





Cheyenne Arneach, 17, takes a deep breath before taking the stage on the opening night of 'Unto These Hills.'

STAFF PHOTOS BY TRAVIS LONG

## CHEROKEE

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leading up to the Indian Removal Act of 1830, which forced 15,000 Cherokees from North Carolina, Georgia and Tennessee along the Trail of Tears to present-day Oklahoma. The Eastern Band comprises descendents of Cherokees who took refuge in the mountains during the removal.

In recent years, those involved in "Unto these Hills" have wanted the production to become more authentic and have more Cherokee involvement. The effort to cast Cherokees in principal roles was led by 48-year-old director Eddie Swimmer, who was in the play as a teenager.

"Theater spoke to me, and I knew I wanted to see my name in

a playbill," says Swimmer, who is one of the original members of the American Indian Dance Theater, which has performed across the world and taped two TV specials for the PBS "Great Performances" series.

After studying theater at Brigham Young University, Swimmer appeared in dance theater on TV and in films.

Swimmer returned to the reservation and the outdoor drama and last year became the first Eastern Band member to direct the play.

Last year Swimmer started community acting classes and heavily recruited locals to play roles in the show. "We're actually playing family members," he says, referring to several cast members who are direct descendants of the historical figures



Tamara Sampson, in front, and behind her from the left, Dawn Russell, Zahay Bone and Bria Stacy, wait for their scene.

they portray. "It carries a deeper meaning ... . The pain, the sorrow, the hurt really comes to it."

The play has undergone two major rewrites since 2006. Linda Squirrel, who works for the Cherokee Historical Association, wrote the latest script.

"It was like watching a stereotypical western, Indian movie from the '50s or '60s," Squirrel said of the original script. "A lot of the historical things in the show were inaccurate."

Squirrel spent the off-season researching and editing the script for accuracy. Among the major changes is a revamping of the climactic eagle dance scene.

"We wanted to bring back the feeling of the old show, yet make

it a little more contemporary," said choreographer Larissa Fasthorse, a Lakota of the Sicangu Nation. Fasthorse felt it was important to show the modest traditional eagle dance and the spectacle of the interpretive modern eagle dance, which has become a crowd favorite over the play's 60-year history.

"I don't know any other tribe in the country that has this kind of exposure and this kind of access to an audience to be able to teach their own stories and their own history from their own perspective," Fasthorse said. "It inspires me every single night."



A historical photograph shows one of the original casts of 'Unto These Hills,' which is marking its 60th anniversary.

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