

CANADIAN NATIVE THEATRE: HUMOUR, MAGIC AND REALITY

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ABSTRACT

Despite Canadian aboriginals' long-documented inclination towards performance, Native dramaturgy is a recent phenomenon. Born out of the feeling of having been wronged but, fortunately, not of the desire to take revenge, Native playwrights base their pieces on the collision between the Euroamerican intellectual tradition and the mythic perspective of a quite sophisticated oral literature, which claims knowledge is born from the revelation found in the marvellous. They imagine spaces in which common and uncommon things exist side by side, design plays for the entertainment and education of Natives and non-Natives alike, and aim at encouraging a transnational solidarity. In the present paper I analyse Native drama in terms of themes and techniques, I argue it is informed by the vision of Bertolt Brecht and the surrealism of Sam Shepard, and suggest that comedy is the most suitable genre for its authors' purposes.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the late 1960s, Native Americans have been producing tradition and community through an overwhelming mass of autobiographies, fictions and poems. If this literary effervescence is hardly surprising to anyone minimally acquainted with the political prominence Native organizations attained thirty years ago, the scarcity of theatre texts, however, does generate a certain surprise. Two reasons have been advanced to explain this absence. Mr. Bernard Assiniwi argues that Natives are more

apt at storytelling than at performing;¹ others assert that performances, songs, dances and masks are instrumentally too powerful and thus need to be handed on with care and secrecy.

None of this is convincing. On the one hand, Native tribes have a long oral performative tradition. Sadie Worn Staff, of the Spirit Song Native Indian Theatre Company in Vancouver, points out that dramatic expression is not new among Indian people. If it is true, Gilbert & Tompkins write, that the storyteller's narrative is distinct from the play's dialogue, it is also true that storytelling is a mode of performance (127). Caroline Heath writes concerning this issue that: "Storytelling and powwows have a strong dramatic element, and the masks and screens used in potlaches are undeniable evidence of powerful staged events".² Cat Cayuga, artistic director of the Native Theatre School in Toronto since 1985, agrees and comments: "Theater for Native people has been a part of our cultural roots prior to colonization. It is expressed through ceremony, ritual, dance and storytelling" (37).

On the other hand, no clear distinction has ever been made between art, magic, religion and ritual.³ In effect, the artist, or the cultural worker,⁴ is often introduced as a shaman existing somewhere between the human condition and the cosmic forces, in charge of dreaming for the community and with the burdensome responsibility of speaking for her or his kind. William Yellow Robe Jr, playwright and enrolled member of the Assiniboine Tribe of the Fort Peck Indian reservation in northeast Montana, considers this encumbrance the main source of difference between Euroamerican and indigenous writers: "In the European American format when a playwright writes he writes with his own voice. When Native Americans write we write with the voice of our people —and that's the big difference" (85).

Privileging the processual workings and the performance event over the written script could be one explanation for the lack of theatre pieces. Lack of appropriate theatrical space could be another.⁵ Literary segregation, however, seems the most probable. According to Jessica Hagedorn, Philippine playwright, few are the opportunities for play development for most writers, and even less so for playwrights of color. Rarely are they able to turn to traditional commercial theatre producers to present their pieces, being usually forced, she writes, "to turn to art galleries, nightclubs, dance spaces, and other non-traditional performance venues" (15). And, she concludes, even though there is certain guarantee of a run in the non-profit theatre, performance pieces, however, enjoy a short life. On this ground, Aishah Rahman, African-American dramatist, imputes the rejection of culturally specific drama to the ethnic and class prejudices of critics "who, like it or not, are tastemakers". Rahman moves from a confessional mode to an accusatory diatribe confronting the audience with the words: "Make no mistake about it, politics does govern art as long as we the people don't do anything about the bunch of lunatics that we allow to govern us, things for us and the country don't look too good" (25). Fortunately, it seems that the major (big budget) arts institutions are only now beginning to change in Canada under much public scrutiny and duress.

