

# The Playwright Larissa FastHorse Doesn't Want to Be a Cautionary Tale

After a delay, “Fake It Until You Make It,” the writer’s follow-up to her Broadway satire, “The Thanksgiving Play,” is finally onstage in Los Angeles.



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**By Robert Ito**

Reporting from Santa Monica, Calif.

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In the 1980s, when Larissa FastHorse was in high school in Pierre, S.D., friends would sometimes forget she was Native American. Talk would turn to the area’s “drunk lazy Indians,” she said, and “I’d be like, ‘um, excuse me, I’m right here.’”

“And then it was always, ‘Oh, well, not *you!*’” she continued.

Even after FastHorse’s “The Thanksgiving Play” opened on Broadway in 2023, the “not you” slights continued. At one of her own plays in New York, she overheard women in the bathroom joking about how Native Americans would be late to the show because they tell time by the sun — it was an evening performance — and because they would be taking horses, not cars. “People say crazy stuff like that all the time,” she said.

In Southern California, where she has lived since 1991, it rarely occurs to strangers that she is Native, or, as she noted, that anyone might be. “It’s all part of the great erasure,” she said.

“Everyone speaks Spanish to me in L.A.,” she said. “Which is fine, it’s lovely. But it’s like I have to fight to be Native American here.”

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Over the years, FastHorse, 53, has transformed her experiences as a Native American navigating her way through the worlds of theater, nonprofits, TV writing and ballet into thought-provoking, often wickedly funny work. Her plays are both a way of confronting that “great erasure” — “the last thing people tend to think about are Native Americans,” she said — and replacing offensive stereotypes, like the “Hollywood Indians” she grew up watching on TV, with more nuanced and human portrayals.

In “The Thanksgiving Play,” which premiered Off Broadway in 2018, four well-meaning white people struggle mightily to produce a more historically accurate holiday pageant for grade schoolers, replacing happy pilgrims and prayers of

gratitude with a bag of bloody Native American heads. In “What Would Crazy Horse Do?” (2017), the last members of a fictional tribe encounter a pair of kinder, gentler Ku Klux Klan members.

Julie Bowen, left, and Tonantzin Carmelo as rivals seeking the same grant money in “Fake It Until You Make It,” a Center Theater Group production at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. Makela Yopez

“The Thanksgiving Play” debuted at Broadway’s Helen Hayes Theater in 2023 with a starry cast that included, from left, Chris Sullivan, Scott Foley and Katie Finneran. Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

She has also adapted and “Indigenized” (her word) a national touring production of the 1954 Broadway musical “Peter Pan,” adding more of Wendy and Tiger Lily and removing the cringey “Ugg-a-Wugg” song, with its red-face performances and gibberish lyrics. And she has given Tom Turkey, the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade mascot, a long-overdue makeover that included replacing the bird’s buckled pilgrim hat with a top hat.

In the process, FastHorse has amassed an impressive number of firsts: the first known Native American playwright to have a Broadway show; the first to have one of the most-produced plays in America; the first “in 90 percent of the places I’ve worked,” including the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, home of her latest play, “Fake It Until You Make It.”

On a recent morning in a cafe near the Santa Monica home she shares with her husband, the sculptor Edd Hogan, FastHorse spoke about that show. It stars Julie Bowen (“Modern Family”) as River, a white woman whose nonprofit runs

programs for disadvantaged Native youth, and Tonantzin Carmelo (“Into the West”) as Wynona, her Native American nemesis, whose cause is less noble (she is fighting for the eradication of butterfly bushes) and who is competing with River for a plum grant. (Amy Brenneman will portray River when the play is presented in April at Arena Stage Theater in Washington.)

“Fake It” raises intriguing questions about race, culture and identity, played out against the backdrop of competing Native American nonprofits. Why are so many of the best Native organizations run by white people? Can we be any race we want to be, as one “race shifting” advocate in the play champions? What should we do with so-called pretendians (white people who assume a Native identity), and who gets to say who is or isn’t one?

“The way Larissa asks those questions, you think this is going to be a wokeapalooza,” Bowen said. “But then she subverts every idea that somebody could have about identity and just smacks you in the face with them as a joke.”

The play is, first and foremost, a farce, FastHorse said, with slamming doors, mistaken identities, odd disguises, mean tricks and one tussled-over pet cat.

“In Larissa’s ‘Thanksgiving Play,’ there’s a lot of humor that skews toward farce,” said the show’s director, Michael John Garcés. “I wanted to see what would happen if Larissa really embraced the form.”

**FASTHORSE WAS BORN** in South Dakota, the daughter of a Lakota father and a white mother, and adopted by a white couple, Ed and Rhoda Baer, when she was 11 months old. “They had been waiting 22 years to have a child, so once they got me, I was the center of the whole universe,” she said. Diagnosed with tibial torsion as a toddler — “basically, my lower leg bones were spiraling inward” — she wore metal braces on her legs and orthopedic shoes.

