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For more information on this week's question, and responses to last week's Inside Line, see Page 2.

Oregon Trail script challenges playwright

■ A playwright from Georgia finds meshing Native American and pioneer cultures into one story a demanding task

By DENNIS MCCARTHY
of The Oregonian staff

OREGON CITY — Tom DeTitta frequently feels like a long distance runner. Always running. Always trying to catch up with history.

For two years, the 37-year-old Americus, Ga., playwright has been pouring his time and talents into what he describes as the most complicated and challenging story he has encountered — the meshing of pioneer and Native American cultures at the end of the Oregon Trail.

DeTitta is writing the script for next summer's Oregon Trail

Pageant, scheduled to run July 14 to Aug. 8 at the End of the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center in Oregon City.

Although pageant officials say he's on the proverbial homestretch for completing the script, DeTitta insists there are still a lot more miles to cover before the play is finished.

The play doesn't even have a title. "I don't ever remember having a title first before writing a script," said DeTitta, during a recent stopover in Oregon City. It was a brief one. The next morning he was off to Pendleton to meet with elders and tribal leaders of the Confederated Umatilla Tribe.

DeTitta has piled on the frequent-flier miles during the past two years. He's flown between his Georgia home and Oregon to confer with pageant officials, historians

and pioneer and Indian descendants about the script.

Unlike "Oregon Fever," which told the story from a predominantly pioneer point of view, DeTitta's play will give equal time to Native American history and culture.

The play is three stories in one: the pioneers who arrived in Oregon in the 1840s; the Indians who settled here first; and how the two cultures collided in the Whitman massacre in 1847.

The drama will cover the struggles of pioneers trying to cope with weather and other harsh elements crossing the country. But it also will include a village scene depicting how the Indians started dying from diseases such as smallpox and



DOUG BOGHTEL/The Oregonian

Tom DeTitta has been working with a script committee in Oregon City and at the Umatilla Indian Reservation in Pendleton on a new play for next summer's Oregon Trail Pageant.

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Script: Whitman massacre shows clash of two worlds

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cholera brought by the settlers.

Dr. Marcus Whitman not only tried to teach farming methods to the Indians in Eastern Washington, but also practiced medicine. They blamed him for the spread of disease.

The play will depict the trial of five Cayuse Indians accused of murdering Whitman, his wife and 12 others; of how the Indians were convicted and hanged in Oregon City in 1850.

"The Whitman massacre was a unique moment in history," DeTitta said. "Both sides felt they were absolutely correct. It was a clash of two different worlds. This play is about how the two worlds learned to coexist.

"But there is nothing in this play that will offend anyone," he insists.

To make the play work, DeTitta has had to spend hours researching his subjects.

He has been working with a script committee of seven people in Oregon City and at the Umatilla Indian Reservation in Pendleton.

People such as historian Jim Tompkins, who has portrayed Ore-

gon City founder Dr. John McLoughlin in local productions; Nancy Wilson, curator of The McLoughlin House; Alice Norris, Oregon Trail Pageant executive director; and Marjorie Waheneka, a member of the Confederated Umatilla Tribe and a descendant of the Cayuse, Palouse and Warm Springs nations.

Waheneka also is a park ranger/interpreter at the Whitman Mission National Historic Site in Walla Walla. She has been impressed with DeTitta's hard work and dedication in trying to present a fair and accurate depiction of the Indians.

"He's really developed a sensitivity to our culture," she said. "He's made a real effort to learn about Indian culture and traditions. He took part in our rooftop religious services, he's observed our war dances."

DeTitta has made four trips to the Umatilla reservation for script readings with Waheneka, her husband, Armand Minthorn, and other members of the committee. Waheneka said she and her husband have not hesitated to point out errors in DeTitta's script.

"Armand told him some of the things in the script were inaccur-

ate," she said. "He told Tom that Indians didn't talk that way, and Tom changed it."

Norris, too, is impressed with DeTitta.

"I think one of his strong points is his ability to listen," she said.

Norris thinks DeTitta's six-month hitchhiking trip across America, upon which he wrote the book "I Think I'll Drop You Off in Deadwood," helped teach him how to listen and how to be sensitive to the problems of other people.

DeTitta wrote the book after graduating from Duke University in Durham N.C., following his journey from North Carolina to San Francisco.

"I started writing a diary when I was hitchhiking because I was scared," DeTitta said. Scared of the unknown, but willing to explore new venues. "It was very therapeutic."

He has written a number of historic plays about subjects such as Appalachian poverty, prisoners of war and the war in Cambodia. He recently was commissioned to do a play about the life of former President Carter.

When he isn't writing, DeTitta is teaching at Georgia Southern State University in Americus.

Two years ago, he created World Community, a community-based theater program specializing in historical productions. But scripting historical plays, he has learned, is a very time-consuming experience.

"Each one takes about three years," he said. "You have to do re-writes each year so you can access, update history."

The Oregon Trail Pageant play has become a big part of his life, in more ways than one. The planning, the researching, the writing and re-writing — all in the name of accuracy, he said.

"I've probably spent 30 to 40 percent of my time over the past two years on this one," he said. "It's more complicated than any show I've ever done."

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