

Final Report

*(Not) Our Mother Tongue: Exploring Language, Story and Connection in Performance*  
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Pure Research Calgary

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Nightswimming, in an international partnership with the University of Calgary's School of Creative and Performing Arts and organizations in Denmark, Iceland and Norway.

Our Experiment

*We set out to investigate the use of text in a language that the audience, and possibly the performer neither speaks nor understands, specifically in reference to Indigenous languages. Our research examined optimal ways to design performance for communities reeling from language loss through colonization and genocide, and other audiences, and promote language revitalization. Central questions addressed included how an audience's experience of a performance varies depending on ability to read and speak the language and their relationship with that language, and how the experience changes when the audience has cultural familiarity but lost fluency in the language.*

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge with deep gratitude that this project took place at the University of Calgary on the traditional territory of the people of the Treaty 7 region in southern Alberta, which includes the Blackfoot Confederacy (comprising the Siksika, Piikani and Kainai First Nations), the Tsuut'ina First Nation and the Stoney Nakoda (including the Chiniki, Bearspaw and Wesley First Nations). The City of Calgary is also home to Métis Nation of Alberta, Region III. The University of Calgary is situated on land adjacent to where the Bow River meets the Elbow River, and the traditional Blackfoot name of this place is "Moh'kins'tsis", which we now call the City of Calgary.

Many others made this research possible. We thank Nightswimming for their financial and human support every step of the way in planning and in the room; Brian Quirt, Brittany Ryan, Jeff Ho. Thank you to University of Calgary School of Creative and Performing Arts and Director Bruce Barton, and SYMBIONT 2018 international symposium in artistic research.

Most of all, we thank our research team: Buddy Wesley, Steven Mark, Caleigh Crow, Kristen Padayas.

Dohã pina maač. Mahsi cho. Quyanaq. Thank you very much.  
Reneltta and Patti

## Summary

This Pure Research experiment was deeply meaningful, rewarding, magical and impactful. It was highly successful on various levels.

Much of this is due to the incredibly generous, brave and dedicated team of researchers. They brought unique perspectives from various cultural backgrounds and life experiences.

Buddy Wesley, the lead Stoney Nakoda speaker, is an experienced musician, language teacher and translator. He was willing and able to play and experiment, to translate on the fly, and was unconditionally encouraging to the non-fluent performers. He brought a skill level that greatly led to the success of this exploration. Steven Mark, the younger Stoney Nakoda speaker, learned his language orally from his mother and grandmother. Not a professional performer, Stevie also was willing to go outside of his comfort zone, telling stories, live-translating, reading his language from a script for the first time and supporting the non- Stoney Nakoda speakers. Kristen Padayas and Caleigh Crow, the non-Stoney Nakoda speaking researchers, worked through their utter fear of pronouncing, mapping out, understanding and performing text in a new language. Nightswimming's team was completely present and supportive.

Perhaps it did not need "proving" that Indigenous languages – and other languages not spoken widely – can be incorporated much more into performing arts; after all, opera routinely does this with surtitles and some other theatre productions are using limited or extensive surtitles as well. What we did want to explore were various ways to engage language and performance that were outside of subtitles and surtitles, allowing autonomy of focus to remain intact in consideration to audience.

All translation is imperfect. Layers of meaning will be lost. There are extensive barriers to using Indigenous languages in performing arts, factors including cultural genocide, the limited number of fluent speakers, lack of familiarity with Eurocentric theatre traditions, ongoing discrimination, and lack of language funding and resources in Indigenous communities as well as rigour of sharing language that isn't dominant. We wanted to explore accessible, culturally respectful ways to feature more language, promote and support language revitalization, and test how much story and meaning could be conveyed without surtitle use.

We affirmed our hypothesis, that this can be done in various creative ways in addition to surtitles. Some methods we enjoyed include: live translation on stage; live translation using headsets; physicality and blocking; use of other theatrical elements (props, sound, lighting, projections, costumes, etc.); judicious interweaving of dominant language text with the other language as access points, including, in our experiment, with rhyme call and response and in a scene. We did not dismiss surtitle use out of hand either.

We also observed that meaning, pleasure and impact can be achieved in performance even when the audience does not understand everything and inferred that audience

preparation and orientation can be essential parts of a successful experience. Many of us know this already but this experiment serves as a valuable reminder.

We learned more about essential factors to build in to all levels of a project to design performance for communities reeling from language loss through colonization and genocide, and other audiences, and promote language revitalization. Our hopes are for Indigenous languages to become more widely used in meaningful ways in the performing arts.

### Creation / Casting/ Rehearsals Awarenesses

- Creating a safe, non-judgmental environment where non-speakers, whether from the community or from outside of it, are welcomed and encouraged.
- There is great value in providing a recording of the language from a fluent language speaker prior to being in the room together. It allows for space to review, review, review. Develop your own language learning techniques and memorization skills.
- The value of having a fluent speaker or speakers in the room, particularly one with patience and experience in translating and/or performance.
- Times when the fluent speaker leaves and the others need to manage as best they can.
- Time. Time to meet in advance with a translator. Time to review the pronunciations, to learn some complexities of the language, to explore nuances of translation and also get a sense of body language and other cultural norms.
- If live-translation is part of the performance, casting translators will need to be part of the process.
- The value of recordings for pronunciation.
- There is significant value in taking the time to explore meaning, emotion, rhythm, placement, function of layers in Indigenous language.
- Finding playable moments within language, with guidance and respect.
- Involving people of different generations: elders/youth.
- Giving of tobacco or other gifts to respect cultural protocols and show appreciation to an elder or language specialist and asking if not sure what's appropriate.
- Having food in the room.
- Having generosity and curiosity in the room.

