

A GUIDE TO  
***SUN DANCE***

**An original opera based on the trial and incarceration of Leonard Peltier, set in the context of several important historical events that highlight the relationship between native people and the US government.**

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## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- To consider different reporting and historical analysis of the same event in United States history and understand how different viewpoints influence historical interpretations
- To see first hand how cultural arts, in this case theater, can give knowledge about past and present events

## PROJECT BACKGROUND

The project, titled Sundance, combines an original opera with a series of workshops to highlight and provide education on social issues. The opera is based on the trial and incarceration of Leonard Peltier, and is set in the context of several important historical events that highlight the relationship between native people and the US government. The educational outcomes are broadly focused on three specific areas: the plight of Native Americans, social justice, and treatment of indigenous peoples.

Using opera, written in a classical yet modern style, this project combines musical performance and a series of workshops and forums in a way that will be both engaging and educational to the target populations. Music has a long history of being associated with conscious social change, yet in recent years this use of music has been largely ignored. This opera provides local educators with a methodology for discussing important and often complex social issues in a context that energizes their students and will reengage the adult population in long term social issues that have been overlooked in the recent focus on global issues.

Events of the last several years have centered the attention of many Americans on the issues of terrorism, global security and public safety, drawing away interest and support for social education. There is a need to bring these social issues back to public attention, and additionally, to provide more than a “sound bite” education on these issues. There is an additional need, particularly in the school age population, to ensure that this awareness of social issues is not lost.

## THE WORKSHOP PERFORMANCE

What the students will be seeing is a workshop performance. It is not the entire opera, but a segment from the opera. A workshop performance is just what it says, it is done to evaluate how the opera works. For example, does it do a good job communicating the story, does it flow easily from one transition to another, is it a good listening experience for the audience? It gives the director and the performers (in this case the singers) an opportunity to see how the audience reacts to the performance. And it is done early enough in the overall process to allow the director to have the composer (the person who wrote the music) and the librettist (the person who wrote the words) make changes before the premier performance. It is an important part of the overall creation of the opera and provides a chance for real input by the students and the teaching staff.

It is not an actual performance, so there will be little or no scenery, and minimal costuming. In a full performance, there would also be more instruments accompanying the performance. A workshop performance usually relies primarily on pianos and keyboards, or whatever instruments are available at the time. The exciting part is that because of the actual length of the segment that is being performed, 15 to 20 minutes, there is an opportunity to see the performance, to discuss what has been seen, and then have it performed again with the chance to see it in a different light based on the discussion. It will also give the students an opportunity to speak to the performers, the director and the composer.

Several workshop performances are being held in the spring of 2005, taking excerpts from the opera to perform for various groups. Each of these workshops will be paired with an educational program that will be tailored to communicate to the different audiences including high school and university students, indigenous groups and or community groups. These workshops will begin the dialogue on the issues that will lead into the premiere performances and feedback from the workshops will serve to enhance these performances which will be held in the summer of 2005.

## DISCUSSION FORMAT

The segment of the opera dealing with Wounded Knee will be performed for the students. Following this, they will break into smaller groups for discussion. The discussion will center on the two learning objectives.

In the section that considers different reporting and historical analysis of the same event in United States history a variety of historical quotes will be used to help set the stage for the different opinions that existed at the time of Wounded Knee. This discussion will be lead primarily by the teaching staff.

In the section that considers how theater can give knowledge about past and present events, the cast of the opera as well as the composer and librettist will become a large part of the discussion. Several of the cast will speak on the role of their character, and how it felt to play that role. The composer and librettist will speak on what they were trying to accomplish with the opera. The students will then speak on whether or not the opera succeeded in what it was trying to achieve, and more importantly, they will offer comments on changes that could be made to increase the chance of success. This will allow them to play a direct role the use of the opera as a teaching tool.

