

The theatre in the forest

Peaceful, wooded setting provides a perfect backdrop for the Six Nations Pageant

It is the Forest Theatre or Wahdakeh, the natural amphitheatre carved from a glen in a forest on the Six Nations Reserve. To get there take Cockshutt Road to Sour Springs Road and turn left onto Seneca Road. The grounds are on the left just past the intersection.

A knoll of grass is the stage and thickets are the sides. A creek borders the front. When the air is cool, mist rises from the water. Characters enter the stage through the forest or by canoe.

There are no microphones or a band. The equipment would be too elaborate. A tape plays the voices of the characters while the cast pantomimes the actions. The chirping of birds and howling of wolves is also on tape in case nature doesn't co-operate.

The light is the moon and stars with help from extra lights. The curtain is the dark.

A fire burns in the middle of all this, lighted at the start of the performance.

"Nothing opened without a fire," said Miss White. "It was thought the thoughts and prayers of the people went up in the smoke to the Creator."

The audience sits on old, gray, rotting wood bleachers built on the stumps of trees on a hill above the stage.

"It's so natural, peaceful," said Miss White. "It's the way we live. It brings history back.

"I'm sure if we applied for a grant we would get it and we could build a dome, but it wouldn't be the same."

Next to the stage is a replica of a traditional native village filled with up to 40 members of

the Six Nations, from infants to elders, in costume.

Inside the stockade, they perform their tasks — pounding corn, tanning hide, weaving baskets. Mothers carry their infants on their backs while they work and a medicine man heals with herbs.

Despite the unique combination of realism and eloquence, the pageant isn't what it used to be; laments Robert Jamieson, president of the committee that organizes it.

Older members of the Six Nations started the pageant in 1948 to "remind our young people" of the rich and proud history and culture of the Six Nations and to "share it with non-native people," said Mr. Jamieson.

But the pageant is becoming commercial, said the 71-year-old retired farmer and employee of Massey.

"It used to be everybody worked for free," he remembered. "Now everybody wants money. You ask someone to do something for the pageant and it's, 'How much do I get?'"

The president of the committee receives \$200, but Mr. Jamie-

son said he has not accepted the money the last three years. He said he didn't accept the \$50 for being treasurer before that.

Most of the other people involved in the play, including the director, cast, crew, even the children in the village and the people who sell tickets are paid.

The money is nominal and it has been cut the last few years because the pageant can't afford it, said Mr. Jamieson.

Are there any volunteers?

Mr. Jamieson laughed. "Volunteers?" he asked sarcastically.

There are a few who clean the grounds after each performance, he said.

The pageant costs about \$5,000. It earns about \$7,000. "If we have \$1,000 left that would be good," said Mr. Jamieson. "We put it in the bank to pay other expenses."

Although Mr. Jamieson credits the pageant with leading to other cultural events like the Grand River Champion of Champions Powwow, where traditional native dancers compete for money, he wonders if the original idea has backfired.

"We're selling our culture," he said.