

I am an Anishnaabe writer of mixed blood from the Chippewas of Nawash First Nation. I live and work at Neyaashiingmiing, Cape Croker Reserve on the Saugeen Peninsula in southwestern Ontario. This is where I write, run a consulting business, and am learning to remember who I truly am. My work is fueled by love and rage and inspired by my community: the land and all of my relations who comfort me and give me strength. This particular essay was inspired by many teachers including Irene Akiwenzie, Joseph V. Akiwenzie, Julianna Damm, Jeannette Armstrong, Pat Grace, Haunani-Kay Trask, Wiremu Grace, Pietra Damm-Holmes, and Freddie Damm-Holmes.

My deepest respect and love go to the those Indigenous people who struggle and resist and fight on behalf of the earth, the mother who sustains us all.

Chi meegwetch.

## *Alive and Well: Native Theatre in Canada*

DREW HAYDEN TAYLOR

This article focuses on the growth, development and increasing acceptance of Aboriginal theatre in Canada, particularly in the last decade, from the perspective of a Native playwright. The author argues that the success of Aboriginal theatre may be directly attributed to a society rooted in an oral culture and the tradition of storytelling.

À partir de son expérience en tant que dramaturge autochtone, l'auteur de cette étude examine la croissance, le développement et la réception de plus en plus favorable du théâtre autochtone au Canada, surtout au cours de la dernière décennie. L'auteur affirme que ce succès peut être directement mis sur le compte d'une société ancrée dans une culture orale et une tradition de conteurs.

Native theatre is alive and well and living in Canada. Today Native theatre is strong, popular and practically everywhere in terms of the Canadian theatrical community. What once was barren is now bountiful. If in 1986 there was one working Native playwright in all of Canada, today at least two dozen playwrights of aboriginal descent are being produced. If that rate of increase continues, by the year 2020 it is conceivable that everybody in Canada will be a Native playwright!

I have a theory as to why theatre seems to be the medium of choice amongst Native Canadians. We have novelists, we have short story writers, we have musicians, we have actors, etc., but in terms of artists per capita, theatre has become the predominant vehicle of expression. Theatre is a logical extension of the storytelling technique. Looking back at the roots and origins of traditional storytelling, not just Native storytelling but storytelling in general, it is the process of taking your audience on a journey, using your voice, your body and the spoken word. Moving that journey onto the stage is merely the next logical step. With their oral culture, Native people gravitate towards theatre, more so than towards the written word where you have to have perfect English or grammatically correct writing. The spotty education that has been granted Native people by the government and various societal institutions has not been great. This is one of the reasons I became a playwright: I write as people talk, and the way people talk is not always grammatically correct – therefore I can get away with less than “perfect” English.

At its origins, storytelling was a way of relating the history of the community. It was a way of explaining human nature. A single story could have metaphorical, philosophical, psychological implications. Unfortunately, in today's society, many Native legends of history have been relegated to the status of quaint children's stories. But legends and stories were never meant to be quaint children stories. They were told to adults as well as for children, and as you got older, you could tap into a whole new understanding of the story. It was like an onion, you could always peel away more and more to get to the core of the story.

Let me give you an example – please forgive my delivery; I am many things but a traditional storyteller is not one of them. Telling a good story involves a special talent and years of practice, so please bear with me. There is a story about the creation of the earth. It starts with a woman on top of the back of a turtle. The woman has fallen through a hole in the sky, and discovers the whole world is flooded. She desperately wants to find land, so she sends animals, one after another, down to the bottom of the water to try to find some earth – a single speck of dirt. The animals keep going down, some returning empty handed, others dying and floating to the surface without any dirt in their paws. The beaver, the loon, all sorts of animals try but fail. Finally, the lowly muskrat approaches and says, "Please let me try." Now the muskrat is viewed with disdain; he is like a water rat. But he persists and says, "Let me try." So the muskrat goes down and he is gone for a long period of time. He goes down, down, down. Everybody thinks he's dead. But finally he surfaces. He is unconscious so he is pulled to shore on the back of the turtle. In his hand there is a tiny bit of dirt. That's all the woman needs to create an earth on the back of a turtle. And this is why North America is referred to by First Nations people as Turtle Island.