Following the discussion, the opera segment will be repeated for the students, allowing them to view it with the benefits of the discussions.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF WOUNDED KNEE

It is important to place Wounded Knee in the right historical context. For many Americans, the issue of the “Indians” was already over by the time of Wounded Knee, and there were many more important issues to be concerned about. Wounded Knee took place after the Civil War, a time of great loss for all Americans. It was also after the Battle of Little Bighorn, often referred to as Custer’s Last Stand. It was at a time when the American frontier development was almost at an end, and Americans felt that it was their destiny to rule the entire American nation. Indians were now simply another impediment in the way of American expansion, and while there was still discussion about their standing, ranging from savage to citizen, and discussion about the best way to “manage the Indian issue” there was little doubt about the outcome. The following timeline shows some of the key dates in the chronology up to Wounded Knee.

1607	First American settlers arrive in Jamestown
1654	French and Indian War
1775	Revolutionary War
1812	War of 1812
1824	Bureau of Indian Affairs established
1861	Civil War
1876	Battle of Little Bighorn (Custer’s Last Stand)
1890	Wounded Knee

The segment of the opera that the students will hear today begins after the death of Sitting Bull, when the cavalry began to round up and disarm the remaining Indians. White officials became alarmed at the religious fervor and activism. Officials called in troops to Pine Ridge and Rosebud reservations in South Dakota. The military, led by veteran General Nelson Miles, geared itself for another campaign.

The presence of the troops exacerbated the situation. Short Bull and Kicking Bear led their followers to the northwest corner of the Pine Ridge reservation, to a sheltered escarpment known as the Stronghold. The dancers sent word to Sitting Bull of the Hunkpapas to join them. Before he could set out from the Standing Rock reservation in North Dakota, however, he was arrested by Indian police. A scuffle ensued in which Sitting Bull and seven of his warriors were slain. Six of the policemen were killed.

General Miles had also ordered the arrest of Big Foot, who had been known to live along the Cheyenne River in South Dakota. But, Big Foot and his followers had already departed south to Pine Ridge, asked there by Red Cloud and other supporters of the whites, in an effort to bring tranquility. Miles sent out the Seventh Cavalry led by Major Whitside to locate the renegades. They scoured the Badlands and finally found the Miniconjou dancers on Porcupine Creek, 30 miles east of Pine Ridge. The Indians offered no resistance. Big Foot was ill with pneumonia and rode in a wagon. The soldiers ordered the Indians to set up camp five miles westward, at Wounded Knee Creek. Colonel James Forsyth arrived to take command and ordered his guards to place four Hotchkiss cannons in position around the camp. The soldiers now numbered around 500; the Indians 350, all but 120 of these women and children. The following morning, December 29, 1890, the soldiers entered the camp demanding the all Indian firearms be relinquished. It is at this point that the opera segment begins.

## THE GHOST DANCE

The Ghost Dance was an attempt of a group of North American Indian tribes to further separate themselves from the white man and the religious doctrines they were forcing upon the tribal peoples. Among the Sioux and Arapaho, the Ghost Dance was one of the central rituals of a new religious movement that focused on the restoration of the past, as opposed to a salvation in a new future. The movement was active within limited tribes and mirrored other attempts by previous Indians to escape the civilization of the white man. The earlier movements included the Good Message of the Iroquois and the Dreamers of the Columbia River tribes. All of these movements had similar features including a rejection of the white man's civilization, especially alcohol, weapons and technology. In addition, the movements preached unity among tribes, even those that were once enemies and a revival of Indian customs that were threatened by the civilization of European peoples.

The despair and nostalgia associated with the Ghost Dance reflects that period from which the movement evolved. Plains tribes faced losing their freedom and being overtaken of their homes, their beliefs and their existence. The Ghost Dance was a resurrection of the dead, a bringing back of the customs and way of life that the Indians were trying to hold onto.

The prophet who began the movement of the Ghost Dance was Wovoka, a member of the Paiute Tribe. He was descended of a family of prophets and Shamans. Known as a medicine man, it was said that during an eclipse of the sun and while suffering from a high fever, he had a vision which inspired the development of the movement known as the Ghost Dance. The vision embodied the beliefs that inspired the followers of the movement including that the white man would disappear from the Earth after a natural catastrophe and that the Indian dead would return bringing with them the old way of life that would then last forever.

