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## Alianait!


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# Iqaluit's Alianait! Festival

Where Polar Rhythms Rock

Laila Hansen and  
Laakkuluk Williamson,  
disguised as Greenlandic  
sorcerer women.

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By Lee Narraway

A single bass guitar pulses out a simple rhythm. The thumping heartbeat of a drum joins in and music resonates through the evening of the summer solstice in Iqaluit. That compelling sound lures me to the parking lot of Aqsarniit School and I find I am not alone. A large crowd of young and old alike waits anxiously for the doors to be unlocked. It's the opening night of the Alianait! Festival and we are here to party!

The drum beats on. Within moments, jugglers, acrobats and throat singers join the Inuit musicians outside. The dusty surroundings and parked cars seem to fade away when we find ourselves in the midst of an impromptu circus performance by ArtCirq, an Inuit group of performers from Igloolik. One entertainer tips back his head, purses his lips and like a mythical dragon spews flames from his mouth. The

crowd gasps, cheers and hastily moves back to give him more room. Fire-tipped torches flip back and forth between two jugglers and in the background, acrobats balance on the shoulders of strongmen below. The spontaneous show ends with tremendous applause. Now, the school doors have opened and the crowd pours into the gym. Tonight with the addition of lights, bleachers and a small stage, it has been transformed into an auditorium.

This festival was christened "Alianait" to convey the Inuit expression of joy and celebration. In just three years, thanks to a dedicated group of organizers, volunteers and sponsors, the festival has grown into a not-to-be-missed celebration of the arts. Tonight's event, the National Aboriginal Day Concert will kick-off 11 fun-filled days of music, dance, art exhibits, workshops, storytelling and theatre. To commemorate





Storyteller Laakkuluk Williamson holds the crowd enthralled with a Greenlandic legend at the Francophone centre.



Acrobat Abraham Ivalu grimaces as his partner Jimmy Qamukaq prepares to dismount during their clown routine.

International Polar Year, organizers have invited not only artists from Nunavut, but also from other parts of Canada and around the circumpolar north to join in the festivities. This eclectic group of guest artists will be performing under the 2007 festival theme of Polar Rhythms.

Mathew Nuqingaq begins the slow mesmerizing movements of the drum dance in front of an opening night sold-out crowd. As the power of the dance increases, his *ayaya* song blends with the drum's beat. Jeff Tabrahtah, a professional drum dancer for the last 13 years entertains with both traditional and contemporary styles of drum dancing. He generates laughter and applause with his energetic butt-wiggling move, affectionately termed "the polar bear dance," which is skilfully interjected into the swaying rhythm of a traditional drum dance.

As soon as ArtCirq appears on stage, the audience begins to clap and stomp their feet. After the

sneak preview outside, we are primed to be dazzled and for the next 40 minutes, this skilled group of professionals does just that. With a fine mixture of technical perfection, physical expertise and perfect showmanship, they blend comedy into performances with unicycle, acrobats and mime.

ArtCirq has wowed both national and international audiences since their inception in 1998. Founder, Guillaume Ittukssarjuat Saladin, a graduate from Montreal's National Circus School and now a resident of Igloolik, says, "It started initially as a youth group where young Inuit could learn some circus skills but now has grown into an amazing collection of dedicated artists who are redefining Inuit culture in a new way." This talented circus has a promising future.

The Alianait! Festival hosts a number of guest artists from around the circumpolar world and include Berit Margrethe Oskal and Ann-Mari Anderson, Sami *yoik* singers from Kautokeina, Norway. In the past, Christian missionaries linked the *yoik* songs to shamanism and yoiking was banned. Now there has been a resurgence of interest in this beautiful music. Traditional *yoik* is sung without accompaniment and using few words. It is often given as a present to a person and describes their character through the melody. Oskal and Anderson have added a contemporary twist to some of their songs by including drums, keyboard and guitar.

As with any Arctic festival, I can always find some place filled with the impassioned voices of throat singers. Guttural hums resonate through the darkness until spotlights pick out the two singers, seated at opposite ends of the stage. As I listen, enraptured, I become aware of sinister shadows that seem to be creeping up behind the women. Slowly the lights brighten and we see two blackened, deformed faces with threatening expressions and wild staring eyes. Laakkuluk Williamson and Laila Hansen masquerading as sorcerer women from Greenland are terrifying in their authenticity.

All eyes were riveted on the high ceiling to watch ArtCirq's aerial performer.





Paul Maliki from Repulse Bay works on a carving outside the Old Residence.




I walk through Iqaluit out past the airport to the “Old Residence”. This venue is home to the 8th Annual Nunavut Arts and Crafts Festival. I wander for hours through the galleries with other visitors and admire displays of beadwork, jewellery, wall hangings, prints, paintings, photographs and carvings. The diversity of talent is exceptional.

Outside, the parking lot is filled with carvers and curious onlookers. Paul Malliki of Repulse Bay works on a piece of white marble to create one of his outstanding polar bears. Malliki is also responsible for the many faces carved into the large stone in front of the Legislature in downtown Iqaluit. With great care, Jimmy Iqaluaq of Sanikiluaq carves precise small feathers on his loon while close by Jaco Ishilutak brings a legend to life with his interpretation of the sea goddess, Sedna. Not only does the Alianait! Festival provide an opportunity for these artists to come together and share their culture, but it also gives them a chance to display and sell their work, showcase their individual styles and observe the technical skills of others.

At one of the storytelling venues Laakkuluk Williamson, now without the sorcerer disguise, shares the Greenlandic version of the Inuit Sedna sea goddess legend with a packed house. And at another location, all kinds of workshops are taking place from painting, drum making, carving, foot-drumming, throat singing and yoiking to circus skills, sewing... the list seems endless.

Laughter spills out of a room amid sounds of slapping and banging. I peek around the corner to see a group of women clustered around a table piled high with what looks like mounds of brightly dyed wool. Radiant colours of crimson, teal, emerald and gold have spilled to the floor in the felting class. This is where I learn to meld pieces of wool into thickened and shrunken felt that can be turned into creations such as wall hangings, jewellery, hats and Christmas decorations.

Alianait! Festival has more than exceeded my expectations. I head home with a smile on my face, my felting project in my backpack and my heart still beating in time to polar rhythms. 



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Flames roar from the mouth of Guillaume Ittukssarjuat Saladin as he performs for a crowd outside the Aqsarniit School before the opening ceremonies.

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