

Maria Campbell, *Eagle Feather News*, March 2007

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Donna is not a very big woman, maybe five foot four and certainly not more than 110 lbs. She wears a lot of black because, "I don't have time to make decisions about color co-ordination." She laughs. Donna moves fast, wasting no time. This morning at the Saskatchewan Native Theatre Company, there are two proposals to be finished, an emergency board meeting to organize and attend. Two different committee meetings on the up-coming Aboriginal initiatives as part of the Juno Awards, which she chairs. A staff meeting and a quick consultation with the project coordinator and a few minutes with the cultural worker to discuss a crisis in the life of one of the students. In the middle of all this, Sophia, her two-year-old granddaughter, drops by to have a conversation with her kokom before going home, and then later this evening, there will be another meeting. Donna Hiembecker works very hard.

But then Aboriginal women have always worked hard. During historic times they raised families, most often as single moms, and worked full time in the fur trade as interpreters, guides, packers, hunters, trappers, (yes women did all those things) housekeepers, laundry workers and rock and root pickers. Today the mode of work has changed but women still work hard, multi-tasking as moms, grandma's and as doctors, lawyers, nurses, teachers, chiefs, councilors, entrepreneurs, office workers and waitress's or like Donna, running a theatre company. And through it all in old times and new, Aboriginal women have always shared and continue to share a profound love and commitment to family and community and thank goodness for that, because without their love and commitment there would be very little left of our cultures, traditions and languages.

But women have had a bad rap both in traditional and western history. They have been maligned, brutalized, silenced, disempowered and murdered with very little notice from anyone except their families and even that was often not forth coming. How many times have we heard women and in particular old women talk about their brutalization at the hands of partners and husbands, both Native and White, with no help or support from families or communities. And certainly the amount of media coverage that has been allotted to the murdered women in Vancouver and the five hundred or more that are missing tell us how important we are in society. More attention is given to mad cow disease then there is for a murdered or missing Aboriginal woman.

A more balanced history has been documented more recently by Aboriginal women scholars, poets, writers and filmmakers One of them, historian Bonita Lawrence, writes how "gender discrimination in the Indian Act has created an ongoing conflict within

native organizations and reserve communities around the notion of individual and collective rights, organized along gender lines.” The Indian Act stated that if an Indian woman married a non-Indian, meaning a White man or a Metis or Non-Status Indian, she was stripped of her Indian status. She was no longer deemed an Indian and her children were Halfbreeds. If on the other hand an Indian man married a non-Indian, meaning a white woman, a Metis or non-status Indian, that woman became an Indian and her Halfbreed children also became Indian. Thus the birth of an insidious form of racism cultivated and nurtured by governments and their policies of assimilation, divide and conquer.

“The many ways in which Native women were rendered marginal by patriarchal colonial laws not only made it more difficult for them to challenge the tremendous disempowerment that the loss of status represented, it made the theft of land easier.”

So what has this to do with Donna and all those good women your asking?

Well what I am trying to say is that despite the entire ugly patriarchal system, culture, language and traditions continue to exist because of the commitment and love of Aboriginal women. Donna and her work through the theatre is a representation of that enduring legacy.