To bring these and the other beliefs into effect, the Indians had to practice the customs of the Ghost Dance movement and to renounce alcohol and farming and end mourning, since the resurrection would be coming soon. The most important practice to ensure the effectiveness of the movement was the dance itself. The dance was unlike other Indian dances with fast steps and loud drumming. The Ghost Dance consisted of slow shuffling movements following the course of the sun. It would be performed for four or five days and was accompanied by singing and chanting, but no drumming or other musical instruments. In addition, both men and women participated in the dance, unlike others in which men were the main dancers, singers and musicians.

The first dance was held by Wovoka around 1889. Word spread quickly and the Ghost Dance was accepted by the Utes, Bannocks and Shoshone tribes. Eventually, the Plains tribes also adopted the Ghost Dance movement and the peaceful message of hope was spreading and uplifting many Indians. While adapting the movement, many tribes added specific customs and rituals to the Dance that reflected their tribe's individuality. The Sioux added two specific elements including the use of hypnosis to bring about trances and aid in the communication with the dead, and a ghost shirt. Made of buckskin or cloth, the shirt was said to make the wearer immune to bullets, a weapon of death known initially only to the white man.

A famous Sioux warrior, Sitting Bull, adopted the Ghost Dance into his way of life. He was a respected leader, medicine man and warrior. His following of this movement alarmed the military and Indian Agencies. In 1890, just a few months after presiding at his first Ghost Dance, Sitting Bull was killed. His followers fled and joined the band of Kicking Bear, one of the first to

practice with Wovoka. Donning their ghost shirts and with their beliefs firm in their hearts, the followers of the Ghost Dance were rounded up at Wounded Knee creek and killed while resisting arrest. Among those killed were women and children wearing their ghost shirts, which did not stop the bullets of the Indian Agencies or the military.

The Ghost Dance continued to be danced in more southern tribes, but the end of the movement really came with the deaths at Wounded Knee. The hopes of the Indians also ended at that massacre. Many of Wovoka's ideas and concepts were adopted by Peyote cults and can even be found in practice today. Indian tribes did not survive the push of the white man. Broken up and with broken dreams, the tribes were shuffled onto reservations and lost many of their customs and rituals. The Ghost Dance was one of those customs lost, but never forgotten. Resurrected from the past, the Ghost Dance and other tribal beliefs are brought to life everyday in the education of our nation.

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Several parts of the opera refer to the Ghost Dance. The words of Kicking Bear at the end of the opera reflect his hope for the return of the Messiah. And the refrain of the soldier's song talks about the ghost dance shirt, "They claimed the shirt Messiah gave, no bullet could go through".

## LEARNING OBJECTIVE - 1

- To consider different reporting and historical analysis of the same event in United States history and understand how different viewpoints influence historical interpretations

In this section we will talk about the factors that can influence reporting and analysis that are pertinent to the events at Wounded Knee. They include:

Initial prejudices  
First hand knowledge, actions and reactions  
Protection of personal reputation; friendships

In each section there will be a few historical references that pertain to the attitude of colonists and then citizens of the United States towards Indians. Each section will contain several discussion points and the question of how these might influence clear reporting and analysis. Unfortunately there is almost no record of Indian comments in the early history of the United States that could give us different reports of the same event. However, by the time of Wounded Knee a number of reporters and other citizens did take the time to interview participants on both sides of the issue, which gives us an excellent opportunity to see a variety of different historical interpretations, some of which exist to this day.

## Factor 1. Initial Prejudices

In some cases, reporting can be influenced by prejudices instilled in a population group before they are ever directly exposed to a situation. In the case of Native Americans, a number of different views were given about them to settlers before they arrived in America. In “The Wild Frontier”, William Osborne does an excellent job summarizing the variety of printed opinions concerning Native Americans.

