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CHEROKEE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION, CHEROKEE, NC



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

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