

A puppeteer with a purpose

ASU English professor hopes his new one-man puppet show promotes love, understanding

By Scott Bordow, ASU News
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It's not easy to define Ty Defoe's work.

[Defoe](#), a professor of practice in Arizona State University's [Department of English](#) who also is affiliated with the [Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies](#), has won a Grammy award for Best Native American Music Album, produced and performed in several theater productions, is about to embark on a one-man puppeteering show and, oh, is also a hoop dancer¹ and eagle dancer².

Nor is it simple to describe Defoe himself.

He identifies as an interdisciplinary artist, a citizen of the Oneida Nation and the Anishinaabe Tribe, and an "Indigiqueer" story trickster and culture shifter.

But one thing is certain: Defoe is highly regarded in the artistic community. Earlier this year, he was awarded a highly competitive 2026 United States Artists Fellowship — and its \$50,000 prize — and this summer, he will perform his new show, "Skeleton Canoe," at the International Festival of Art and Ideas on June 19 and 20 at Yale Repertory Theatre.

ASU News spoke with Defoe about the award, his work and how it is a reflection of his life.

Note: Answers have been edited for length and/or clarity.

Question: Congratulations on the fellowship award. What did that mean for you?

Answer: My title is interdisciplinary artist because I work in several different mediums, and theater has been my way in terms of stories. I'm trying to achieve things by being a sovereign story trickster or shape-shifter because I think my culture and identities are all part of that story in particular. I often look at things from the past so that I can build Indigenous futures for tomorrow.

I was very humbled to receive (the fellowship). It's based off your colleagues in the field nominating you. They look at relevancy, like why is this artist relevant right now. But I think they also look at whether this artist has a process by which they create and make work.

Q: How would you describe your art, and what are you trying to say with it?

A: I think for me, it's about creating innovative forms to tell stories for cultural shifting. I think culture shifting work is changemaking work. And I do that through writing, theater, performance and technology. I feel very much connected to the way in which it gets made in this new form, but I also am a person who's always trying to take something as simple as a song (and use it for art). I feel like everyone should have access to art-making because there are so many stories that haven't been told yet that exist and can contribute to the fabric of culture.

Q: When you say culture shifting, what are you referring to?

A: Shifting the thoughts around culture and various concepts. When I think about some of my greatest teachers from my community, when I look at the teachings of the Anishinaabe people or the Six Nations (a historic alliance of Indigenous Native American nations originally based in what is now upstate New York and parts of Canada), there are entire globe worldviews and concepts that exist around language. I use the language of English and my tribal languages to really take a deep dive into how to understand worldview and concept.

Q: Your work seems like it's a reflection of your life. Is that the case?

A: I think every artist, in some kind of way, has little pieces and fragments of yourself that you create. I think I'm always trying to draw things from my past so that I can create new forms. My work is definitely what I have witnessed and/or been a part of, which I think is really important. Storytelling and creating stories can create empathy toward greater human existence. There's this theory of, well, if we can humanely understand someone that we might not encounter, then we can create love. We can create ways of understanding. I know that's very idealistic, but I have to believe in that right now based on the conditions of the world and what it's going through. And that goes for humanitarian efforts as well as climate change and what's going on with the environment.

Q: In your bio you're described as an Indigiqueer story trickster. What does that mean?

A: "Indi" comes directly out of being Two Spirit (a contemporary, pan-Indian umbrella term used by some Indigenous North Americans to describe Native people who fulfill traditional third-gender, mixed-gender or other fluid gender roles in their communities). Indi to me is my relationship to the land and understanding with an Indigenous philosophy that land is relative. The concept that we are related to the trees, we are related to the water, and this is how we are to view this environment that for so long has held so many stories. The trickster part is using satire, using joy, using comedy as a form because I do feel like laughter is medicine.

Q: Tell me about "Skeleton Canoe."

A: It's a piece that is told using the form of a puppet show. It's a very simple story that follows a young person named Nawbin, who is portrayed through a birch bark mask. They (Nawbin) make a mistake; they have accidentally broken something in their family that has been passed down for many generations. So they end up running away from home. And when running away from home, they invoke blood memory from the Earth, which means they come in contact with a canoe.

Hundreds and hundreds of years ago, Anishinaabe people buried canoes under water so they would be preserved every season. So, in puppet form, this frame of the canoe emerges and comes to life, and this young person forms a relationship with the canoe, and they take a journey along the river. They get life lessons about culture and what it means when you do make a mistake, what it means to have empathy and love. It's a really charming story, I think, and an important one about

environmental justice and what you do with feelings.

Q: Last question. What do you hope people get from your work?

A: What I hope is that I can change hearts and minds toward humanitarian understanding, whether it's about food scarcity, climate change, climate justice or whether it's about loving on each other as a greater community. A lot of my work really centers love and being seen and heard. I feel like as someone that didn't have certain accessibilities available to me, I am architecting a world that I didn't have hope for.

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

¹ The hoop dance is a traditional and sacred storytelling dance among some Indigenous peoples.

² The eagle dance is a sacred ceremonial ritual practiced by various tribes.

Main image



Professor of Practice Ty Defoe will perform his new show, "Skeleton Canoe," at the International Festival of Art and Ideas on June 19 and 20 at Yale Repertory Theatre. Courtesy photo

Text image(s)



Defoe performs his one-man puppet show "Skeleton Canoe." Courtesy photo



Defoe says "Skeleton Canoe" (which he is seen performing above) gives life lessons about culture, empathy and love. Courtesy photo