- The first settlers were English for the most part, and a flood of reports from the New World presented a grim picture of what they might encounter:

Crafty, brutal, loathsome half-men whose cannibalistic instincts were revealed, as one pamphleteer wrote in 1578, by the fact that “there is no flesh or fishe, which they finde dead, (smell it never so filthily) but they will eate it, as they finde it, without any other dressing (cooking)”

The “noble savage” has, however a terrifying aspect; he attacks in the dead of night with blood-curdling yells, he sets houses afire with flaming arrows, he scalps the fleeing inhabitants.....cannibals

- Other early reports romanticized them:

The European mind was captivated by the idea of the noble savage as it had been by few ideas in its history. Both Voltaire and Rosseau, philosophers who nurtured the Enlightenment, saw society as corrupt and decadent, far removed from the wholesomeness and simplicity of the natural man. They romanticized the savage man, whom they saw as being close to nature, his intelligence unclouded by priestly superstitions, by social conventions, fashion, greed and ambition.

- William Bradford, who was governor of the Plymouth colony for most of the time between 1621 and 1656 wrote:

the English had come expecting the “continual danger of the savage people, who are cruel, barbarous, and most treacherous,” which make “the very bowels of men to grate within them and make the weak to quake and tremble”

### STUDENT DISCUSSION:

Think of a time when you had already formed an opinion about an individual or a group of people before you met them, based on something you were told about them. Did this keep you from forming your own opinion? What things occurred for you to change your opinion?

What is different about the early reports? (Savages vs. noble savages) What is common about these early reports? (They are always savages) In both cases, they are a set of humans distinct and inferior to the settlers. How would this influence the behavior of the early settlers?

Can you think of a time where what you were told about someone made you react more quickly to something than you would if you knew nothing about them?

QUESTION: How would this impact your reporting on situation involving this group of people?

## Factor 2. First hand knowledge; Actions and reactions

Often, the clarity of reporting is influenced by an individual's personal experience, and can sometimes be a reaction to an event that took place.

- Following the arrival of settlers in Jamestown, Virginia there was relative peace for almost 15 years. However, following an Indian attack on Jamestown and other settlements on the James Rives in 1622, the colonist position changed to one almost of extermination. The Virginia Council of state, in 1622, replied to a charge that colonists had gone too far in dealing with Indians with the following statement:

wee hold nothing inuiste (unjust).. that may tend to their ruine ... Stratagemes were ever allowed against all enemies, but with these neither fayre Warr nor good quarter is ever to be held, nor is there other hope of their subversiuone, who ever may inform you to the contrarie

- During the Revolutionary War the British used some Indian tribes to fight against the American colonists. One of the charges that Thomas Jefferson leveled King George III in the Declaration of Independence was that:

“he had endeavored to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages whose known rule of warfare is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.”

- But in the first few day following the end of the American revolution, George Washington outlined a policy for purchasing land occupied by Indians instead of seizing it:

“I am clear in my opinion, that policy and economy point very strongly to the expediency of being on good terms with the Indians, and the propriety of purchasing the Lands in preference to attempting to drive them by force of arms out of the Country” (However, his continuing comments showed that he still thought of them as savages) “ which as we have already experienced is like driving the Wild Beasts of the Forest which will return as soon as the pursuit is at an end and fall perhaps on those that are left there; when the gradual extension of our Settlements will as certainly cause the Savage as the Wolf to retire; both being beasts of prey tho' they differ in shape. In a word there is nothing to be obtained by an Indian War but the Soil they live on and this can be had by purchase at less expense, and without that bloodshed, and those distresses which helpless Women and Children are made partakers of in all kinds of disputes with them”.

- During the years leading up to the war of 1812, President James Madison had a number of different opinions about Indians. In his first annual message to Congress in 1809, he reported that “our Indian neighbors had remained at peace.” On June 18, 1812 Congress declared war on Britain and several tribes fought with the British. Madison reported that “the hand of friendship, extended in vain, was now withdrawn”. And in 1815, after the war was over, Madison reported that “our Indian neighbors” were back in the government's good graces.

