

## THE BUFFALO NEWS

SPOTLIGHT

# Elizabeth Licata: Celebrate America250 with a compelling narrative that transcends it all

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Not everyone has been waving the red, white and blue this week. That is a bit sad. It

would be nice if we could try to put our political divisions behind us for the nation's semiquincentennial.

On the other hand, politics aside, there are those who have solid justifications for viewing all this patriotic fun with a cynical eye.

Indigenous people aren't wrong when

they say they have nothing to celebrate on America's 250th birthday.

As artist G. Peter Jemison (Seneca, Heron Clan) bluntly puts it, "There's a variety of reasons given for the Revolutionary War, but the principal reason was that either the British or the Americans were going to be able to take our land from us. And we know how that turned out."

And yet, Jemison, at 81 a well-known artist and Native historian, is leading a celebration. "Turtle Island," a multimedia production with traditional Haudenosaunee dancing, storytelling and a giant inflatable turtle that floats overhead, was created by Jemison, along with the French company Plasticiens Volants, choreographer William Crouse Sr. (Seneca, Hawk Clan) and Skywoman Iroquois Dance Theater, under the leadership of independent producer Sonia Kozlova Clark. The production has been on tour throughout Western and Central New York, with the next date on Wednesday, July 8, at the Ganondagan State Historic Site in Victor.



G. Peter Jemison is co-creator of "Turtle Island," a multimedia production about the Haudenosaunee creation story – "an uplifting, positive performance that predates any notion of the United States," he says. Joshua Bessex, Buffalo News

Artist Peter Jemison stands for a photo inside the Seneca Bark Longhouse at Ganondagan on Thursday, July 2, 2026. (Joshua Bessex/Buffalo News) Joshua Bessex/Buffalo News



"Turtle Island" production shot, with G. Peter Jemison at right.

Alex Hammer

“This is kind of an uplifting, positive performance that predates any notion of the United States,” Jemison says, “because this goes back to how the earth came to be as it is.”

Many Western New Yorkers know at least a little bit about the Haudenosaunee creation story. There are a few different versions. The general narrative being used for Turtle Island is that a pregnant Skywoman fell from her home in Sky World. She was caught up by birds who guided her to a safe resting place on the back of a giant turtle, floating in a massive body of water. A muskrat swam to the bottom of this ocean and brought up a bit of mud to place on the turtle’s back. Skywoman spread the soil, which became the earth.

There’s more, especially concerning the twins Skywoman gives birth to, but that’s the gist.

Jemison made a film of this story in 2015 to be shown at the opening of the Ganondagan Seneca Art & Culture Center, which is located at the Ganondagan State Historic Site. For the animated portions of the film, he created a series of drawings that were then brought to life by Rochester Institute of Technology film students. For the live action segments of the film, Tony-award-winning choreographer Garth Fagan worked with traditional Haudenosaunee Social Dancers. The "Iroquois Creation Story" has been shown across the world, garnering a number of festival awards along the way.



Artist Peter Jemison closes the doors of the Seneca Bark Longhouse at Ganondagan State Historic Site in Irving. "Turtle Island" will visit Ganondagan on Wednesday.

Joshua Bessex, Buffalo News

Narratives like this provide some of the most unifying archetypes the world has. Every culture and every religion has its creation story and they often share very similar elements. As Jemison tells it, "Our creation story also talks about the nature of human beings. Within each of us there's a destructive force and there's a positive constructive good mind [the twins borne by Skywoman] but periodically we wander off into our lesser selves, and then we have to get guided back to our better selves. This struggle is the nature of human beings."

It puts things into perspective.

Jemison's film is beautiful, but as a live performance spectacle, "Turtle Island" takes the narrative to a new level. That's thanks to the participation of French street theater group Plasticiens Volants. Those who have seen this group at Artpark, where it performed in 2017, 2019 and 2022, are unlikely to have forgotten the experience of walking among huge hand-painted inflatable beings floating above their heads – seeming almost close enough to touch – accompanied by music and spoken narrative.

Think Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade, but way, way cooler and more interactive. Founded in 1976, Plasticiens Volants has performed at such events as the Olympic Games ceremonies (Barcelona, Sochi and Rio de Janeiro) and the Nice carnival, but never in the U.S. until they were brought to Artpark by then-director Clark.



Costumed dancers act out the narrative of the creation myth while a giant inflatable turtle hovers during a production of "Turtle Island" in 2025.

Sonia Clark

There is only one inflatable in "Turtle Island," the giant turtle, which is brightly painted from Jemison's original designs. Costumed dancers act out the narrative of the creation myth with the turtle hovering overhead. This is the second season for the production, which was held in Prospect Park, Brooklyn, Hudson River Park and other locations last year. It's hoped that future productions will up the ante – additional aerial creations would represent Skywoman and the other characters.

We have Clark to thank for pulling together the pieces of "Turtle Island." While at Artpark (2018-24), she created the Strawberry Moon Festival, which celebrated Indigenous arts with music, dance workshops and storytelling. She heard many versions of the Haudenosaunee creation story and was at the same time working to bring in Plasticiens Volants. As she points out, the group's "entire existence is about creating stories in the sky above our heads." Then she was introduced to Jemison and saw the possibilities: "It just clicked, you know. Sometimes it just happens, and the relationship was born – in such a productive and heartfelt way."

Clark now works independently. Her company, Unicycle Productions, which she founded in 2011, is focused on bringing street art spectacles from across the world to the U.S. for touring. During her interview for this story, she said that she had just gotten funding to bring in South Korean group Elephants Laugh to tour a fascinating production entitled "Muljil," which immerses performers in clear containers of water, emulating the dangerous lives of the female shellfish divers of Jeju Island, South Korea.

That narrative is about the crossroads between life and death. As in "Turtle Island," water can deliver both. Another group Clark is working with is led by Sxip Shirey, an eccentric artist who combines electronic brass band music with circus, dance and theater.

Clark hopes to bring more of her productions to Western New York's public spaces and lists such venues as Silo City, the lawn at AKG and even M&T Plaza as possibly hosting events. As she did with Plasticiens Volants, she wants to introduce more Americans to European street theater, which she has traveled worldwide to explore. During one such

trip, she made a startling discovery. “At one of these festivals, I noticed that nobody's on the phone,” she says. “There are teenagers all around me, and there are people in their 20s all around me. Nobody has a phone in their hand.”

In order for a celebration to transcend political polarization, that much disconnection might be necessary.

*Learn more about "Turtle Island," including all performance dates, by visiting **[unicycleproductions.com](http://unicycleproductions.com)**.*

By Elizabeth Licata  
editorial writer

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