A doctor recommended ballet for physical therapy. In fifth grade, she saw an illustration of Maria Tallchief, widely regarded as America’s first prima ballerina and a member of the Osage Nation, in “one of those chick-empowerment books” that an aunt had given her. In a flash she discovered that ballet was something that

a “half Native American woman from Oklahoma” does, something that people actually went out to watch for pleasure. Before that, she said, “I just thought ballet was something they were torturing me with, like school.”

After dancing with Atlanta Ballet, Los Angeles Classical Ballet and other companies, FastHorse quit dancing in 2001, when she was 30 — “old in ballet land” — and found a paid internship in a writing program at Universal Pictures. Her first two pilots were sold to TeenNick and Fox, but neither were made. “I was really relieved,” she said, “because they were so watered down and didn’t represent Native people the way I wanted them to.”

In 2007, she tried playwriting, which “made sense to me in ways that TV didn’t,” she said. “When I first saw it, I was like, ‘Oh, this is dancers with furniture. I know how to do this.’”

For years, FastHorse’s plays called for all-Native casts, including “Urban Rez,” which was created with members of the Indigenous people of the Los Angeles Basin. Perhaps not surprisingly, she struggled to get many of these plays produced.

“The Thanksgiving Play” grew out of this frustration. “Larissa very purposely wrote a play for four white actors, and it immediately got produced,” said Garcés, who directed the show’s Geffen Playhouse run in 2019.

Honors soon followed, including awards from PEN Center USA and the National Endowment for the Arts; in October 2020, she won a MacArthur Fellowship (a.k.a. the “genius” grant).

“There’s this terror that I’m going to be that one who screws it up for everybody,” FastHorse said. Kayla James for The New York Times

The following month FastHorse helped Macy’s rehab its parade through Indigenous Direction, a consulting firm she founded with Ty Defoe, an Ojibwe and Oneida artist and writer. In addition to Tom Turkey’s hat, they added a land acknowledgment and ditched the pilgrims. “The opening shot of the parade was always pilgrims waving to the camera,” Defoe said. “Removing all those pilgrims was one of our biggest celebrations.”

Three years later, FastHorse took “The Thanksgiving Play” to Broadway, where it opened to rave reviews. Jesse Green, chief theater critic of The New York Times, praised it as a “brutal satire about mythmaking” and “cheerfully cutthroat.”

“When Larissa asked me to join her as a director, I was very honored, honestly, but I did ask her if she maybe wanted a collaborator of color, and a Native director specifically,” said the director Rachel Chavkin, a Tony winner for “Hadestown.” “But she was very clear that she needed someone with extreme expertise in whiteness, which I have in spades.”

**TRUE TO ITS NAME**, “Fake It” began life with its own bit of fakery. In 2020, FastHorse had been commissioned by Center Theater Group to write a play for the Taper, which the theater would soon announce. But FastHorse didn’t have an idea for the play, or a title. She told Luis Alfaro, one of Center Theater Group’s associate artistic directors at the time, some of the things she had been thinking about — race shifters, pretendians — and he suggested the title “Fake It Until You Make It.” She could always change the name, he told her.

“A month later, there were these huge banners with ‘Fake It Until You Make It’ on them,” she said. “I told Luis, ‘I can’t change the name now, can I?’ And he was like, ‘No, you cannot.’”

The play was scheduled to open in 2023. In June of that year, however, just two weeks before rehearsals were to begin, however, the Taper suspended the remainder of its season, citing a financial crisis exacerbated by the pandemic.

The play’s future was in limbo. FastHorse received offers from other theaters outside of Los Angeles, but she fought to have it debut in the city, which it finally did last week (it runs through March 9).

“The play is very much a love letter to L.A.,” she said. “We’re making fun of a lot of things in L.A. And the Taper was always meant to be a theater that represented the people of L.A., so the fact that there hadn’t been an Indigenous playwright on that stage bugged me.”

FastHorse has several other projects in the works, including two TV series; a “dream jukebox musical” about a “very big band that I’m not allowed to name”; and a solo show, produced by Seattle Rep and Seattle Children’s Theater, about becoming a ballet dancer, which she plans to star in later this year.

“I have a lot of old dancer injuries I need to figure out before then,” she said.

And her adaptation of “Peter Pan” continues to tour the country. The Chicago Tribune called it a “joyful introduction to a classic story,” praising the production as “more female-empowered and inclusive while retaining much of the original’s magic.”

“When I took it,” FastHorse said of the musical, “I was like, it’s either going to go really well, or it’s going to be the thing that ends my career.”

For FastHorse, that fear never goes away.

“It’s shocking how many times people say to me, ‘Yeah, we tried working with Native American people once, and it didn’t work out,’” she said. “There’s this terror that I’m going to be that one who screws it up for everybody. So I really don’t want to be the cautionary tale.”

***A correction was made on Feb. 4, 2025: An earlier version of this article misstated the title of Luis Alfaro when he worked at Center Theater Group in Los Angeles. He was an associate artistic director, not an artistic director. The article also omitted one of the theaters presenting a new solo work by Larissa FastHorse. In addition to Seattle Rep, Seattle Children’s Theater is also a co-producer of the play. (Neither company commissioned the work.)***

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