### Performance

With guidance from the Indigenous speakers in the room, a set of protocols were established that acknowledge and situate the language, people and territory for the audience. It is vital to recognize and link to community where language is situated as a visual of where Indigenous language exists rather than continuing the narrative that Indigenous language is dying.

### Community

Do as much research as you can, then ask. Including about specific cultural protocols. We learned that Stoney Nakoda language has at least three variations: child, women and men.

### Moving Forward

*We generated considerable interest from Nightswimming artists and delegates at the conference. We gained valuable insights to carry into our ongoing work incorporating Cree, Inuktitut, Gwich'in and other languages into our theatre practice.*

*As we worked, with this dream team, Patti was aware of specific challenges faced in similar work in the Yukon region, where all 8 Indigenous languages are considered critically endangered, and the need to find sensitive ways to address these challenges. For example, the limited number of fluent speaker-translators are elderly and dealing with multiple demands and responsibilities. They are tired.*

*A clear challenge moving forward is to take longer sections of text and bring them to life. What of a full text in one of these languages? Would the methods we experimented with sustain storytelling in a longer performance? Perhaps, for now, we are looking at an imperfect blend, perhaps with some English woven in, or with acceptance that not all meaning will be translated.*

*The translation task is huge. In the Yukon, this task on a full-length script may be too large for available translators.*

*Reneltha discovered that having Indigenous language spoken in a dominant non-Indigenous space to non-Indigenous audience can trigger reactive feedback. There was some discomfort felt when the non-Indigenous audience heard language that was not known or understood in a space they were invited to engage in.*

*At the completion of the sharing, an audience member asked if Reneltha and Patti had tried using English on stage with Stoney Nakoda in the headphones for audience to listen to. Reneltha replied that yes, that was one exploration but in prior feedback, that since the language being spoken on stage was English and they understood it, having Stoney Nakoda language on the headset was not necessary to the telling of the story. It offers a distraction to the telling of the story on stage rather than enhance it. This was said in an observational way and therefore was not included in the final showing. The answer given to the audience member was not accepted. The person felt the need to inform the Pure Researchers on how that would have provided more context. It was interesting to be challenged for the decision to not offer that.*

*In reflection, two things came out of that exchange: Indigenous language is not a side interest for audience members to engage in, which is why it was not included initially. The other is, there is resistance to accept how Indigenous language is shared in a space primarily occupied by non-Indigenous people. It creates an unsettling feeling and for this particular person, a desire to control it. One of the purposes of this research was to explore ways to decolonize theatre space. From this interaction, this felt like a success.*

*One deeper consideration Reneltta walked away with was that using Indigenous language on stage with English in headsets allows the autonomy of focus for the audience. It also lessens the barrier of needing to read the play, allowing audience to experience the play. Having English in headsets does enhance the telling of story. The question remaining and what was not explored during this time was how to use this engagement with multiple voices. There are some ideas on how to do this successfully but these weren't accomplished in this time. The other consideration is how to lessen Indigenous language barriers and yet create opportunity to engage Indigenous language into other language expressions, such as sign language and Braille, etc.*

#### Research Participants:

Co-Researchers Reneltta Arluk, Patti Flather

2 Fluent Stoney Nakoda language speakers – Buddy Wesley, Steven Mark.

2 non-fluent Actors – Caleigh Crow, Kristen Padayas

Nightswimming team – Brian Quirt, Brittany Ryan, Dramaturgy Intern Jeff Ho

Various audiences

#### Preparations

In early fall, we refined our experiment plan in consultation with Nightswimming and identified the equipment needed in order to document. We decided to work with speakers of an Indigenous language of the territory Pure Research Calgary took place on, Treaty 7. This was partly a practical decision due to travel costs of bringing more people in, but this decision felt right on other levels – to work with first languages and speakers of the territory we were on.

Reneltta, as Director of Indigenous Arts at Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, is connected to many cultural specialists in the region. She recruited both an older fluent Stoney Nakoda speaker, Buddy Wesley, and a younger one, Steven Mark. Patti, with her Gwaandak Theatre contacts including colleague Clare Preuss, recruited two non-Stoney Nakoda speaking, Calgary-based performers Kristen Padayas and Caleigh Crow. Gwaandak Theatre administered the contracting.

We assembled short Eurocentric text selections that are familiar in mainstream popular culture. This included: the nursery rhyme Hey Diddle Diddle, a fairy tale excerpt from Little Red Riding Hood which Patti paraphrased in a short prose section, and the song Row, Row, Row Your Boat. Reneltta also wrote three brief, fairly neutral dialogues. (We added other texts later in the room. All are attached). We planned to incorporate more culturally specific Stoney Nakoda text in the room, drawing from the fluent speakers' own stories; Reneltta discussed this with them in advance.

Buddy translated initial texts in writing. Reneltta, having language learning experience, recorded them with Buddy in Banff. The pace and quality were excellent, clear and not too fast. Reneltta sent them to Patti and she uploaded them onto google docs for Caleigh and Kristen one week before the experiment. There were some technical difficulties sharing the recordings. Brittany Ryan was a huge help.

We had envisioned that one of the fluent speakers would spend a half day in advance with the non-fluent performers reviewing the Nakoda text; this was not possible but would be ideal.

We arrived in Calgary on the Sunday – Patti, Reneltta, Jeff and Brittany all connecting at the airport – and had a meeting that afternoon, clarifying roles and our plan for the first day. Reneltta and I asked ourselves how we would hold space together.

Reneltta would be the lead as a skilled director and Patti would take excellent video, photography, audio documentation and offer vital observational input.

