

Green Feather Foundation  
in association with Heather Henson  
Presents



AJIIAAK  
ON TURTLE  
ISLAND



Written by Ty Defoe  
Lyrics by Ty Defoe & Dawn Avery  
Music by Dawn Avery & Larry Mitchell, Kevin Tarrant, and Ty Defoe  
Based on original storyboards written and drawn by Heather Henson



**A transformative spectacle, where the four-legged, two-legged, finned, winged, and the rooted are all interconnected.**



## LEGEND

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## WHAT IS *Ajijaak on Turtle Island*?

Reflecting our connectedness with all of creation, *Ajijaak on Turtle Island* bears witness to the birth and first year of flight of a whooping crane in North America.

Separated from her family, young whooping crane Ajijaak undertakes her first migration from Canada to coastal Texas alone. Her journey is disrupted by environmental, industrial, and mythical chaos. Ajijaak must follow her intuition to fly onward, learning from the contemporary Indigenous communities she encounters along the way.

Bringing together an ensemble of Native American performers with puppets from Jim Henson's Creature Shop™, indigenous songs and dances, and video projections *Ajijaak on Turtle Island* is a transformative experience that honoring contemporary Native American cultures and illustrating harmonious relationships between humans, animals, and the environment.



Including:

Ho-chunk Nation / Fancy Shawl Dance  
Lakota Nation / Grass Dance  
Cherokee Nation / Men's Traditional Dance

Traditional Dances in workshop or on stage are inspired by the nations and are not the actual dance



## PRODUCTION HISTORY

*[AJIJAAK ON TURTLE ISLAND is] a tale of adventure, family, the environment and being brave against all odds... I love the beautiful synergy of Heather Henson's artistry in puppet making, the Indigenous styles of storytelling incorporated by Ty Defoe and how they are used to tell this incredible story of the crane migrations and brave Ajijaak*

*~Mary Rose Lloyd, New Victory Theater*

Our journey with majestic cranes continues to develop over time.

Over the past 25 years, Heather Henson has dedicated her work in puppetry and philanthropy to highlighting the plight of the highly endangered cranes. Ty Defoe's work gives voice to indigenous people and drawn deeply from traditional stories and current events. Combining these artists with the infamous artistry of the Jim Henson Company has been in a driving force in the development of this work.

Originally conceived and performed as part of LaMama Theatre's 2015 Puppet Series as *Crane: on earth, in sky, Ajijaak on Turtle Island* is a spectacle of environmental theater, music, kite flying and dance. The story of our hero, Ajijaak, the young whooping crane, incorporates Native American traditions and contemporary ceremony that reflect our connectedness with creation. This work was made with members of the Indigenous Community of NYC and workshopped to include dances inspired by the traditional dances of the Lakota, Ho-Chunk and Cherokee nations.

In this day of climate change and its dangerous effects on all living things, this story could not be more timely and important. Thanks to a grant from the National Endowment of the Arts, in early 2017 *Ajijaak* was reconceived for the proscenium stage and was presented at the Lied Center for the Performing Arts. Following a week of educational outreach by the Ajijaak team and local Indigenous community members, the run at The Lied Center in Lincoln, Nebraska, was a rousing success.

Subsequent Presentations:

- 2017** Lied Theater Center in Lincoln, NE  
The Merryman Theater in Kearny, NE
- 2018** International Performing Arts for Youth Festival in Philadelphia, PA  
LaMama Experimental Theater Club in New York, NY
- 2019** Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival in Chicago, IL  
Al Ringling Theater in Baraboo, WI  
First Works Festival Frontier Series in Providence, RI  
New Victory Theater in New York, NY
- 2023** Gerald Lynch Theater at John Jay College in New York, NY  
Lied Theater Center in Lincoln, NE  
Bloomsburg University in Bloomsburg, PA  
Catskills Mountain Foundation in Tannersville, NY  
Vilar Performing Arts Center in Beaver Creek, CO  
Lincoln Center in Fort Collins, CO

## WHO ARE THE MAKERS



**Heather Henson** - is a second-generation puppet artist whose work promotes healing for the planet. After studying at the Rhode Island School of Design and the California Institute of the Arts, Henson has focused her efforts on supporting other independent puppet artists, producing her own award-winning environmental spectacles, and bringing people and nature into reciprocal harmony through hands-on educational experiences. By supporting Indigenous knowledge keepers who are reviving traditional practices, Henson strives to support a sustainable and healthy world for generations to come.

Henson sits on the Board of Directors for The Jim Henson Company, is President of the Jane Henson Foundation and a trustee of the Jim Henson Legacy. She is also Board Member Emeritus of the International Crane Foundation and the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center.



