

## The Collaborative Process for Making Treaty 7 Shows

The process of Making Treaty 7 is grounded in artists listening to Elders. From its inception in 2012 to this year's production, the roots of our productions are always based in the spirit of learning from our Elders who have generously shared their wisdom to inform and ensure the truth and authenticity of our stories.

### History of Building the Show

Birthered as a legacy project when Calgary was named the 2012 Cultural Capital of Canada, Making Treaty 7 has grown through several iterations. In early days of the project, founder Michael Green of One Yellow Rabbit fame, also known as ELK SHADOW / PONA KO'TAKSI began meeting with Elders in Treaty 7 communities. He and Narcisse Blood, also known as MIDDLE BULL / TATSIKIISTAMIK, slowly earned trust and entry into the communities. Once it was understood that this production was going to be led by Indigenous people, for Indigenous people the Elders and knowledge keepers began opening up and sharing stories that until then had never been recorded or written down.

The Making Treaty 7 group originally also drew heavily from a book of testimonials called The True Spirit and Original Intent of Treaty 7 by Treaty Elders and Tribal Council, with Walter Hildebrandt, Dorothy First Rider and Sarah Carter. This collection of stories was the result of an attempt to gather the "collective memory" of Treaty 7 Elders, a process started in 1991.

Elders, knowledge keepers and community members were invited to a series of gatherings to share and interact with one another, and with the artists.

"I remember sitting in the first large Elders gathering where we had every single Nation in a hotel conference venue. That was the first time since the signing of the treaty that that many Elders or people from the community had gathered together," remembers Artistic Director Justin Many Fingers. "We listened. We took the information from the book, and did our creative work, and presented it to them. They liked where it was going, but they're not used to the performing arts in this manner so it must have looked pretty bizarre to them."

All together over 18 hours of performable material was created through this consultative process.

Elders and knowledge keepers were brought in to give context to research, including working with historians who brought forward the colonial side of story. Artists took the information in, put in into a performance piece of song, dance, poetry or prayer.

"The Elders would guide us," Many Fingers goes on to say, "and sometimes one would say, 'well, our family story is more like this' and the artists would be told another perspective, so we had all these snippets of truth from these families to build the whole story."

Through this iterative process, every year the Making Treaty 7 show is re-imagined and re-invigorated by going back to the roots of the Elder's voices to uncover new storytelling materials.

### **Kaahsinnoniks (our ancestors)**

This year the iterative process continues. During the writing residency, a group of writers, performers and designers worked through how to put forward pieces of this vast trove of never before heard stories. Elders from various communities were invited to review their work and plans.

“We still bring in Elders to discuss the ideas we have come up with, or things we’re specifically interested in,” explains Many Fingers “Elders comment directly to the artists and writers and that gets worked in. They can bring in fresh perspectives depending on what is going on in real time.”

Many Fingers notes this way of working with the communities is deliberately replicating the practices of the oral tradition and oral culture, meaning once the story is told it continues to evolve as the culture evolves.

“The western concept is, you write it down, get it right, and what’s in there stays in there. And it’s meant to live forever in that form – like Shakespeare or the Bible.” says Many Fingers. “Whereas, when you go to an Elder and ask, ‘what happened at the treaty?’ most likely the Elder will tell you a little bit... but the idea is you have to keep going back and you get more information each time and it never stops.”

One of the aspects that holds all stories, and these shows, together is context moments. These are the important salient facts of the history being revealed that were set and agreed to through the original consultations with historians, Elders and knowledge keepers.

In that sense, the Making Treaty 7 Cultural Society is not simply putting on a new play each year, it is sharing the learnings of its own culture by replicating its cultural traditions, featuring local Indigenous artists – all for audiences of all backgrounds to experience, explore and learn.

We are all Treaty people.

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*“The idea for this is that it’s not finished, it might never be finished because we’re going to do this every year, and every year the piece is going to become richer, it’s going to become more authentic as we hear and are able to share more of the stories that are a vital part of what you’re about to see tonight...” - Michael Green*

*The Making Treaty 7 Cultural Society would like to acknowledge the late ELK SHADOW / PONA KO’TAKSI, also known as Michael Green, and MIDDLE BULL / TATSIKIISTAMIK, also known as Narcisse Blood. Elk Shadow was the founder and visionary behind the Making Treaty 7 project. Middle Bull was the Cultural and Spiritual Advisor to Making Treaty 7. He was the Grandfather to the cast and crew; he was the walking encyclopedia of our language, our culture and our history.*

*They, along with two other performers, died in a car crash in February 2015.*