### Equipment used

Hearing Assist System including: transmitter, receiver, body-pack charger, overhead mics, lapel mics, hearing aid neck loop, cables, earbud headsets

4 iPods

2 Rolls of presentation size paper

Markers in multiple colours

Audio recorder

Video recorder

Screen

Projector, HDMI for Apple

Laptop

Speakers

### Experiments and Discoveries

#### **Day 1:**

#### Introductions

We got to know each other, and some of our language influences. Kristen's grandmother spoke Hindi to her. She spoke of similarities and connections between the Hindi and Nakoda language structures. Brittany is working in Indigenous language as General Manager at Signal Theatre in Toronto.

Buddy shared knowledge about the large Stoney Nakoda language family stretching across wide swaths of Turtle Island in what is now Canada and the U.S, about linguists working in his community from the 1960s on, about the distinctive Stoney Nakoda nasal placement. We learned he teaches Stoney Nakoda to people in three communities around Calgary. There is a waiting list.

Caleigh's Métis roots trace back to Lac LaBiche in northern Alberta; her grandfather would not speak his Cree language. She was in French immersion. Now her family is taking Cree classes.

Reneltta's roots are Chipewyan, Cree, Inuvialuit and Gwich'in. These languages were not passed down due to shame, residential school and cultural disconnect. Steven learned Stoney Nakoda from his mother and grandmother Fay, also he is Buddy's cousin.

Questions we discussed:

Reneltta: "Teaching language to people who are not of the culture – what does that feel like?" Buddy: "I think it's about time. Paradigm happening in society, suddenly interest in our own language which never happened before."

Changes in fluency levels:

Buddy told us, "Old language, my generation is the last frontier to have that." He explained that Nakoda is a complex language with various forms including men's, women's, general, diminutive. Nowadays he only hears the "general" form of Stoney Nakoda.

Steven's grandmother and mother taught him the old language therefore he speaks the women's dialect. He learned to speak within his own family. There are language classes at the school in Morley, on the Stoney Nakoda First Nation west of Calgary, but Steven says not all kids are speaking the language.

How did Caleigh and Kristen memorize:

Caleigh's initial response was: "This is going to be impossible." Even getting used to the physical movements required of her mouth, tongue, palate, but it got easier. "The recordings were just absolutely crucial."

Kristen also was "doing things with my mouth I have never had to do." She played Buddy's voice over and over and pieced together the nasal sound as best she could. She figured out that the "hat" – the circumflex – is used in the Stoney Nakoda writing system for nasal sound and noted that throughout.

Kristen found the dialogues manageable but with Little Red Riding Hood, "it was like, oh no." Then she was able to attach words and meanings to an English translation – such as *Sîna sa hî îna* for Little Red Riding Hood. Row Your Boat stuck for her because she knew the song; it ran in her head at work. She wrote the text out phonetically. She read it several times, focusing first on pronunciation, then on emphasis. She found similarities and differences with Hindi.

Exploring Language in the Room:

Reneltta shared her experiences as a Performer, Director and Playwright while working with Indigenous language. In the play *Night* that she acted in for four years, she would listen repeatedly and fall asleep to the recorded Inuktitut text. She would also breakdown the text into recognizable bits in her script as she didn't know what the majority of the words meant. As a Director in rehearsals for *The Breathing Hole* at The Stratford Festival, Reneltta had some of the text translated into Inuktitut Netsilik dialect. Reneltta and The Festival's vocal coach, Paul Diong, a non-Inuk, recorded the Inuktitut text with the same person who translated it. Paul then broke it down phonetically and provided copies of the recordings for the cast to learn. There were fluent Inuktitut speakers in the cast but there was not a formal Inuk language tutor. The intention was for Paul to administer the rigour

of learning the Inuktitut text and not have the responsibility land on the fluent speaking actors. As a playwright, Renelitta has been working closely with a Plains Cree speaker that joins her in the rehearsal room during each workshop on *Pawâkan Macbeth*. Darlene Auger taught Cree words to the cast as an ensemble but also met with each of the cast members one on one to have them record their words and work on specific pronunciation.

This ensemble reviewed texts with Buddy, word by word then line by line. Steven commented that it was good to hear Buddy speak.

Thus in *Hâ thwa thwa* (Row Your Boat), for example, the performer-researchers learned and pencilled into the Stoney Nakoda version:

*Owakâgagen îjathibe yihotûbi gichi*  
Cat bow musical instrument and  
(The cat and the fiddle)

This helped them to latch on to words like cat.

*Have Elder and fluent actor listen to **memorized text**.*

The performer-researchers took turns reading their first Stoney Nakoda text, Little Red Riding Hood, with the fluent speakers. “Pretty good...You didn’t butcher it,” Steven said. Renelitta encouraged the actors to ask the fluent speakers questions. Kristen wondered about the rhythm of it. Caleigh was curious about which vowels take a longer time, are “lived in.” Buddy immediately connected with the concept and offered, in line 1, to “be a little musical” with the word *wîyânâcha* (wearing), to think like a little kid, to play around, take your time, try to talk like a child.

*Wanîgas wîyânâcha sînâsa hî îh ejjyabinâcha hûgu gichi ûhâch.*  
Little Red Riding Hood lived with her mother.

Renelitta spoke of infusing the text with creativity, of the need to empower the actors, and to ask the translator: Where in these words can they play? Where in these words do they need to be straight? “You have to understand where you can play with the language.”

*Hecheyaktek* – it suddenly happened or suddenly – became one of those words, in the text’s final line.

*Hecheyaktek sîktogeja wodîktecha akipahâch.*  
And who should she meet but a hungry wolf.

After Kristen emphasized *Hecheyaktek*, Buddy said: “You sound like my granddaughter. That’s very good.”

This discussion – about finding moments to play with text – was often revisited.



How does it feel to hear someone of another culture speaking your language?