**Ty Defoe** - (Giizhig) is from the Oneida and Ojibwe Nations. He is a Grammy award-winning composer, a librettist, interdisciplinary artist, actor, Broadway choreographer, eagle dancer, and hoop dancer. Ty interweaves artistic projects with social justice, indigeneity, trans rights, Indigi-Queering, and environmentalism.

Awards, residencies, and fellowships: 2022 The Kennedy Center's Next 50, 2021 Helen Merrill Award-winner, TransLab Fellow, Robert Rauschenberg Artist in Residence, Jonathan Larson Award, Cordillera International Film Festival Finalist, 2021 Cultural Capital Fellow, Eugene O'Neill Theater Center finalist, and the ASCAP Musical Theater Workshop.

Ty's songs have been featured at: Lincoln Center, Joe's Pub, Ars Nova, 54 Below, The Met, and The Kennedy Center. Ty's theatrical work has been presented at: Guthrie Theater, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Yale Institute of Musical Theater, La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club, Native Voices at the Atrium, The New Victory Theater, First

Stage, The Millennium celebration in Cairo, Egypt; International Music Festival in Ankara, Turkey; and Festival of World Cultures in Dubai, and coming soon: Syracuse Stage. Works: *TransWorld*, *Red Pine*, *The Way They Lived*, *Ajijaak on Turtle Island*, *Hear Me Say My Name*, *Hart Island Requiem*, *Clouds are Pillows for the Moon*, *Wind Changes Direction*, *Before the Land Eroded*, *BasketBall Is 'War, Minus the Shooting' In Sectarian Lebanon*, *River of Stone*, *Firebird Tattoo*, *Trial and Tears* (with Dawn Avery), and *The Lesson* (with Nolan Doran and Avi Amon).

Ty is a core member of All My Relations Collective, recent piece: GIZHIBAA GIIZHIG | Revolving Sky.



**Dawn Avery** - Grammy and NAMA nominated, Avery has worked with musical luminaries from Pavarotti to Sting, Cage to Nakai; composing for Indigenous films (Smithsonian's NMAI, Rich/Heape); touring with her own multimedia projects including *50 Shades of Red* and mentoring future generations in the *Native Composer's Project*. Avery holds a PhD in ethnomusicology (Indigenous theory, Native Classical music). Of Mohawk descent, her longhouse name is Leriho:kwats and she wears the turtle clan. Some of the music from this performance may be heard on the Global Award-Winning CD, *Crane on Earth, in Sky: A Journey*, available for sale.



**Larry Mitchell** - is a Grammy award-winning producer, engineer and performer who has toured the world playing guitar with well-known artists including Tracy Chapman, Billy Squier, Ric Ocasek, and Miguel Bosé. In his original compositions, Larry skillfully weaves guitar textures that showcase his virtuosity as a solo artist and ensemble player. As an artist, he has released 8 solo records and won a San Diego Music Award for best pop jazz artist. Larry is currently touring promoting his 2016 release "The Traveler." As a producer-engineer, Larry has won 26 New Mexico Music Awards in various categories from pop, adult contemporary, rap, rock, country, World music, and Native American. He won a Grammy Award for producing, engineering, and performing on "Totemic Flute Chants" by Native American artist Johnny Whitehorse, who is better known as Robert Mirabal of Taos Pueblo. Larry is currently touring with his own trio as well as solo shows in support of "The Traveler."



**Kevin Tarrant** - was Hųęczii Zi, Bear Clan of the Ho-Chunk Nation of Wisconsin and Taal'wip'hoya, Sky Clan of the Hopi Tribe of Arizona. He was brought up in the traditional way and began singing at age 9. A singer, arts manager, and community activist, he was a leader in the Native American community of New York City, serving as Board Chairman and Executive Director of the American Indian Community House. He was a founder and head singer of The SilverCloud Singers, an internationally known Native drum group. They are featured on the album *Music for the Native Americans* with Robbie Robertson and the Red Road Ensemble and performed at The Theater at Madison Square Garden, The Ritz, Roseland, La MaMa, Lincoln Center, The Public Theater and The Apollo Theater. SilverCloud also traveled to Brazil where they took part in the international percussion festival PERCPAN VI. As a solo performer, he performed with acapella First Nations group, Ulali, composer David Amram, choreographer Savion Glover, and Award-winning percussionist, Alessandra Belloni, and for the off-Broadway productions of *Winterman*

and New York Theatre Workshop's *The Rez Sisters*. In 2016, he founded, along with playwright and director, Murielle Borst-Tarrant, Safe Harbors NYC, an arts initiative that focuses on the development and production of Native Indigenous Theater and Performing Arts in New York City. Most recently he was the musical director and performed in the Safe Harbors production of *Don't Feed the Indians - A Divine Comedy Pageant!* at La MaMa. In 2019,

He was the composer and percussionist for the Broadway production and national tour of *Ajijaak on Turtle Island*. Kevin passed away from Covid-19 in 2020.