Now that is a very brief, rough summary of a creation myth, a small segment of that whole myth. How that legend is related for adult understanding was shown to me by the writer and storyteller Basil Johnston. The legend refers to the psychological process of reaching deep inside yourself to find that nugget that is your grounding, your earth, the essence of who you are. The story can be interpreted as the need to survive, as a dangerous journey with dangerous ramifications. The journey to find that nugget – that most important thing – is the story of creation from a different, more philosophical, psychological viewpoint. Taking that interpretation – the story as archetypal self exploration – and then putting it into theatre, seems like a natural progression. At the same time, the story has meaning for children. Take any storyteller, watch him work with kids, suspending their disbelief and taking them on a journey, using characters and an interesting plot line. This is the basis of any good theatrical presentation.

There have always been many different forms of theatre in our nations' history. During the onslaught of Christianity, of the government, the residential system etc., traditional Native beliefs were deemed offensive and unnecessary. There were numerous attempts to stamp them out and replace them with white North American/European concepts. However, it is incredibly hard to eradicate the simple act of telling stories. Our culture persevered, and today we are getting our voice back.

Prior to World War II, it was illegal for Native people to leave the reserve without written permission from the Indian agent. With the advent of World War II, many Native people enlisted in the armed services. We were exempt from the draft because legally we were not considered citizens of Canada. However, because of our warrior traditions and some sort of bizarre loyalty to the King, many Native people enlisted and went to Europe. There they found there were different ways of doing things. They didn't have to just stay on the reserve and do what they were told.

After the war, many Native people had a more worldly outlook. Also, in 1960, Native people finally got the right to vote in Canada. There was a progression of events; it was like a puzzle, each bit falling into place. Native people were beginning to understand that there were alternatives. We began to assert ourselves. In 1968 there was a demonstration in Kenora over a park that the local Native tribe wanted back. In 1973, there was Wounded Knee. And so on and so forth. Each event was a step towards getting our voice back. There were also little steps in between. In 1967, George Ryga wrote the play *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* which became a milestone in terms of Canadian theatre and more accurate representations of the urban Indian experience. It was, however, written by a non-Native person and, though I believe Chief Dan George was in it, most of the original cast for the production in Vancouver was non-Native. It did start people talking however – about the power of theatre and about the plight of Native people. In 1974, an organization was created in Toronto called the Association for Native Development in the Performing and Visual Arts. One of the things it set up was the Native Theatre School, which was the first school of its kind to teach Native people how to act, to teach them theatrical production, and how to write their own stories. The Theatre School operates during the summer, for seven weeks; for four weeks the students train and for the other three they perform. In addition they also write their own play as a collective, direct it and then take it out on the road for a tour. It has been over 20 years since this school was created and many well-known Native actors have been a part of the school.

In 1979 the Association for Native Development in the Performing and Visual Arts was invited to perform a play at the International Theatre Festival in Monaco. They found themselves in the awkward position of having no play to take. So they decided to remedy the situation as best they could. They contacted a Native poet by the name of George Kenny who had written a book of poetry called *Indians Don't Cry*. One of the poems was called "October Stranger" and had good dramatic potential. With the help of an experienced Native actor, they adapted it into a play (also called *October Stranger*) and they took it to Monaco. It was pretty much a fiasco. Everybody in Europe seemed to be expecting buckskin, feathers and beads. Instead these contemporary Native youth came in to do a serious play about a person leaving the reserve to go and live in a city and becoming acculturated. This was not what people at the Monaco theatre festival wanted to see.

Another moment in the history of Native theatre was the 1984 creation of a drama company called the De-Ba-Jeh-Mu-Jig Theatre Group. De-Ba-Jeh-Mu-Jig is an Ojibway-Cree word meaning storytellers or tattle of tales. It was started by a woman named Shirley Cheechoo, an amazing painter, actress, model and playwright. Shirley Cheechoo is a person who does whatever intrigues her – if she wants to go write a play, she'll go write a play; if she wants to do a painting, she'll do a painting. She started De-Ba-Jeh-Mu-Jig as a summer theatre company on the West Bay Reserve on Manitoulin Island. It was created partly to showcase Native legends, both traditional and contemporary, and also to raise some money by performing for tourists in the summer. Every year the company produced a play.

Although the professionalism of the work was rough to begin with, it gradually grew. The group performed plays such as *Nothing Personal*, *Nanabush of the 80s* and a whole series of others that toured communities in and around southern Ontario.