Buddy: "For me, very appreciative. I'm enjoying it. What a concept...It gets you some kind of high." Steven said, "I don't mind it at all." He is trying to teach his partner, who is not Stoney Nakoda. "It's really refreshing to hear it from other people too."

Renelitta talked about the plans to translate Colleen Murphy's play *The Breathing Hole* into Netsilik dialect of Inuktitut from around the community of Gjoa Haven with translator Janet Tamilik McGrath. The translator has identified the need to consider how community members might feel hearing their language spoken by Inuit actors from outside their region.

Renelitta asked Buddy and Wesley how it would feel if they stepped into the theatre and heard their language being spoken by non-Stoney Nakoda actors. Both were very receptive to the idea. Buddy said, firstly, he'd be "surprised, then start to really appreciate it. 'Oh, there's my language. Who's speaking it?' It kind of gives me pleasure." Steven expected he would be caught by surprise, then feel glad that his language is being featured and others can hear it. There was no extrapolation from this discussion that other individuals or communities would have the same response in different situations.

What Renelitta learned was that connection to community and acknowledgement of how that language came to be part of the play was likely the necessary process to ensuring safety of Indigenous language was held for cast and audience.

When engaging in Indigenous language, what is the best way to acknowledge protocol and process?

We discussed the need to ensure space is created to recognize and link to community where language is situated.

Renelitta: "I don't re-create history. I create art using history." Kristen spoke of wanting to have the feeling of paying homage, being true, as opposed to using one's own experience and appropriating from others. A place where you feel pleasure. Where a brown person is not the butt of every joke. Renelitta said we as directors, artistic directors, need to create safe places in the room to encourage that.

Theory into Practice!

*Rehearse with actors in Indigenous language then again in English. **For dialogue.***

- *Neutral, no blocking.*
- *Neutral, blocking.*
- *Intention, no blocking.*
- *Intention, blocking.*

Dialogue 1

This simple dialogue elicited fascinating teachings from Buddy, as Renelitta directed Caleigh and Kristen to be neutral, then act with intention.

A. *Âbawathtech*

A. Hello.

B. *âbawathtech doken yaû?*

B. Hello. How are you?

A. *dâ âwaûch*

A. I'm good.

B. *îjayakenî?*

B. Really?

Buddy explained, "There was never hello in our language." A greeting was created, that means good day. Elders might say "ooooh" or "eeeeh" as forms of greeting conveying various meanings. He gave pointers. An extended nasal was needed on *doken yaû* to convey a sincere rather than disrespectful greeting.

As we delved into simple blocking, he also shared valuable information about appropriate physical gestures in Stoney Nakoda culture, in the past and nowadays. Hugging was not in their culture but now women can hug. Two men meeting at FasGas in Cochrane in Stoney Nakoda territory could shake hands.

Brian Quirt and Jeff Ho were the first audience, watching Kristen and Caleigh speaking the Stoney Nakoda dialogue without blocking or intention, then with no blocking but intention, then with blocking and intention. The level of audience understanding predictably increased. Jeff had no idea what the first iteration was about; by the second he deduced it was a greeting and a question; finally he decided it was a greeting with a 'How are you?', a check in and a second question. Brian spoke of "the magic of bodies" by the third iteration.

We also tried Buddy and Stevie saying the text, with English surtitles written large on large paper held by others at the side. The paper was loud. Everyone agreed this was distracting; we could not stay in the scene.

### Row Your Boat

The text for the song began:

*wado wadopa*

Row, row, row your boat

Buddy knew the song. In translation discussions, Buddy explained that in Stoney Nakoda the verb *wadopa* covers all activities one might do in a boat – riding, rowing, paddling, etc. After individual efforts, Renelitta had the group sing it in a round. This was unfamiliar to Steven but he tried. Buddy realized that, as men and women were singing, he wanted to use the "man word" at times and not just his original translation in general language. "That's why I like having people in the room who speak the language," Renelitta said. "Language is living and we need to recognize and work with it in that way."

### Dialogue 2 – The Wallet

In this simple dialogue around a missing wallet, Renelitta worked on blocking with Kristen and Caleigh. We explored how obvious the blocking needed to be without use of surtitles, and without sliding into melodrama. Renelitta does not like surtitles; she ends up watching them instead of the action. Patti was less sure – recognizing them as a barrier, but also wanting to explore how to convey more complex and longer sections of text.

We experimented with simple surtitles set up on Brittany’s laptop, in Keynote program, and projected. We added the prop wallet in an iteration. It was obvious after the fact that adding in this simple prop made the scene clear in Stoney Nakoda and we did not need English surtitles.

### Nursery Rhyme – Hey Diddle

*Hâ thwa thwa*  
Hey, diddle, diddle,

*Owakâgagen îjathibe yihotûbi gichi*  
The cat and the fiddle,

*Tahrneya mâganâ cha hâhebi*  
*wahîyâba ayupthiyahâch*  
The cow jumped over the moon;

*Sûkchiyânâcha îhrahâch*  
The little dog laughed

*Wîchoskade dâ â hûyagabi*  
To see such sport,

*Waksiyacha kiskanâ cha gichi nâpa hâch*  
And the dish ran away with the spoon.

Renelitta purposely chose this text because it had rhyming and words that were hard to translate. Buddy immediately raised challenges around direct translation with Hey Diddle Diddle. This could not be literally translated. He chose a playful, joking Stoney Nakoda expression: *Hâ thwa thwa*, used with people and pets.

With this nursery rhyme, as the performers reviewed the text word by word, Renelitta returned to her question around which words were playable, which were straight. Buddy said *thwa* was playable. So was *ayupthiyahâch* (jumped over).

