



YO!

**HE'S
GOT
THE
'SPIRIT'**

PETER BUFFETT SAYS FAIRMOUNT PARK SHOW
COULD BE A LIFE-ALTERING EXPERIENCE

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Native American Extravaganza

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GIVE TWO HOURS of your life to “Spirit — The Seventh Fire” and it may just change you forever.

So suggests Peter Buffett, the creative mastermind of this Native American-themed multimedia extravaganza that’s set up its climate-controlled tents atop Fairmount Park’s Lemon Hill, in preparation for a big opening on Friday night.

“I met a 50-year-old guy who told me he quit his business and went to Costa Rica to follow his dream after seeing the show,” related Buffett, the show’s core creator and producer, in a recent chat. “And young people who’re searching for their path, their direction, are equally taken by the show. When we played last summer, I saw this tattooed and nose-pierced 14-year-old girl come into the tent with her parents, looking all sour and grumpy, complaining that she’d been dragged there. A few nights later, she was back in the the-



Peter Buffett

ater with several of her friends. That’s how much it effected her.”

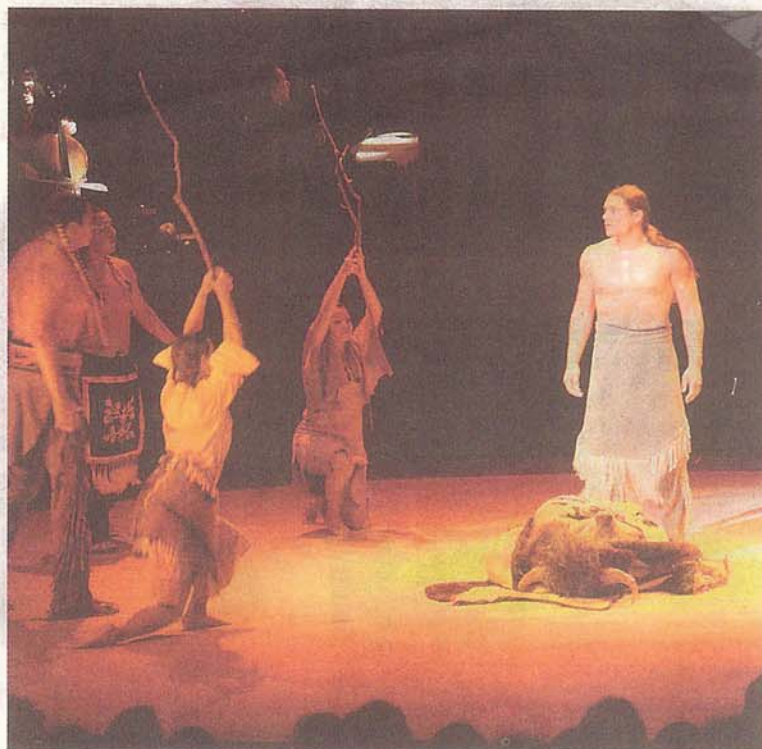
Sharing his spirit

Frankly, it takes almost two hours for Peter Buffett to explain his show to a reporter, but hey, the man is really into it, possessed with a missionary-like zeal.

“Some people have called it an ‘American Indian Cirque du Soleil,’ because we’re a touring event that’s staged in a tent but doesn’t feel like a circus, that’s very theatrical and filled with surprises,” he noted.

“Others have said it’s a ‘Native American Riverdance,’ and there’s also some truth to that, since ours is also a show that’s celebrating a specific culture and showing

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Peter Buffett’s “Spirit — The Seventh Fire” is the story of a contemporary, Native American businessman who is “called back” by the spirits to reconnect with his traditional world and celebrate the treasures it holds.

IF YOU GO

“Spirit — The Seventh Fire” runs Friday through July 4th in a climate-controlled, 750-seat theater at Fairmount Park’s Lemon Hill. Showtimes are: 7:30 p.m. Tuesday through Friday; 4 and 7:30 p.m. Saturday; 1 and 5 p.m. Sunday.