## STORY SYNOPSIS



***Ajjaak on Turtle Island tells the story of Ajjaak, a young whooping crane.***

*Separated from her family in a Tar Sands fire, Ajjaak must make her first migration from Wood Buffalo, Canada, down to the Gulf Coast on her own, finding her voice and a family through the interconnectedness of all of creation.*

*Ajjaak begins her travels with a medicine bundle, given to her by her parents, as her guide. She encounters deer, buffalo, coyote, and turtles as well as communities of Indigenous peoples, living in balance with their environments. These people share with Ajjaak prayers, songs, and dances that celebrate life on earth and help Ajjaak find the meaning and strength of her own song.*

*It is with this song that Ajjaak must restore balance to Turtle Island.*



*A reflection on life's energy and how it connects all aspects of our world, Ajjaak on Turtle Island brings communities together through puppetry, music, traditional dances, animations, and kites. Ajjaak's story puts forward visions from Indigenous communities, celebrating the symbiotic relationship between cranes and Native American/Indigenous peoples, and inspiring the next generation of storytellers, change-makers, and eco-champions.*

## WHERE WE FLY

After they are separated, Ajijaak and her family must migrate from their nesting grounds in Wood Buffalo, Canada, to the wintering grounds on the gulf coast of Mexico, and back again. Each stop is associated with Native American Nations, a local animal and a medicinal plant. Along her journey, Ajijaak is threatened by pollution, loss of grasslands, urban development, and the effects of the fracking industry on the environment.

### Dene (Chipewyan) Territory - Nesting Grounds

Wood Buffalo National Refuge  
Spring

#### Cree and Anishinabek Territories

Northern United States/Canada  
Summer & Fall  
Grandmother Aki  
Birch Forest  
Deer  
Kinikiniik

#### Cheyenne, Oceti Sakowin (Sioux), and Lakota Territories

North and South Dakota  
Fall  
Brings Humble  
Grasslands  
Buffalo  
Sweetgrass

#### Pawnee and Cherokee Territories

Nebraska/Oklahoma  
Fall  
She Has Corn  
Corn Gardens  
Coyote  
Cedar

#### Urbanization of Nations

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma  
Fall  
Walks in Two Worlds  
The City  
D.O.G.  
Sage

### Karankawan Peoples - Winter Grounds

Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, Texas  
Winter  
Blue Crabs



*"Check this out. My birch bark map. You know this right? It's North America. My First Nations, Indigenous people call it, Turtle Island. See the back of the turtle? Down the spine is the route Ajijaak will travel down and then will travel all the way back up north."*

*~ GRANDMOTHER AKI, SCENE 1, AJIJAAC ON TURTLE ISLAND*



## EDUCATION & OUTREACH



Green Feather Foundation is committed to inspiring the next generation of storytellers, change-makers, and eco-champions - both onstage and off. We offer our own in-house curriculum, developed in collaboration with a myriad of artists, educators, and environmental experts. Our educational programming is constantly in development, available in many formats (hands-on workshops and crafts, lesson plans, dioramas and displays, installations, classroom visits, etc), and can be tailored to suit audiences of all ages, backgrounds, and ability.

Educational offerings for *Ajijaak on Turtle Island* are directly related to the show's narrative, covering a range of topics from puppet-making and puppeteering, Native American/Indigenous arts, recyclable materials, song and dance, and more. Curriculum and activities pertaining to Native cultures are always developed with and performed by Indigenous/First Nations artists and teachers - if and when possible, we prioritize partnering with educators and artisans from local communities (see: Community Engagement).

We also cover material pertaining to environmental issues, particularly relating to waterways, preservation/restoration, and Whooping Cranes. Our intimate relationship with the International Crane Foundation offers us special insight and support in developing crane-related projects. When touring, we aim to partner with local crane conservation efforts, if and when possible.



**A comprehensive study guide is available upon request.**

Please contact us for more information about how Green Feather can offer educational programming to best support your institution or community.

**Explore More Educational Resources!**



## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

*Ajjaak on Turtle Island* is a distinctly Native story, developed through years of collaboration with a diverse group of Indigenous artists and leaders. As part of Green Feather's larger mission of engaging and empowering audiences of all backgrounds, *Ajjaak on Turtle Island* offers a unique opportunity for outreach to local Native American, Indigenous, and First Nations communities.

It is known that varied and authentic representation in media is necessary for developing healthy, unbiased, and informed perceptions of different cultures. Depictions of diverse populations (or lack thereof), and specifically the quality of those depictions, has tremendous impact on self-esteem, particularly in young audiences. For these (and many other) reasons, increasing access for Native audiences to experience this show is imperative to our mission. Our team is interested in working with presenters who appreciate this mission, are invested in broader conversations regarding decolonization within the performing arts industry, and are committed to doing the work that comes with the responsibility of engaging Native audiences.