Renelitta asked if one could rhyme in Stoney Nakoda. “I don’t think there’s such a thing as trying to rhyme in our words,” Buddy replied. Renelitta asked if there was a different way to engage language with texture, to add different voices and personalities.

Reneltta said this nursery rhyme's purpose is to delight and asked how we can use the text's sound and rhythm to create this sense of delight. This was a lovely insight which led to experiments full of play and joy.

To take the text out of one's head and deepen its resonance in other parts of the body, Reneltta had the performers lie down to say the lines. Others joined in. Reneltta asked how far we can push, stretch, the language, while it remains understood, and urged finding sounds that delighted Kristen and Caleigh. They played. We laughed so hard our cheeks hurt. Kristen, then Caleigh did the rhyme again with this spirit.

"I like the consonants I found," said Kristen. "It's liberating," said Reneltta. Jeff Ho was observing. He said he didn't even care what they were saying. "To me, it's just music. It's delightful." Success!

Building on this, Reneltta wanted them to find the freedom to play with each other. Caleigh and Kristen delivered the rhyme together, to each other; it was even more delightful. Reneltta instructed them to choose English words to throw in here and there. Caleigh asked if she can use sounds as well, such as a meow, a laugh. Reneltta said yes. Brian Quirt, also observing, noted that this iteration allowed some "ins" for a non-speaker. Caleigh and Kristen tried to pick English words that helped make it understandable.

Brittany, whose background in Canada is Chinese-Métis, did not still fully understand it. This rhyme was not familiar to her in English. This was an important reminder not to assume audience familiarity, even with a popular text from mainstream culture.

Building again, Reneltta led call-and-response iterations between Caleigh and Kristen. She wanted to keep the sense of a secret, of not giving away all of the story. Caleigh led in Stoney Nakoda; Kristen waited, weaving in English pieces afterwards in some moments. Brittany said this version was a lot clearer for her. We all enjoyed this version. It felt playful. There was a sense of sharing the moment. We decided to present this version at our final showing at the end of Day 3.

### End of Day 1

Reneltta asked Caleigh and Kristen how many hours they needed to put in to be comfortable with these short texts before this first day. Caleigh estimated four hours, Kristen 8-10 hours. The recordings were invaluable. Buddy said translating Hey Diddle Diddle was the toughest for him.

Reneltta asked Buddy to bring his guitar, and Steven to prepare a short story with a beginning, middle and end in his language, possibly from his mother or grandmother. She told Buddy she would send one more text for him to translate, featuring dialogue with more substance.

We learn that Buddy needs to leave early on Day 2. We asked about what happens if you don't have the language support in the room.

As the day wrapped, we noted courage and generosity in the room. Caleigh confessed that she had been very anxious coming in. Buddy said, "I felt very free here. It feels very warm here." Jeff Ho told us how he had come to Canada from Hong Kong at age 12, and the fear the performers expressed brought back memories for him, as did their joy using a new language. Brian observed that the experiment got further today than anticipated and could go further, that one or several doors will open.

### We reviewed our plans for Day 2

The ensemble members were incredibly quick to the delving in of process. Renelitta will admit that their openness and quick learning skills asked more of her for the days following. This meant looking for deeper complex text that would need to be translated by Buddy and broken down and learned by Kristen and Caleigh.

Our revised plans now included Stoney Nakoda stories from Buddy and Steven and experimentations with live translation and Renelitta's more complex text.

Patti and Renelitta then participated in a Pure Research debrief of our day, for SYMBIONT delegates, in the Reeve Theatre. Afterwards, we spoke with delegates from The Philippines and Brazil, who are exploring ways to use body to tell story.

### Day 1 Observational Questions

Patti wondered if more documentation or focused questions were needed in the group, with written rather than just oral answers as the experiment progressed. She also was aware that she, as an Anglo-settler, does not come from an oral culture and brings a bias to document in certain ways.

She also jotted down questions:

How do we do this work when fluent speakers are not in the room?

How do we welcome/include a fluent speaker who is not familiar with theatre arts practice?

How do we prepare performers for longer sections of text in another language?

What about with performers who are not trained?

How do we test the minimum use of surtitles with complex text, and avoid over-acting?

From Bruce Barton – how might we explore ways to use sound to help tell it?

### **Day 2:**

*Check in.*

*Talk about language text.*

- *Any new thoughts from day before?*
- *Audience responses? Surprises? Discoveries?*
- *Try something else with dialogue text?*

Kristen stayed away from the text until before bed, then reviewed it then and in the morning. She remembers more than she expected. "My brain is piecing it together. I also noticed the words are kind of like music now." Steven was thinking about the story he's

going to tell, even as he played volleyball that night. Caleigh had a lot of fun the first day and was feeling good.

We shared some of our conversation including with Eric, one of the Philippine delegates, about language and dialects feeding off the environment in The Philippines – the angular mountains, the ocean, etc.

We had an important discussion about our audiences and accessibility. Jeff told us about his play *Trace*, about three generations of women survivors in his family. This was a current performing arts/Factory production in 2017 in Toronto. He was sick of men speaking and only had them speak through pianos. The English was in a specific Hong Kong accent. He wondered how accessible this play needed to be and quoted director Nina Lee Aquino, “Sometimes a play isn’t for a white audience...don’t be afraid to embrace this.” “The story needs to be told however it needs to be told,” Jeff said. He might consider surtitles if he did the play again.

Kristen, also Artistic Associate with Chromatic Theatre, a company dedicated to developing and supporting culturally diverse voices in Calgary, spoke of pressure she sometimes feels to make her work accessible to everyone. Yet she has seen work in other languages or in clown and understood completely. She asks if others who struggle with connecting are even open to it. Jeff spoke of pressures of creators of colour to only create from their perspective, and wonders how we can shift this. Reneltha described questions around the Inuktitut language adaptation of *The Breathing Hole* with the National Arts Centre, and possible Inuktitut surtitles. She knows surtitles are standard in opera, and there will be Inuit people who come to the play. “I just don’t want to do it ’cause it’s clever or it’s the right thing to do as an ally.”