During the 1984-85 season, De-Ba-Jeh-Mu-Jig Theatre Group was catapulted into the theatrical limelight. The powers-that-be contacted a man whom they asked to be their artistic director; Shirley was busy and didn't have the time to devote fully to the company. The person they approached to go to Manitoulin Island and run the company was a Cree writer by the name of Tomson Highway.

Tomson Highway spent the winter on the island in a portable trailer. It was not the most enjoyable circumstances for him but he persevered. During his time on the island, he visited a nearby community, about 45 minutes away, called Wikwemikong or Wiki to the local people. It was there he first formulated the idea for a play that would become so important for Native Theatre. He noticed all these women rushing around, going to play a game called ... bingo! He watched and saw people becoming really obsessed. They'd enter the bingo palace and there would be dead silence, there'd just be smoke floating through the room. That is where he first developed the idea for the play *The Rez Sisters*. He wrote the first draft there and workshopped it on the island too. After a year, he came back to Toronto with his script.

In Toronto there was another theatre company, slightly older than the one on Manitoulin. In 1982 the Native Earth Performing Arts was formed by a loose group of artistic friends, urban Indians who wanted to act. The company functioned as a collective. Basically people got together saying: "I have an idea for a show, let's go do it." There was no overall structure to the company, no artistic director, no administrator, no core funding, just a room at the Toronto Native Friendship Centre and an occasional show. Then Tomson came and became artistic director. He took his play *The Rez Sisters* to a dozen theatre companies in Toronto. Nobody was interested. They didn't want to do it for a very basic reason, in my opinion: the fundamental differences between Native theatre and European Western theatre or Canadian theatre. He took his play around, and every artistic director he showed it to said, "Nobody cares about a group of seven women wanting to play bingo" and "there's no drama in the story." I've had this experience, too, with one of my plays. What they were saying, by and large, is that European drama, is based on conflict. The story progresses through conflict, information is perceived through conflict. That is the Western dramatic structure, which is the opposite of Native theatre. To understand this you must remember Native theatre's origins in storytelling. Stories were told in small family groupings. For example, the Ojibway would be in family groupings during the winter because it was easier to feed a small group of people than a large one. People were living in close quarters. If somebody had a problem, or if somebody was angry and wanted to make a very aggressive point about something, it was frowned upon and discouraged because conflict would infringe upon the harmony of the community and therefore its survival. Overt or aggressive conflict was actively and urgently discouraged within

the family group and this manifested itself within stories too. A lot of the traditional legends are more narrative than dramatic – the hero goes on a journey but he doesn't have to fight his way through, or slay dragons to get to the end. Again there are exceptions to that rule; I know of a lot of bloody legends within my Native community. But on the whole, conflict was discouraged within our community, and as a result our stories reflect that. *The Rez Sisters* is about a group of women going to Toronto to participate in the world's biggest bingo. They do that, then come back. There's no big fight, there's no big car chase, there's no big conflict *per se*. There's squabbling. But it's the squabbling of everyday life – not Shakespearean-style sword-fighting, which is a hell of a way to resolve conflict!

Most of the artistic directors didn't know how to handle this different way of telling a story. I have a play called *Someday* which is about the "scoop up" when Native children were taken away for adoption by the Children's Aid Society. It was produced last Christmas [1994] in Montreal. When I was first trying to interest Morris Podbrey in producing my play, he said the structure went against everything he was taught about drama. All the information comes too easily, everybody gets along too well. He liked the story but felt it was missing something. Larry Lewis, who produced and directed both *Someday* and *The Rez Sisters* had a chat with Morris, explained some things about Native theatre, and the play was produced.

Lack of conflict seems to be one of the fundamental differences between European and Native drama. For instance, one of the legends I know – again in rough because I'm not a storyteller – is Thunderbird children. Father thunderbird and thunderbird children fly around, doing the "thunderbird thing." The two children see a village of humans and watch what's going on. The male thunderbird sees the men out having these great epic battles and the female thunderbird sees the women giving birth and creating life. They become infatuated with human life. Back at thunderbird camp, the two children, after talking with each other, tell their father, "We would like to become humans." One says, "I would like to become a great warrior" and the other one says "I would like to create life." Father thunderbird says, "Well, I wish you would remain here with me, but if that is your wish I will grant it under one condition. What you have to do is find me the cleanest lodge that exists. You have to go down to earth and find a house, a place to be born that is absolutely immaculate." The two thunderbird children go from village to village. They find some lodges that are very clean and some that are not very clean, but they can never find an absolutely immaculate and clean lodge.