STUDENT DISCUSSION:

How had your attitude towards an individual or group of individuals changed based on an action that was done by them?

Does it have to directly affect you, or can it simply affect people that you know?

How hard is it for you to change your opinion after it has been formed?

Question: How might this affect your reporting on a situation that involved these individuals?

### Factor 3. Protection of Personal Reputation, Friendships

Many times history is reported by the winner. It is often written to reinforce the reputation of the winner, and in some cases, to protect those that have worked along side or fought along side those who have won. In this final section, we will look at the reporting of the incidents that took place Wounded Knee by a number of different individuals and organizations.

This section will use actual quotes from the individuals involved in Wounded Knee and the follow up that took place. They are well summarized in the book “Voices of Wounded Knee” by William Coleman.

There were several different opinions about the role that the Medicine man played prior to the actual shooting:

Private Walter Crickett

During the time the search was going on, the medicine man was talking to them...and telling them the soldier's bullets would not hurt them. He was raving and singing his arms about like mad, had a whistle in his mouth, making a most hideous row; but when the bucks was ordered to get up and be searched, he took up (a handful of dirt ) and threw it in the air. I can just see him doing it now, as I wasn't fifty feet away. Then the fun began as each buck was well armed.

Dr. J.R. Walker, Agency Physician at Pine Ridge

The medicine man has been accused by the whites of throwing up dirt into the air and waving a blanket or some such emblem as a signal for action. This was only the ordinary procedure through which he went into the Ghost Dance. It happened at the moment that the searching party came to two certain young men who had Winchester rifles for which they had paid good prices, and they were not willing to give them up, though their disposition was peaceable and they would have surrendered their ammunition without resistance.

Alice Ghost Horse, Indian

During the heated discussion a medicine man by the name of “Yellow Bird” appeared from nowhere and stood facing the east, right by the fire pit which was not covered up with fresh dirt. He was praying and crying. He said to the eagles that he wanted to die instead of his people. He must sense that something was gong to happen. He picked up some dirt from the fire place and threw it up in the air and said this is the way he wanted to go, back to the dust.

Philip Wells, mixed blood interpreter and scout

The medicine man stopped praying, and stooping down, took some dirt and rose up facing the west, raised his two hand, and still facing the west, cast the dirt with a circular motion of his hand toward the soldiers in the road. Then he walked around the circle, and when he got back to the starting pin on the west side, he stopped and uttered exclamations which in Sioux signify regret, and that he had decided on a desperate course.

There were several different reports on the first shot fired at Wounded Knee:

Charles Allen (A reporter traveling with the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry)

...After all the guns in the village had been secured the soldiers began to search the Indian men who were held in the circle, upon most of whom they found a belt of cartridges and a gun under their blankets. They had proceeded to disarm eight or ten of these, when the brave who had been inciting them jumped up and said something and fired at the soldier who was standing guard over the arms that had been secured

Dewey Beard (Native American)

There was a deaf Indian named Black Coyote, who did not want to give up his gun; he did not understand what they were giving up their arms for. The Indians agreed among themselves that they would explain to him what the disarming meant, and then they would take his gun away from him....If (the soldiers) had left him alone, he was going to put down his gun where he should. They grabbed him and spun him in the east direction....Right after they spun him around there was a report of a gun-it was quite loud. ... In an instant a volley followed as one shot, and the people began to fall. I saw everybody was rolling and kicking on the ground.

A large part of the different versions of Wounded Knee center around what happened after the initial fighting. Reports by soldiers at the scene insist that the soldiers maintained discipline and only fired to defend themselves. Follow up reports by the army, and testimony by both Indians and whites who cared for the Indians after the shooting give a very different story.