Another valuable teaching moment and discussion ensued that relates directly to cultural protocols and how we work together respectfully.

Buddy told us that in Stoney Nakoda culture pointing is acceptable. Staring someone in the eyes is rude. Reneltha was taught that looking down and listening with your ear is a sign of respect. Reneltha, Kristen and Caleigh spoke about their negative experiences in post-secondary theatre institutions, where among other things, not looking someone in the eye was frowned upon. Reneltha was called stubborn when she spoke out; years later the institution apologized to her. Reneltha said, “Indigenous women can’t get angry the way white women can.”

- *Have Elder and fluent actor listen to memorized text.*
- *What was not pronounced accurately? Lost in transference.*

The team revisited our short monologue text about Little Red Riding Hood, with goals of deciphering a monologue, deepening meaning in words, taking an audience on a journey and exploring use of surtitles.

*English is backwards (!)*

Patti scribbled this note as we began. Renelitta asked Kristen, Caleigh and Steven all to create their own relationship with the Little Red Riding Hood text, identifying where they are in the character's life and journey.

### *Surtitles*

*Rehearse with actors in language then again in English. For text.*

- *Neutral, no blocking.*
- *Neutral, blocking.*
- *Intention, no blocking.*
- *Intention, blocking.*

Brittany set up the laptop and projector. Renelitta prepared Little Red Riding Hood surtitles in English.

Kristen did her version first. Kristen savoured the cloak from her grandmother and interpreted it as a coming of age tale. Buddy instructed her to tone down a little her *Hecheyaktek* (it suddenly happened or suddenly.)

Steven, not a performer, was reluctant to stand up for his version but he did with encouragement. Renelitta then asked him to tell the story in his language without using the script. Steven hesitated. Buddy gave him advice in Stoney Nakoda. Steven proceeded. Buddy noted that he had included other words. Patti asked Steven how it felt reading that text in his language. "It felt good, the way Buddy translated," he replied.

Caleigh's version emphasized more of the trail through the woods – *châ ohâ châgunâcha ohnâ*.

Now it was time to experiment with surtitles. Some considerations included the surtitle font, size, colour, placement in relation to the performer, and choice of text per slide. We began with black text on a white screen.

### *Questions:*

*How do surtitles change with the teller's delivery?* Rhythm and timing vary. Also the performer's height.

Kristen and Caleigh became faster, more adept at delivering their Stoney Nakoda lines. "You're behind," Buddy noted, as Renelitta tried to time the surtitles with the text. Finally, "That was a good one. Nailed it," Buddy said.

Renelitta experimented with where surtitles were projected, including levels. She also edited the text. Patti asked why. She said she wanted to get to the point and create energy, and asked: "Are we using too many surtitles?" We discussed the need for cues for surtitle changes. It was obvious that working with surtitles requires more time in the room.

In one iteration, Renelitta projected the final English word of the text – wolf – on the body of the performer, on Caleigh’s torso. Brittany noticed three elements: the voice in Stoney Nakoda, the word projected on her body, and the text surtitles like another character she was watching. “They do compete with each other a little bit...thing I’m watching most and trying to interpret is the body.” Brittany said she realized in that moment when the surtitle was on Caleigh’s body that was doing all those three things, and they “all kind of came together...like they were talking to each other.” Kristen spoke of the surtitle world and performer world and how they became one world in that moment.

We set up blacks and white text and tried other iterations. Patti was also keen to try the manipulation of the surtitles and did some. Brittany preferred versions without the word wolf on the performer-researcher. “I wanted her to be the storyteller,” she said. Renelitta talked about wanting to explore how a surtitle could change the narrative of a story. Putting that word on the body changes the narrative. We all thought the blacks made the performer and surtitles feel more integrated and seamless. Patti was surprised at how differently the versions felt – the first ones using white screen and black text, the second using blacks and white text.

We asked: *Does a surtitle need to be separate? Can we use it to tell story and character?*

We decide to show the wolf on and off Caleigh’s body in our final showing on Day 3.

#### Live Translation: Little Red Riding Hood

Brittany guided Buddy up the stairs to a chair on a raised platform booth with a small window in the adjacent room, where she set him up for live translation. He had headphones and could hear the sound in the theatre and his own voice.

In the theatre, Steven spoke the Little Red Riding Hood text in Stoney Nakoda and Buddy live-translated into English. Steven could not hear Buddy. We listened using earbud headsets, some of us like Renelitta and Brittany with one earbud in, listening to Buddy and one out listening to Steven. Steven was surprised. “I didn’t know you could do that.” Renelitta noted that’s what they do at the United Nations. Buddy said he used to do that kind of translating at conferences.

Brittany said it was funny, but “it felt like actually...the character’s grandfather telling the story in real time...they were both very much a part of the storytelling.” Renelitta said, “That’s a good balance.”

Next, Steven spoke the text in English on stage and Buddy did Stoney Nakoda live translation. Renelitta only wanted to hear the Stoney Nakoda. Brittany observed that what’s live on stage is the priority; when we put English on stage (in our English-speaking milieu) we don’t need Buddy’s translation, and what we hear in earbuds is not as clear as what’s on stage.

She asked: *Who is the audience? What language do we make the priority?*



Next, Steven went into the booth to live-translate into English, from Buddy on stage in Stoney Nakoda.