One day they are travelling by a river and they see a woman heavy with child, washing herself in the river. They are curious and follow her back to her camp. They watch her enter her lodge and because they are invisible, they go in too. She has the cleanest lodge they've ever seen. So they say, "We've found it father. This is what you've asked and we've found it." As it happens, the woman gives birth to twins. The boy comes out of the birthing process covered in blood and immediately starts saying, "Oh no, I'm dying, I've been stabbed, I've been pierced, I'm never going to be a great warrior." The mother tells him, "No you're fine, you've

just been born, you will grow up to be a great warrior." The same happens with the girl. The mother consoles the children who grow up to be a warrior and a great woman elder of the community. They live their lives, they die and they go back up to the great thunderbird father. Now that's a very rough telling of a legend, I'm not doing it justice. But in that legend there's no fight, there's no argument, there's no conflict really. They're given an objective, they achieve it, and they go on. This is the structure of a lot of traditional Native legends which, to reiterate, conflicts with the European dramatic process.

Because he couldn't get anybody to produce his play, Tomson Highway decided that he would have to produce it himself. It is a seven-character play and expensive to mount. Somehow Tomson managed to do it. He raised the money and he co-produced it with his friend Larry Lewis, who directed it. The first week it did abysmally. Part of the reason had to do with another common feature of Native theatre: the play had no major central character. *The Rez Sisters* has seven women, all of equal importance, all with an equally important story. No one person is more important than the other. Most people are not used to that. They are used to seeing a protagonist – Hamlet for example – at the centre of the story. Each of the Rez Sisters has her own story, and it is of equal weight and equal strength within the context of the play. The same can be said about *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*: all seven men in the play have an equal and important story. This is why Tomson will never write for television, which requires protagonists and heroes.

So the first week *The Rez Sisters* almost died. Nobody came to watch it except for the reviewers. They had never seen anything like it before! It was like a breath of fresh air, something new, something interesting, something invigorating. So it had wonderful reviews. Many times in the first week or so, the director and stage manager had literally run out to the street, and handed free tickets to people passing by the Native Canadian Centre to come in and see the show. Then the word got out that it was fabulous. By the fourth week there was standing room only. They were turning people away. In the end, the play got such a great response that almost immediately there were offers from cities all across Canada to produce it. They ended up doing a production that toured from BC to Ontario, stopping in all the major capitals along the way, doing incredible business. Within the Native community, for the majority of us, *The Rez Sisters* marked the beginning of contemporary Native theatre because that's when people stood up and said, "Hey, what's this? People are telling their own story and they're telling it well."

Next came Highway's *Dry Lips*, which was a co-production between Theatre Passe-Muraille and Native Earth. Because of the success of *The Rez Sisters*, *Dry Lips* did amazing business. It did a three-city production – Winnipeg, Ottawa and Toronto (at the Royal Alex). It was the first Native play ever to be in any of those three places all at one time. From there, Native playwrights had their voice.

The second person to be produced was Daniel David Moses who is well known as a poet, and has also written short stories. Lately he has been getting more and more into theatre. Native Earth produced *Cloudy City*, his very first play, which

did reasonably well. Around that time I was brought in as Artistic Director of Native Earth. Playwrights started to come out of the woodwork. We have a festival called "Chuck Begins to Dance." Chuck is another word for the Trickster, Nanabush, or the Raven. It is a festival or workshop of six new Native plays. They are given public readings. For the first festival, back in 1989, Tomson had to beat the bushes to find plays to workshop – Tomson and Dan were the only ones writing plays. He had to scramble to find six plays to workshop. Today I have a big stack of Native plays on my desk. I have to make tough decisions and weed out and pick six to produce. It's really quite striking, quite grand, to see how far Native theatre has come.

I was invited to be playwright-in-residence for Native Earth in the 1988-89 season. I'd been a journalist and I had written for television. I had done some documentaries and I was writing a drama series. The number of plays I had seen I could count on my fingers. I wasn't planning to get into theatre. Theatre was something done by dead white English people. But I was offered 20 weeks work – they had gotten a grant for playwright residency – 20 weeks of salary just to come in and sit through rehearsals, so I accepted. I went in absolutely disinterested. But I was bitten by the bug and since 1989, I've had 22 productions of my eight plays. I feel so privileged to sit in the first row of theatre of Native theatre.