Ticket prices range from \$25 to \$60 with discounts available to children, students, seniors and groups. Visit www.ticketmaster.com, charge by phone at 215-336-2000, or purchase through any Ticketmaster outlet.

To reach the show site, take Kelly Drive to Sedgely Drive (the street perpendicular to Lloyd Hall at the eastern end of Boat House Row). Take the first left off Sedgely to Lemon Hill.

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what it's all about, in live music and dance, as well as with a major film component."

All that activity helps tell the story of a contemporary, Native American businessman who's "called back" by the spirits to reconnect with his traditional world and celebrate the treasures it holds.

"What you can't describe but have to experience is how the story is not just about American Indians but really for and about everybody, about reconnecting with your own group culture, with who you ultimately want to be," added Buffett. "If I was in the movie pitch mode, I'd say it's more like 'Roots' meets 'The Wizard of Oz.'"

Viewers of PBS might recall a video version of "Spirit" that was showcased as a pledge drive special in 1999. After raising tons of money for the public television cause, Buffett was encouraged by some entertainment industry types to turn his creation into a touring property. Four years later, it debuted with very well-reviewed runs last spring and summer in Buffett's hometown of Omaha ("Poignant, sad, uplifting, thrilling and powerful," declared the *Omaha World-Herald*), plus Milwaukee ("A phenomenal celebration," said the *Journal Sentinel*), and Louisville ("Britney's backup dancers have nothing on these folks," wrote the *Courier-Journal*).

The show was an integral part of the opening celebration for the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C., where it won praise as a "wonderful show" by that noted arts critic William Jefferson Clinton.

"This year, we're upping the ante — taking it to the major East Coast cities — Philadelphia, Boston, New York and back to Washington," said Buffett. "The idea of being in Philadelphia on the city's 375th birthday seemed especially appealing."

The show is settling in here for a daringly long, six-week run that will keep it lit until the Fourth of July on Lemon Hill, a great site just off the Kelly Drive above Boathouse Row.

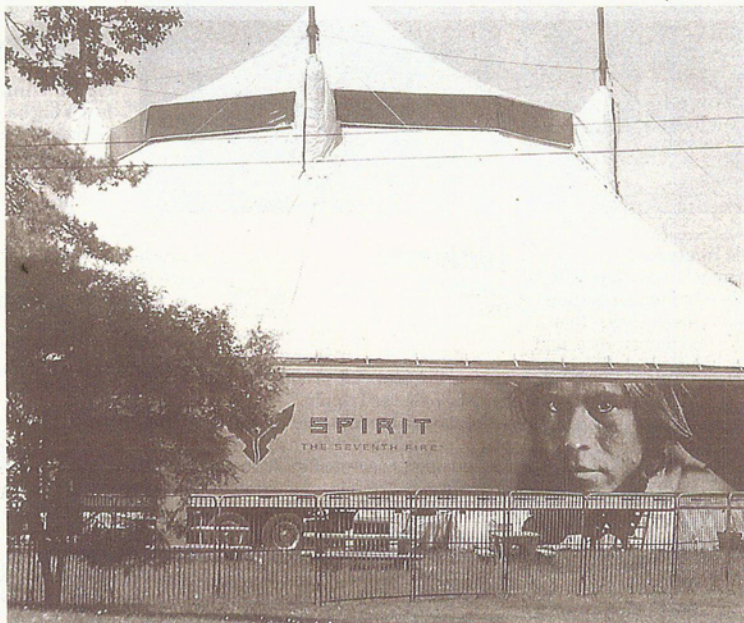
"Attendance may be a little light for the first few days," he predicted, "but once the word of mouth starts to spread, I think we'll do fine."

Then, now, forever

One constant that carries over from the TV production of "Spirit" to the "Spirit — The Seventh Fire" stage show is the haunting music by Buffett and Shawnee Nation Chief Hawk Pope.