In presenting *Ajjaak on Turtle Island*, we enthusiastically encourage you to connect and collaborate with local Indigenous groups, leaders, and cultural consultants. As in all areas of outreach, your team is best positioned to engage with your neighboring communities. We at Green Feather are happy to offer guidance and support in matters pertaining to audience development, outreach, sensitivity, cultural competency, recommended practices, and other areas, but stress that the work has the most impact and best intentions coming from you.

We invite our presenters to be active participants in this dialogue about the ways we, as artists and institutions, can offer our Native peers impactful and sustainable support - thinking well beyond when *Ajjaak* has left your stage. Please contact us for more information, resources relating to Community Engagement, as well as opportunities for Green Feather to collaborate with your team in these efforts.





## BY THE NUMBERS

- ★ Recommended for ages 7 and up. Show runs 60 minutes without an intermission.
- ★ Our company of performers, collaborators, and creators collectively hail from over a dozen Native Nations, Tribes, and communities.
- ★ Multi-award winning and nominated team (Grammys, NAMA, etc.)
- ★ Puppets designed and fabricated by Jim Henson's Creature Shop™; co-directed by visionary puppet artist Heather Henson, daughter of legendary puppeteers Jane and Jim Henson (The Muppets, Sesame Street).
- ★ The character of Ajijaak is played by 5 different crane puppets.
- ★ There are a total of 17 puppets, 5 kites, and 12 flags.
- ★ Interdisciplinary artist Ty Defoe's work in communities across North America explores the parallels between environment and identity using art to inspire others for cultural and social change.
- ★ *Ajijaak on Turtle Island* is the result of years-long collaboration between Heather Henson and Ty Defoe exploring the resiliency of both endangered Whooping Cranes and the indigenous communities that, like the cranes, have lived in harmony with this continent for thousands of years.
- ★ As a former trustee for the International Crane Foundation (ICF) based in Baraboo, WI, much of Henson's work with cranes is inspired by ICF's mission to conserve cranes and their landscapes.
- ★ The world premiere presentation of *Ajijaak on Turtle Island* was in February 2018 at the La Mama Experimental Theater Club in New York City.

## PRESS

**The New York Times**

[Muppet Makers Turn to Creating Whooping Cranes](#)

By [James Barron](#), February 27, 2023



[Jim Henson's Daughter Brings Her Own Creative Visions to Life](#)

By [Alyse Zwick](#), March 8, 2019



[Off-Broadway play uses puppets to tell a powerful environmental story](#)

By [Starre Vartan](#), March 7, 2019

**The New York Times**

[7 Things to Do With Your Kids in N.Y.C. This Weekend](#)

By [Laurel Graeber](#), February 28, 2019



[Ho-Chunk Performers Bring "Ajijaak on Turtle Island" to Life on Stage](#)

By [Ken Luchterhand](#), February 8, 2019



[How to speak puppet — and 5 types you'll meet at Chicago's International Puppet Fest](#)

By [Christopher Borrelli](#), February 8, 2019



[Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival Features "Ajijaak on Turtle Island"](#)

By [Jerome McDonnell](#), January 16, 2019

"... an imaginative, immersive-and at times participatory-puppet-based performance ... While *Ajijaak on Turtle Island* imparts a serious and urgent ecological message, its overall tone is positive, inclusive, and uplifting in the end." - [Broadway World](#)

"... [a] family friendly saga, enthralling to both the young and old ... absorbing and charming." – [Splash magazines](#)

"Stunning Visuals and a Soaring Soundtrack... Heather Henson brings the Henson legacy to life ... *Ajijaak* is magic on stage." – [third coast review](#)

"... an exquisite tale of American Indian heritage and environmental concerns." – [WTTW](#)

"... encapsulates the magnificence and splendor of Native American folklore through music, dance, and of course, puppetry ... a must-see for the entire family." - [brown girl gumbo](#)

"... an impressive bit of storytelling... gorgeous swooping visuals... takes an honest look at the dominant culture's current relationship with our shared natural world." - [Mother Nature Network](#)



## ABOUT GREEN FEATHER FOUNDATION

**Green Feather Foundation** is a newly-formed non-profit umbrella for the works previously done by IBEX Puppetry, Handmade Puppet Dreams, and Puppet Slam Network as well as to further support the philanthropic works of Heather Henson. Originally founded by Henson as IBEX Puppetry in 2000, Green Feather is an arts and education organization promoting health and healing of the planet through artistic spectacle, puppetry, and the reconnection of individuals with the land through immersive cultural, environmental and arts education.

Learn more at [www.greenfeather.org](http://www.greenfeather.org).