My purpose in this paper is to analyse Native dramaturgy in terms of themes, methods, techniques and genres.⁶ I argue that Native American dramatists are informed by the vision of Bertolt Brecht and the surrealism of Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) or Sam Shepard, and suggest comedy as the most suitable form for Native theatre. I decided to leave out the texts which have already achieved visibility in favour of less well-known pieces. The corpus consists of eight plays: *October*

Stranger, performed in Monaco in 1977, and written by George Kenny (born in Sioux Lookout, Ontario, and raised in the Lac Seul Indian Reserve) in collaboration with Denis Lacroix; *The Land Called Morning*, written by John Selkirk in collaboration with Gordon Selkirk, and performed by an all-Native cast at Edmonton Finge Theatre on August 17, 1985; *Teach Me the Ways of the Sacred Circle*, a quest journey written by Valerie Dudoward and performed by the Spirit Song Native Theatre Company in communities throughout British Columbia; *Coyote City* written by Daniel David Moses (a Delaware poet who grew up in Brantford), and produced at the Native Canadian Centre of Toronto from 17 May to 5 June 1988 by Native Earth Performing Arts Inc.; and Drew Hayden Taylor's *Toronto at Dreamer's Rock*, *Education Is Our Right*, *The Bootlegger Blues* and *Someday*.⁷

2. ANTI-ILLUSIONISTIC STAGING

These plays are all dialogue oriented, the narrative structures dialectical in form, as Brecht advised in *A Short Organum for the Theatre* (1948), and the presentations of the plot dualistic, although the underlying philosophy is holistic, meaning that both terms are necessary. The amount of action is limited, making the plays easy to produce though difficult to act. Their scenes are short, the rhythm quick, and the set is minimal. Brecht's anti-illusionistic theatrical techniques (bare sets, segmented spaces, revealed lighting equipment, audience participation and the like) are favoured over naturalistic dramaturgy and tribal specificity.

Austere is the physical set employed by Taylor in the production of *Toronto at Dreamer's Rock*,⁸ and sparsely furnished the stage recommended for *Education Is Our Right*, for whose enactment the playwright asks just for "a handful of numbered and lettered building blocks of various sizes (as) the main components of the set. These could be arranged in any number of configurations depending on the scene." Daniel David Moses also speaks a word for simplicity of form in his stage directions for *Coyote City* and, in Brechtian fashion, advises non-atmospheric lights from clearly visible lamps and spotlights: "The play is set in darkness complicated only by spot lights and by the shadows of the characters and the few necessary properties. It happens just yesterday on a reserve and then in the city". Likewise, John Selkirk considers a simple set appropriate as scenario for *The Land Called Morning*. In his production notes, the author remembers the first enactment of the play, presented by four young Cree Indians from the Montreal Lake Reserve in northern Saskatchewan with no theatrical training except for a two-week workshop, in a non-purpose built theatrical space: "... perhaps the most emotional performance of *The Land Called Morning* took place in just such a room at the Poundmaker-Nechi Institute, a Native drug and alcohol rehabilitation centre in St. Albert, Alberta" (74).

Scenery and properties are minimally used. Stage directions for the opening of the play tell us that:

The set should be simple, suggested. Some raised areas. Darkness.
A faint drum song is heard. As it builds, the actors, one by one, move to four individually lighted areas on the stage. When they are set, the music fades away. (75)

Lighting and gels are also utilized by Valerie Dudoward to enhance the semi-reality of the two dream-scenes in *Teach Me the Ways*. She divides the proscenium into two areas, set off against one another, and, as Taylor in the production of *The Bootlegger Blues*, recommends episodic montage so as to give each part of the fable its own structure, that of a play within the play, and remind the audience of their presence in the theatre. Taylor supplies further particulars:

The original production of *The Bootlegger Blues* contained a set broken up into three areas. The first and busiest was Martha's kitchen, which also doubled as the community center kitchen... It was painted yellow for a domestic tone.

The second area was the space that doubled for all outdoor activities...This background was painted green.

And finally came Blue's bedroom...the room was painted blue. (7)

All the action, the dramatist adds, takes place on a typical contemporary Indian reserve. He later proposes similar recommendations concerning the enactment and location of *Someday*, a play which "takes place in a fictional Ojibway community on the Otter Lake Reserve, somewhere in central Ontario. (But) It could also take place in any Native community in Canada." The author thus creates, in D. George's words, "a here which is not here" (in Gilbert & Tompkins 139).

3. STRATEGIC GENERALIZATION

Thus freed from the limitations of topographical features and geographical barriers, the authors tend to transform the particular into the general. They defy rigid systems of classifying aboriginals along the axis of tribal culture, and construct texts of resistance that are both, widely representative or universal in scope, and historically and temporally specific, i.e., engaged with the social and political needs of the Native community.