Some comments related to the deaths of women and children

Captain Edwin Godfrey, Officer of the Cavalry and participant in Wounded Knee

Regarding the deaths of a woman and her children, I am stating that not a man knew they were non combatants. That the boy was powder burned at this time is true, but that the squaw and the girls were powder burned is not true

Capt Frank Baldwin, Acting Inspector General, follow up after Wounded Knee

Found the bodies of one woman, adult, two girls, eight and seven years old, and a boy of about the years of age... Each person had been shot once, the character of which was necessarily fatal in each case. The shooting was done at so close a range that the person or clothing of each person was powder burned.

Contradictions were also found in stories concerning the extent of the shooting:

Capt Godfrey

I saw no wanton destruction of non-combatants, not that could not be helped, in my opinion. I told my men throughout the day not to fire on women or children.

Black Elk, Indian present at Wounded Knee

We followed down along the dry gulch, and what we saw was terrible. Dead women and children and little babies were scatted all along there where they had been trying to run away. The soldiers had followed them along the gulch as they ran, and murdered them in there. Sometimes they were in heaps because they had huddled together, and some were scattered all along. Sometimes bunches of them had been killed and torn to pieces where the wagon guns hit them. I saw a little baby try to suck its mother, and she was bloody and dead.

Mrs E.M.Keith, White church woman at Pine Ridge who cared for the wounded

The church was filled with the suffering. She did not count the number. A good many died of their wounds, infants from a few months to tender year of age were shot in all parts of their bodies and presented pitiable spectacles.

Doctor Eastman - Lakota medical doctor

We laid the poor creatures side by side in rows, and the night was devoted to caring for them as best we could. Many were frightfully torn to pieces by ... shells and the suffering was terrible.

Doctor Eastman also toured the scene 3 days after the battle and reported as follows:

Fully three miles from the scene of the massacre, we found the body of a woman completely covered with a blanket of cover of snow, and from this point on we found them scattered along as they had been relentlessly hunted down and slaughtered while fleeing for their lives.

And finally, there were differences in the stories that were accepted as the accurate accounts. In some cases, it was believed that soldiers were killed by friendly fire by their own troops. Several members of the US Army testified directly about the actions of the troops.

Surgeon John van Hoff

I have not the slightest reason to know or think that any men were wounded by our own bullets. It was possible that some men might have been so wounded, but there is not reason or evidence that came under my observation

Capt Charles B Ewing, Army Surgeon

I have every reason to believe that some of our men were killed by the fire of other of our troops...located as the troops were and firing as they did it was impossible not to wound

or kill each other.

Only the officers, not the enlisted men, were allowed to testify at the inquiry, and all supported the fact that women and children were not targets of the soldiers.

Capt. H.J. Nowlan

It came under my personal observation during that day that is was the cry all over the field, both on the part of officers and enlisted men, not to kill women or children - "Don't fire, let them go, they are squaws.

No testimony of the Indians was heard. In the end, the decision was summarized by J.M. Schofield, Major General Commanding.

The interests of the military service do not, in my judgment, demand any farther proceedings in this case... The evidence of these papers shows that great care was taken by the officers and generally by the enlisted men to avoid unnecessary killing of Indian women and children in the affair at Wounded Knee and shows that the conduct of the Seventh Cavalry under very trying circumstances was characterized by excellent discipline, and in my cases, by great forbearance. In my judgment the conduct of the regiment was well worth of the commendation bestowed upon it by me in my first telegram after the engagement. (Note: Three officers and fifteen enlisted men were later awarded the Medal of Honor for their actions during the massacre.)

#### STUDENT DISCUSSION

Why would there be different opinions on what happened?

What role did personal fear play in each interpretation, especially to those who were on the battlefield?

Why did the Army feel the need to award medals for the actions of the soldiers?

LEARNING OBJECTIVE - 2

- To see first hand how cultural arts, in this case theater, can give knowledge about past and present events

STUDENT DISCUSSION:

Was this opera an effective way to communicate the message of Wounded Knee?

If yes, what were the most effective parts?

If no, what could be changed to make it more effective?

Are there other social issues that you think would lend themselves to this type of communication? What are they?

Would any type of music work with this? What types would work best? Could current types of music like rap and hip hop be used to communicate social issues?