



→ Male and female, rural and urban, traditional and modern — theatre artist Waawaate Fobister reaches across the divide to find humble, human truths

THEATRE

# "I KNOW WHERE I COME FROM"

Story **Gordon Bowness**  
Photography **Tanja Tiziana**

**T**he opening night audience at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre knew they had witnessed something very special back in 2008 at the world premiere of Agokwe by the then 23-year-old Waawaate Fobister. Where else in the world would they see a gay Native love story straight from the bush of northern Ontario told so passionately and produced so intelligently? Only a city like Toronto and a theatre like Buddies have the resources and outlook to nurture a young talent like Fobister and treat his story with the respect it deserves.

Any number of developments could have derailed the project. But Fobister had the talent and support, both as a writer and a performer, to deliver a complex one-man show, portraying six fully realized characters while giving a crash-course in Anishnabe life and cosmography, including the traditional notion of agokwe (pronounced agoo-kway), or two-spirited, a concept of homosexuality that finds both male and female spirits residing in one body. Fobister's story could have been mishandled: the politics too angry, the characterizations too earnest. But he crafted a wildly funny, heart-wrenching play. The audience's cheers and tears opening night presaged strong critical acclaim and

a near sweep at the Dora Awards. Agokwe nabbed eight Dora nominations — that's every category it was eligible for — winning six, including best new play, production, direction and performance.

Agokwe returns to Buddies this month, again directed by Ed Roy, in a new production co-produced by the National Arts Centre that has toured to Vancouver and Ottawa.

Agokwe's success changed Fobister's life. He's since starred in productions across Canada, choreographed for theatre and TV, began producing an all-Native cabaret, has a new play in the works and nabbed a commission for the 2012 Cultural Olympiad in London, UK. "It's been a wild ride," says Fobister. "Agokwe has touched so many.

"People open their doors; they are interested in me as an artist and what I have to say. And I'm just starting my career so the Doras have really given me opportunities."

Based on a true story, Agokwe explores the lives of two teenage boys on neighbouring reserves in northwestern Ontario whose growing attraction to one another leads to tragedy. Jake, a dancer, is a little more comfortable accepting his gayness; Mike, a star hockey player, is much more conflicted. Other characters include two female cousins, Cheyenne and Goose (she's hilarious), Mike's mother Betty, and Nanabush, the foul-mouthed Ojibwe trickster.

There's a dark side to all of

Agokwe's success. Fobister lives daily with his creation; the character of Mike, in particular, is a disturbing companion. He's based on a friend of Fobister's, a young man up north who killed himself — the day Fobister flew back home to see him.

"Mike was the character I was most scared of," says Fobister. "I was blocked when it came to him. His character breaks down every night. It's hard. It's the biggest challenge emotionally and as an actor. I just basically have to go there."

"Waawaate is a very gentle person," says director Ed Roy. "At first he was afraid to go into the anger of Mike's character because he felt he might not be able to control it. Now he can."

Roy has been involved in the play from the start, first spotting Fobister as a talent to watch when teaching at Humber College, then nurturing the script when Fobister attended Buddies' Queer Youth Arts Program. Roy's work as dramaturge and director has been key to Agokwe's success. He feels Fobister has matured greatly as a performer and writer since Agokwe first premiered two and half years ago.

Fobister is an incredibly resilient young man. He's been gaybashed a couple of times up north — once so severely he ended up in hospital for three days. The guys who beat him up never took ownership of what they did. But at a party some time later, they all put the moves on Fobister. "Those guys were all over

---

**"I WANT TO BE A STORYTELLER LIKE MY FATHER AND HIS FATHER BEFORE HIM, BUT I WANT TO TELL MY STORIES IN A CONTEMPORARY WAY."**

me. Each of them wanted to get in my pants." That's some bizarre stuff to have to deal with. "They're all so messed up," says Fobister. "I don't have time to deal with it. I'm not angry. It was a long time ago. I don't want to live with that resentment. I know I'm a strong person, that I was fortunate enough to have a lot of older people, elders, around me to make me strong. I let it go a long time ago." Fobister admits, however, that the memory of being bashed is a pernicious one. "It's almost impossible to get rid of it. I think it's always there."

That's why Fobister's all-embracing art is so fantastic. He describes an incredible scene that took place soon after Agokwe's first run at Buddies. He went back up to Kenora to do a staged reading of the play. All he had was a chair and a couple of props.

"It was my first all-Native audience, most of them were high school students. And the tough guys were right in front with their

→ **JET-BLACK SUCCESS** Waawaate Fobister's tragic gay love story set on a northern reservation is a wildly funny, heart-wrenching piece of theatre.

Continued on page 42



David Hawe

Continued from page 41

feet up on the stage, arms crossed, staring at me. It was crazy, really scary. But I thought, okay, I'm going to show you what I can do. I thought it could be either a disaster or a total hit.

"And they loved it. All these dudes came up after to shake my hand."

**T**hat a young theatre artist has a career in the making is news enough in this country, let alone a young Native artist. Fobister got invaluable advice while he was still a teenager living in Grassy Narrows. Veteran actress and playwright Monique Mojica spoke at his high school. He approached her to discuss his hopes of becoming an actor. "She asked me how I wanted to be portrayed," Fobister recalls. "She said if I wanted a career as a Native actor I was going to have to write my own material. It stuck with me. I want to have a career as a storyteller. I want to be a storyteller like my father and his father before him, but I want to tell my stories in a contemporary way."

Does his father recognize that Fobister is following in the family tradition? "I think so. He saw Agokwe for the first time in Ottawa in February — that was pretty nerve-racking. We didn't really have a full discussion yet. I'm waiting till I go home in June. But he said, 'When you come down I want to have a long discussion with you and I want to pass things on to you.'"

→ **TRICKSTER** The character of Nanabush is comical, foul-mouthed and wise.

Fobister is the first person in his family to finish high school, the first to move away, the first to graduate from college. His family has been incredibly supportive, even though his parents, both Catholics, don't always understand Fobister's project to reclaim a tradition like agokwe, a concept actively suppressed by European colonizers in North America.

"Some of my success they don't understand. Like when I called my dad about winning the Doras, he was like, 'That's great... I don't know what that means but it's great,'" says Fobister, laughing. "My parents are just so humble, 'cause they're from the bush, right. They're residential-school survivors. They have a very simple life.

"My father brought his elder brother and two sisters to see the play in Ottawa — my aunties, they took care of me when I was a little kid. When I was taking my second curtain call they were standing right in front and I could see my aunties just bawling their eyes out. I had to fight back the tears until I could get off stage. It's a moment I will always remember. It moved me so much. It made me so proud.

"It was also so humbling... because I know where I come from."

**AGOKWE \$28-\$33. 8pm. Tue-Sat. PWYC. 2:30pm. Sun. Thu, May 5-15. Buddies in Bad Times Theatre. 12 Alexander St. (416) 975-8555. buddiesinbadtimes.com.**