All of us in the room enjoyed the live translation very much. It was Renelitta's favourite so far. Kristen enjoyed hearing English in her ear and Stoney Nakoda live, feeling she could both engage with the performance and get fed its meaning. "It's like there's two storytellers," Caleigh said. Technical issues arose, as they will – Steven's headphone was harder to hear on one side. Brian liked putting his full visual attention on Buddy telling the story in this version. Patti said she wants to be promoting Indigenous language and culture and find the best ways to do this. Whoever is translating is important, said Brittany. "You have to cast translators according to the cast on stage." Alternately, Renelitta said the translator could speak the lines neutrally to retain focus on the storyteller.

We decided to present Buddy speaking Stoney Nakoda on stage and Steven live translating for our final presentation.

#### *Discussion: Back to surtitles!*

Kristen said she enjoys watching full foreign films with surtitles and doesn't see why she wouldn't with a live show, although she has never seen a full show with surtitles. Brittany said an issue in theatre is surtitle placement. A movie screen is in one location whereas in theatre there are many places to look. She prefers voice over surtitles. Caleigh reported having a hard time watching both surtitles and a film's action. "They're all imperfect. What is least imperfect and what contributes most to storytelling?" Brian asked.

*More questions: What's it like with one translator and multiple voices?* More translators could be in another room.

*Could translations be pre-recorded?*

*How do we ensure translators feel comfortable?*

Renelitta reviewed what we did on this experiment, including her meeting with Buddy in person in advance and recording his texts with him. She noted she did not offer tobacco. Buddy said he's open. "You don't have to. Some others, you have to follow protocol." She wondered if she should be stricter about protocols of offering it, but also viewed translating and being in the room not so much sacred as a part of the practice. Brittany said she likes to bring a small gift to show her respect. Buddy said, "It's ok to ask." Renelitta said we also make sure there is food in the room, which we did, as did SYMBIONT. We also gave respect to the language in the room. (At the end of our experiment Patti gave gifts to all research team members).

#### New Text and Translation – TUMIT Excerpt

Buddy had already translated the next text, a two-character scene from Renelitta's play *TUMIT*. The main character is Sarah. Buddy changed this to Sena because many Stoney Nakoda speakers can't pronounce R's.

Caleigh, then Kristen, read Sena/Sarah and Buddy read Grandpa in the Stoney Nakoda text, without any English translation on their scripts. Renelitta spoke of the first day's texts being more two dimensional. She asked Kristen and Caleigh to do some review work on it at home to get comfortable. This text allowed more space, thought and reflection. She spoke of the young woman being at a crossroads in her life, going into her past to guide her choices for the future. Caleigh recorded Buddy reading it.

Steven revealed that younger speakers like himself have learned orally, not off of paper, and that this was his first time reading written Stoney Nakoda. He noted there is a language app for his language. Renelitta said she has used Cree and other language apps in her writing.

The group is given the English translation for the scene. Renelitta told them she's looking to reflect and convey emotion in the text in Stoney Nakoda. This was tough for the performer-researchers. Kristen said there were so many layers to learning to perform this and felt a sense of loss of body during her effort. "There was none of this that I read out loud that I felt good about...to now try and act, the brain is in this kind of like aaaagh." (On this afternoon, Buddy has had to leave early). Steven works with Kristen and Caleigh on the text.

Renelitta described a moment after week 1 on *Pawâkan Macbeth* rehearsals when the fluent speaker had to leave the room. Some had to make the language their own. Some regressed. But Renelitta said she always wants the language teacher to leave the room at some point. Kristen said that would be okay with the other texts but not on this one.

Renelitta suggested that Kristen add a few English words here and there; after all, she is a younger person and this is believable. Renelitta spoke of her Cree language guidelines on *Pawâkan*, where she did not want to use the language just anywhere; there were with greetings, intimacy and one of the witches. If helpful, she told Kristen to create her own rule of engagement with the Stoney Nakoda language.

### Preparing for our Wednesday Presentation

We began finalizing the volunteers who would come to observe Day 3 experiments, the excerpts we would share on the final afternoon, and the questions we wanted to ask.

### **Day 3:**

#### *Check in.*

People are feeling good. Caleigh's looking forward to the afternoon sharing, her "non-existent expectations exceeded." Buddy said he had fun and really appreciates "you two" – Kristen and Caleigh, who are getting the language. He's used to teaching to non-Stoney Nakoda students who don't always do their homework! He thinks it's about time the outside world is learning his language. "Language is a responsibility," Renelitta said. Brittany said this work, this experiment, is important and hopefully everyone can do more work respectfully with language, not just the few doing it now. This is Kristen's first time

working in Indigenous arts and she appreciates it. She described her worries about her connections to her grandmother and whether Kristen's own children one day will ever taste her grandmother's food.

On the *TUMIT* scene, Kristen and Caleigh said they're feeling better. Kristen got thinking about how she and her cousins talk to their grandmother in Hindi with some English words sprinkled in; she could use that approach in this scene, but certain key words like grandfather would remain in Stoney Nakoda. They reported how Steven was a huge help yesterday helping them split up the text.

#### Steven's Story – Oral Storytelling and Live Translation

Steven stood, and Buddy sat in a chair next to him. Steven told a personal story in Stoney Nakoda and Buddy did live translation into English. This was so simple, moving, touching and powerful. It was about his grandmother's wonderful memories of going to Banff Indian Days as a girl, and how it was not the same nowadays. Steven did it once through. Then Renelitta had him do it again in smaller sections. It was quite remarkable; as Buddy knew of this event as well, he also added more details about this four-day celebration each July, like a big powwow, people camped all over, a parade from the rodeo grounds to town to the Banff Springs Hotel.

