David Vadiveloo & Family • Anne Jensen • Georgia Travers • Etta Fournier • Megan & Riley Kalayauk & Family • Jana Harcharek • Herman & Sylvia Ahsoak • Debby and George Edwardson • Sarah & Michael Thomas • Jonas & Heidi Ahsoak • Jeremy Aamodt • Richard Strauss & Spirit Series