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"We're still here":

Eddie Swimmer on
Cherokee History, Life,
and Outdoor Drama in the
Appalachian Mountains

BY GINA CAISON

PHOTOGRAPH BY THE GOSS AGENCY; COURTESY OF THE CHEROKEE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION, CHEROKEE, NC



The Cherokee language appearing in the margins of this interview was provided by Gina Caison, who (with help from Heidi Altman and Tom Belt) translates the words not mentioned in the interview as: "We're still here" (above); "We are speaking here" (49); "Hello. How are you?" (52); "my home" (57); "Real human beings or principal people, Cherokee" (58).



PHOTOGRAPH BY REGINA SWIMMER



Raised in the Big Cove Community of the Qualla Boundary on the Eastern Band of Cherokees Reservation, Eddie Swimmer has deep North Carolina roots – thousands of years deep according to the archaeological record and even deeper according to the Cherokee people themselves. However, Swimmer has not always lived in these mountains, and for many years of his life he traveled the world from New York to Italy to Japan as a professional dancer, choreographer, and actor. As a past member of American Indian Dance theater in New York and a founding member of the Santa Fe Music Hall, Swimmer has participated in some of the most significant contemporary American Indian performance projects. He has worked on Broadway as a hoop-dance choreographer with *Annie Get Your Gun* and performed at both the Atlanta and Salt Lake City Olympic Games. Swimmer's portrait as a hoop-dancer has even been used for a US postage stamp as part of the Native American Dance series. After all of this, though, Swimmer has decided to return home to the Qualla Boundary in North Carolina to take part in the Eastern Band of Cherokees retelling of Kermit Hunter's original outdoor drama *Unto These Hills* (1950). The script, both then and now, tells the story of events from 1540, when Hernando DeSoto first explored the Southeast, up to the events surrounding the forced Removal of thousands of Cherokee people to Oklahoma and the story of how those in the Eastern Band of Cherokee resisted the Removal to remain in their mountain home. The show opened as an almost instant success and sold its one-millionth ticket in 1957, breaking an attendance record for any previous outdoor drama. This past summer Swimmer directed the show's sixtieth season.

"When *Unto These Hills* opened in 1950, the average person in North Carolina was not really aware that there were Indians in his state."—Kermit Hunter,

"The Theatre Meets the People," *Educational Theatre Journal* 7.2 (1955): 129

Unto These Hills has undergone several changes in the past five years, as the Cherokee people wanted to revitalize the performance, revising historical inaccuracies in the original script as well as including more elements of their traditional culture. Swimmer, however, is not a newcomer to the outdoor drama. His grandfather assisted in the clearing of the land for the theater, built in 1948, and his father worked as an usher for the show in the 1950s. Both Swimmer and his brother Stephan performed in the play as teenagers. In 2006, the Eastern Band called Swimmer to come home and act in the performance's first retelling, written by Native playwright Hanay Geigomah. The resulting version of the play opened to mixed reviews, and the Cherokee Historical Association (CHA) decided to retire that script, hire new writers, and promote Swimmer to Assistant Director for the next year. In 2008, the CHA Board asked Swimmer to become the play's director. He, along with writer Linda Squirrel and choreographer Larissa Fast Horse, revisited the past scripts, the historical archives, and the traditional dances of the Cherokee to re-invent a script that would be as exciting as it was culturally and historically accurate.

LEFT **Sam Beckman as Lead Eagle Dancer in the 2004 production of *Unto These Hills*, Mountainside Theatre, Cherokee, NC**

ABOVE **Eddie Swimmer, Cherokee, NC**

PHOTOGRAPH BY KIAH WEST; COURTESY OF THE
CHEROKEE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION, CHEROKEE, NC



EDITOR'S NOTE: *NCLR* intern LaTasha Jones's transcription of Gina Caison's interview with Eddie Swimmer has been edited for clarity and flow. To avoid distracting from the content, the minor editorial changes and omissions (including the frequent laughter of the speakers) are not noted, but both the interviewer and the *NCLR* editors have been careful to remain true to the voices and intentions of the speakers, and we believe the speakers' enjoyment of their subject comes through without references to "laughter."

ABOVE Linda W. Squirrel, playwright for *Unto These Hills: A Re-telling*, Cherokee, NC, 2009

ABOVE RIGHT Kermit Hunter watches a production of his *Unto These Hills*, Mountainside Theatre, Cherokee, NC, 1954

I met Eddie Swimmer in the summer of 2009 while I was visiting the Qualla Boundary. We talked about the play's evolution and his decision to take on the challenges of revitalizing an outdoor drama in the twenty-first century. The conversation recorded here took place by phone on 17 December 2009 between me, a homesick North Carolinian in California, and Swimmer, just after his busy day of work at the Museum of the Cherokee Indian. We continued our conversation from the previous summer and talked about Appalachian culture, the future of Paul Green's vision for a "people's theater," and Swimmer's work against the persistent stereotypes of Native people. While all of these topics have serious implications for our present moment, we also enjoyed a few laughs about football, Southern rainstorms, and an ancient time before the internet. Most striking throughout is Swimmer's vision for the future – a future where he sees a continued strength of both the Cherokee people and outdoor drama.

GINA CAISON: *I know the production of Unto These Hills has gone through some changes in the last few years. What are some of those, and why have they been important for the community in the Qualla Boundary?*

EDDIE SWIMMER: I think the main thing was that the tribe sort of took over the whole Cherokee Historical Association Board situation with the management of the theater and *Unto These Hills*; and so with that, they wanted to portray the Cherokee more accurately both in their historical positions and in the roles that the Cherokee have here in the mountains; and so with that, we started studying and researching and learning how we can put our culture and what really happened into the play.

I know one change that you and I have talked about is with the Eagle Dance, which has certainly become an iconic part of the show. I think people all over North Carolina recognize those images, but I know you've revamped the Eagle Dance a bit. Can you talk about that and what went into making those changes?

Even in the old show, the Eagle Dance was a very important part. It was a very exciting dance and had a very upbeat tempo, but, in reality, that wasn't really our dance. It goes back to wanting to portray our true dances in the show. The way it was, people would come out of the old show thinking we danced like ballet stuff – you know, jumping in the air, hootin' and hollerin' – and so, we had to bring this back down to earth a little bit. I got with Larissa Fast Horse – she's a Native choreographer – and I told her my idea of how I wanted the Eagle Dance to be. I still wanted it upbeat, positive, and eye- and audience-catching. Still, we needed to portray our traditional Eagle Dance in it. We started out with the idea of having some of our traditional Eagle Dance alongside the more interpretative version. There are three traditional versions that we show within that one dance. So, the dancers come out and do the traditional style of the dance, and then