#### TUMIT Scene

We returned to this, first with Buddy and Caleigh. Buddy proved to be a comfortable performer. Renelitta asked him as Grandpa to rub his legs when he says they're sore, to adjust his glasses when he says he can't see clearly, and to find eye contact with Caleigh as his granddaughter. He kept building his showmanship over the afternoon. She instructed to plant on the English word bingo in his Stoney Nakoda text to create a bit of context for a non-fluent audience. Caleigh did the same in certain areas. Kristen and Buddy also did the scene, with Kristen experimenting in her own way with sprinkling English text in.

We liked both versions and decided to present them both that afternoon.

A small group of volunteer audience members – three young women – arrived about 2:30 pm. They observed as Brittany also recorded the performer-researchers doing Sarah's final monologue of the scene in English, with Buddy playing guitar softly in the background. This was a sort of bonus track. They got to see two iterations of the scene and then listen to the English recording on the iPod if they chose. One called it "a very rich, small experience." One said she enjoyed seeing the process of recording, then seeing the scene and recording incorporated. One said she was not sure if the recording she heard was unique, special, but thought it might be, and did not feel the technology brought her out any more than sitting in a chair. Brian loved how the recording did not try to duplicate but added additional experience; he had one earbud in and one out. So did Jeff and Patti. They wanted to hear both the recording and the live moments on stage, including Buddy playing guitar in both recorded and on stage, live versions.

The volunteer audience members also responded to the non-text vocalizations, the chuckles, from the performer-researchers in this scene. They felt nostalgia and warmth in this grandparent/grandchild relationship and found the scene to be welcoming to an audience.

This was a perfect scene for the younger performer-researchers and Buddy to do together. It had emotionality yet was not too long and complicated.

### Language Protocols

We decided that protocols that acknowledge and situate the language, people and territory for the audience are essential. It is vital to recognize and link to community where language is situated. Together we decided the words we wanted to share for the afternoon guests. This is what Renelta and Patti read out as part of the introduction:

*Stoney Nakoda is one of the Nations of Treaty 7 Territory. Different dialects are Nakoda, Lakoda, Dakota. They are spoken in regions of Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Montana, North and South Dakota and Nebraska.*

*These past three days we've been working with an older speaker, experienced Stoney Nakoda translator Buddy Wesley, younger speaker Steven Mark and non-Nakoda speaking performer-researchers Caleigh Crow and Kristen Padayas.*

### The Final Afternoon – What We Shared

We gave short set-ups and shared a variety of our experiments. We asked the group a few specific questions.

- Hey Diddle Diddle nursery rhyme, with Caleigh and Kristen together in both Stoney Nakoda and English
- Dialogue – the wallet, with a prop and no English surtitles
- Little Red Riding Hood with Kristen and surtitles next to her, and Caleigh with the final surtitle word on her body
- Little Red Riding Hood with Buddy on stage and Steven in the booth live-translating with ear buds. (We asked what the different Red Riding Hood versions offered.)
- Steven's story with Buddy live on stage
- The *TUMIT* scene, first Caleigh and then Kristen with Buddy, with audience having the option of putting their ear buds in at the end of the second iteration and pressing play on their iPods to hear the recorded of Sarah's final monologue, with Buddy playing guitar.

### The Researchers

**Renelitta Arluk** brought years of valuable experience into the room. She is a Dene, Inuk, Cree woman from The Northwest Territories. A born storyteller, she is the first Indigenous woman graduate of the University of Alberta's BFA in Acting. She faced significant barriers in the program at that time. She has performed on stages across Canada, including in Inuktitut (*Night*). She is a playwright working in multiple languages. Her play *TUMIT*, written in English, is translated into French. *Pawâkan Macbeth* is her groundbreaking reimagining of Shakespeare's darkest play into Plains Cree history, legend and cosmology. She is the award-winning director of The Stratford Festival's production of Colleen Murphy's *The Breathing Hole*, currently being translated into Inuktitut, Netsilik dialect. She also is Director of Indigenous Arts at Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity.

**Patti Flather** is a third-generation Anglo-settler theatre artist, raised on unceded territory of the Squamish, Musqueam and Tseil-Waututh Nations in North Vancouver, B.C. She moved North and co-founded Gwaandak Theatre in Whitehorse, Yukon, an Indigenous-centred intercultural company focused on illuminating Indigenous and Northern Voices, with her husband Leonard Linklater (Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation). They have raised two strong daughters; one works in Gwich'in language revitalization and one in Indigenous law. Patti is Artistic Director of Gwaandak Theatre. She grew up with English as her only language. One great grandfather spoke Scottish Gaelic. Patti is a playwright, dramaturg, director working to infuse more theatre stories with Indigenous languages in respectful ways. She is currently working on Ndoo Tr'eedyaa Gogwaandak (Forward Together) – Vuntut Gwitchin stories for theatre, radio plays, and booklets in Gwich'in and English, with Gwaandak Theatre in partnership with Vuntut Gwitchin Government.

### Reflections

The majority of Indigenous languages in what we now call Canada are identified as critically endangered. However, significant language revitalization efforts are happening within Indigenous communities across Canada. This includes Yukon First Nations, the majority of whom have contemporary land claims and self-government agreements, and others from coast to coast to coast. With a small number of fluent speakers of most of these languages, and as time speeds up in our world today, it is not easy to build in reflection of language and the ability to practice in our daily lives.

There is a resurgence for Indigenous artists and young people to engage in their language(s). The performing arts can and must be a place that supports these efforts. We know that language drives culture and to further understand ourselves we need to know how we came to communicate those beautiful ancestral teachings. What we hope this work does is deepen that practice and create a trust with each other to build language in our various communities in our stories and other various artistic expressions. We are grateful for the days we had together and the generosity of all that were imperative to making it happen. Mahsi choo, Quyanaq.