There are many interesting developments in Native theatre. We've been given back our voices to tell our stories. It is fascinating to see what stories are being told and what the voices are saying. I would say that a majority of plays produced in the past, and to a certain extent now, are very, very angry stories. They are talking about things that have happened that have prevented them from talking in the first place. Tomson likes to quote Lionel Longquash from Saskatchewan who said that before the healing can take place, the poison has to be exposed. This is the reasoning behind *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*. I became a playwright in residence during the original rehearsal period of *Dry Lips*. This play was my introduction to Native theatre. I remember sitting through that rehearsal, seeing the play on stage. For anyone who has read or seen it, you know there's a horrific rape scene, where a young man with foetal alcohol syndrome rapes Nanabush, who is in the persona of Betsy Pegahmagahbow, and who is pregnant. He rapes her with a crucifix. The image of the young man with foetal alcohol syndrome raping Nanabush, who is at the centre of Native mythology, with a crucifix, just explodes with metaphoric intent. About the same time, there was a production of *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*. Although it was written by a non-Native person, as I mentioned, it was an important step in the development of Native theatre, and I went to see it. In that play as well, there is a horrible rape.

And if we look at other plays, we find more rape scenes. There's mention of a rape in *The Rez Sisters*, there's a rape in *Moonlodge*, there's a homosexual rape in *Fireweed*, there are four or five rapes in *Night of the Trickster*, and I could name more. I'd say in 75 per cent of the Native plays written and produced, there is a rape. Why? One theory is that rape represents the horrific amount of sexual abuse that exists in Native communities because of the residential school system, because

of alcoholism, because of the breakdown of the extended families, because of adoption. Sexual abuse is cyclical in that the abused becomes the abuser. The dramatic version of rape is also the perfect metaphor for what happened to Native culture. In many communities, culture was matrilinear or matriarchal. Another culture comes in, forcing itself on the community, basically eradicating everything there, subjugating that culture to its will.

I think that this (hi)story is still a large part of what Native playwrights and Native people in general are trying to work out through theatre, through art. This is important but sometimes the work can seem very fixated on that one point. I get a script on my desk and I wonder what the dysfunction du jour will be in *this* play. There are so many different aspects of Native culture waiting to be explored. I look at all the things that have happened to Native people that we're trying to document in our theatre, and I think what has gotten us through those periods is a sense of humour and a sense of storytelling. Those two things have kept us going. They have helped us grasp who we are. Native people have a very special sense of humour. Depending on where you are, it can be very sarcastic, biting and almost vicious, or it can be very laid-back. With a lot of my material I try to use humour. I have a series of plays that I refer to as "The Comedies" because I want to celebrate the Native sense of humour, a very important ingredient that has allowed us to survive the tragedies. I'm constantly urging people to explore different things about the Native community.

Because Native theatre is so young – it's barely 10 years old – we're still trying to find its parameters before cultural appropriation occurs – one way or another! People talk about taking our stories, but our stories are taking new forms too. Two years ago we produced a play called *Diva Ojibway*, a Native opera. I do Native comedies (I've been called the Neil Simon of the Native community). In two seasons, we are going to be presenting a show called *Shame of Oz*, a Native version of the *Wizard of Oz*. The definition of Native theatre is continually expanding. It is still growing. In the 1970s, Native theatre was either a dramatization of a legend or about a rather didactic social issue that had to be explained, with no plot, or character. Now Native theatre can be practically anything. During the 1980s Native Earth was the only theatre company developing and producing Native theatre. I myself have six plays being produced across Canada this season [1995-96] and only one by a Native theatre company. Previously one play might be produced and then it would disappear. Now, people in other companies are saying, "I hear that's a good play, I'd like to see it, I'd like to produce it." Last Christmas [1994], there were two different productions of *The Rez Sisters*, one in Hamilton, one in London. Meanwhile my play *Someday* was running in Thunder Bay and Vancouver. The momentum is growing and growing and Native theatre, instead of being the exception, is now a dynamic component of contemporary Canadian theatre.

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