

In 'Spirit,' tradition is besieged by modern life

By A.D. Amorosi
FOR THE INQUIRER

The area between the Philadelphia Museum of Art and Kelly Drive has had many visitors of late, drawn by the Dalí exhibit and regatta season.

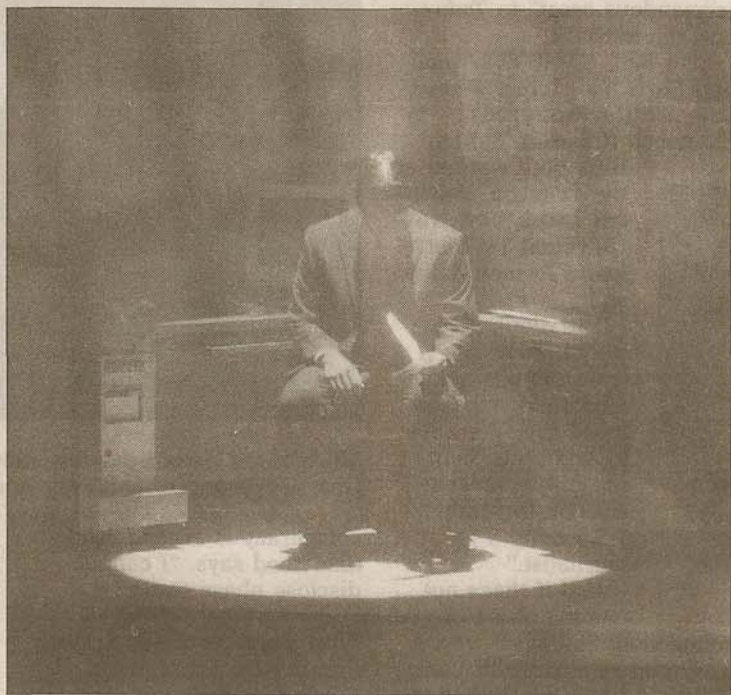
High on Fairmount Park's Lemon Hill, across from Boat-house Row, stood a different set of newcomers Friday night: traveling tents that opened to reveal conceptualist/composer Peter Buffett's multimedia production *Spirit — The Seventh Fire*.

Like a Native American version of Philip Glass' dance/performance opera *1,000 Airplanes on the Roof*, *Spirit* presents an allegorical peek at one man's American Dream turned deeply inward to consider heritage: his own and that of his nation, its inner life, struggles and success.

The central question of *Spirit*: Can a man (wordless male lead Brandon Oakes) exist in the present without losing contact with the traditions to which he was born?

To answer this question, Buffett (who leads a live band's mix of traditional Native American instrumentation and conventional art-rock arrangements) and cocreator/narrator/singer Chief Hawk Pope forged a narrative that would be cornball if it weren't for their mastery of universal themes.

Rather than blame anyone for Native Americans' plight, Pope and Buffett's tale shows how the lure of money — a desire for something purportedly "better" — turned Everyman's head. Through a spectacular film presentation — yellowed daguerreotypes of Native Americans plucked from the soil, torn from



"Spirit — The Seventh Fire" is a multimedia show mixing traditional Native American music with art rock, film, and narrative.

traditions of dress — we watch as the Industrial Revolution's progress eats away at the spirit of the people.

Returning to nature, keeping in touch with the primal, the Earth and the heaven within, becomes the goal by *Spirit*'s end.

Sometimes the production's grandeur was heavy-handed, and the acting seemed a bit stiff. But that was because the wordless enterprise (except for Native American and English lyrics) and its tribal powwow singing and chanting were as vivid as the dancing and the music. The incongruity of sounds and images old and young, "native" and "now," made *Spirit* ele-

gant, especially as its Greek chorus of singers and drummer screech atonally, puncturing the music magnificently.

While IMAX photography and newly filmed "techie" collages filled screens and scrims that surrounded and overlaid the ornately costumed live performers, Buffett's music sprawls in dynamic piano-led arrangements that were an equal mix of Native American forms (accompanied by traditional musician Patrick Mirabal) and Gershwin-esque melody, Bo Diddley-like beats, and guitar rolls that would put U2's *The Edge* to shame.