The score fuses traditional Native American flavors with elements of guitar rock, electronica and Broadway pop, much in the same fashion that Cirque du Soleil composers swirl, say, Western contemporary music with Asian or African flavors to create a soundtrack that is at once exotic and comfortable on the ear.

"Fortunately for me, the music is what people liked the most about the first ver-



JESSICA GRIFFIN/Daily News

sion," said Buffett, who started creating in hybrid Native American/pop forms in the late 1980s with a series of organically flavored new age albums. Then he dug deeper as a scorer of Kevin Costner's "Dances With Wolves" and of the eight-hour CBS-TV series on the "500 Nations" of American Indians, which is when Buffett first started working with the singing/chanting

Chief Hawk Pope, also a principal performer in the current show.

"The basic plot line of the original 'Spirit' also remains, though the execution is radically different," related Buffett. "The film projections were initially pretty minimal. Now I'd estimate the film elements tell about one-third of the story, played out

Buffett says people have called "Spirit" the "American Indian Cirque du Soleil."

on three enormous screens."

The staging also has been radically altered.

"The original choreography by Wayr Cilento [best known for the musical "Tommy" and "Wicked"] was very good but rather traditional Broadway-style dancing, and the cast was half-native American half-not. Now we have an all-native cast of 25, including many champion dancer and drummers from the Native America pow-wow [competitive dance competition circuit].

"They do some amazing things, including a hoop dancing segment that's very imaginative and acrobatic. The production [staged by Jody Rippinger] is centered in traditional world, but it's done in a non-traditional way, with all the film and special production effects, including an amazing surround sound mix in the theater."

Finding his way

Buffett is not a Native American, but this 47-year-old can certainly identify with the core theme of the struggle for self-discovery. His father is the noted financier Warren Buffett, but Peter is not one to sit in his shadow, or take handouts.

"He wouldn't pay for this, and I wouldn't want him to do it. That's not right. Yes, he came up with some seed money, but only 10 percent of the original \$3 million budget and I've had to go from there. My philosophy is that self-respect comes from earning your own reward. If you don't work for what you get, you're probably not going to appreciate it, and I've certainly worked hard for this."

Buffett said he was especially fortunate to win support from the Rudolf Steiner Foundation, a public charity dedicated to creating "social benefit" and supporting "the higher aspirations of the human spirit," as president Mark Finser shares in a program-book message.

"The foundation's support has allowed me to structure this show as a not-for-profit venture," added Buffett. "I'm not taking royalties, or a fee as the producer, just salary as a musician in the band. And profits will be funneled to good causes — Native American initiatives and other related areas that honor the earth and holistic communities."

The flame grows brighter

The ethical nature of "Spirit — The Seventh Fire" also is reflected in the steady stream of special events that will run concurrent with the show's local stay. These will be held in the adjacent ou-

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door Courtyard space and inside a second, smaller tent called the Lodge.

Opening night will feature live music and the unveiling of an art exhibit by local Lenape Indians.

On Saturday, the Lodge hosts Women for Women, an organization that provides aid to survivors of war, civil strife and other conflict.

Another gallery exhibit, opening June 3, features art from local Waldorf School students (Rudolf Steiner started the progressive Waldorf educational movement).

World Environment Weekend welcomes local eco groups, June 4 and 5.

A Strawberry Festival June 11-12 spotlights local organic farmers, nutritionists and cooks, while a Summer Solstice celebration June 18 and 19 will celebrate the power of solar energy.

"All these activities are about how people today are using traditional ways of thinking and practice that have always been around to fix the planet or fix a local issue," said Peter Buffett. "You know, when your guy Ben Franklin and his buddies were plotting America's independence from Britain, they went to the leaders of the Iroquois Confederacy to learn how democracy works. And we can still learn from America's first peoples.

"Our goals are to make the Lodge a sort of community place where like-minded people can meet, and to make the whole show a community event that gets people re-energized about who they are and what they want to do," concluded the "Spirit" man. "We've got to get back to a place that's real, get away from a world that's full of weapons of mass distraction." ★