Universalization or generalization is, according to Arnold Krupat, a rhetorical act "performed for practical effectiveness rather than for logical coherence or factual accuracy" (6), and, as such, is unavoidable and necessary to improve the prospects for Native people.⁹ Generalization, understood as the process of extracting commonalities, is also, I would add, a technique of distancing. On downplaying the importance of location and by magnifying the distance between signifier and signified, sign and referent, Indigenous dramatists hinder the complete identification of Native spectators with the characters on the stage, force them to partially withdraw their affections, prevent their being entirely "carried away" and look for their critical support. For the European spectator the target is different. This time, it is precisely through the dramatists' speaking to transpersonal unity and wholeness, and through their commitment to a general panhuman essence, that Native playwrights boost white empathy towards the social and cognitive world of the Native characters.

The effect of generalization is attained through anti-illusionistic staging, and is further reinforced by, first, privileging English (the language used by most tribal peoples inhabiting Canada) at the expense of indigenous languages,¹⁰ second, by humour

and, third, by emphasizing performance. The intersection of songs and music in an otherwise non-musical play, like *The Bootlegger Blues*;¹¹ the presence of choric figures playing trickster and exercising their right to insert satirical material and to comment on events, in *October Stranger*; the freezing of characters in the “transition-to-introspect scenes” in Kenny’s piece, only to come alive again in their transition to reality; the use of direct audience addresses at several points in the action of *The Land Called Morning* by characters who step outside theatrical time; the foregrounding of the distinction between actor and role by means of a solo performer to embody multiple characters in *Education is Our Right*;¹² and the placing of the action in the world of fable,¹³ or in the world of magic, denaturalize the action and thus increase the audience’s attention, calling for an intellectual response rather than merely an aesthetic appreciation.

Other means of attainment involve formulaic stories that take a conflict-resolution form and the essentialization of the protagonists’ identities. All plays may be reduced to the Jungian or Campbellian quest: a journey that goes within, below the everyday self, into the domain of the unconscious soul, and ends in conversion. As for the protagonists, they become monolithic abstractions of the post-colonial diasporic subject, i.e., ephemeral metonymies of the displaced person, dispossessed in a world of material luxury and dependent on a system that alienates her or him.¹⁴ Displacement, dispossession and dependence result in a fissured individual with visionary powers who must contend with contrary impulses within himself. In other words, it is this very fragmentation of the protagonist self what renders him particularly sensitive to manifestations of otherwise invisible presences who, first, refuse temporal boundaries, second, engineer events as they wish, and, third, maintain the plays’ morality.

Timeless personal or familiar spirits guide the protagonist in his dealings with the typical postcolonial experience of shuttling in-between two civilizations not fitting into any,¹⁵ by forcing him to listen for the ancient and universal instructions embedded in his soul. The rest of the characters, most Native, most young, and nearly all of them family,¹⁶ tell the truths that stay inside the hero’s head and present us with his conscious and unconscious will. In short, they impersonate two different attitudes towards life, much like in Shaw’s comedies of ideas. But they all, spirits and non-spirits alike, contribute to the same heuristic intent: self-knowledge, and they all aim at the same goal: help the protagonist to negotiate a post-colonial identity, accommodated rather than assimilated to white society. Almost always the resolution is positive.

For Rusty in *Toronto at Dreamer’s Rock*, Anglo and Indian societies are equal threats to his integrity. He submits to pressures from without and is unable, till the closing of the play, to control the action:

I’m stuck smack-dab in the middle of a family war, between one uncle that’s called “Closer” because they say he’s closed every bar in Ontario, and my other Uncle Stan, who is basically a powwow Indian, I never know what’s going on. Sometimes I don’t know if I should go into a sweatlodge or a liquor store. Sometimes they tear me apart. I don’t fit in. (47)

The play ends in a prayer signalling the completion of the cure that was the primary purpose of his encounter with Keesic and Michael. Rusty will maintain his Indian roots and gain advantage of the benefits of higher education. His religious conversion guarantees his fate will be accomplished.¹⁷

RUSTY:...I'm going to be the first Grand Chief of the Aboriginal Government. And it's dated 2023. I'll be 50 years old. *It sinks in.* Holy. I'll be old. Damn. Guess this means I have to go back to school. And I thought I'd be free next year.

...

Kessic speaks to them in Indian, telling them that they must pray. He places the boys carefully, facing the east, and begins a final prayer of thanksgiving to the Creator for allowing them to meet across time on this sacred spot.

At the end of the prayer, Rusty sinks to the rock, holds his weekah pouch with one hand and drums a beat on the rock with the other. He sings a song in Indian about hearing the voice of the people, so far away. During the song, Michael and Keesic leave the rock and disappear within it. At the end of the song, Rusty opens his eyes. He is alone. He goes to pick up his knapsack and beneath it he finds a crow feather. He holds the feather up to the sky, turning four times, saluting the Four Directions. Then he moves off. Just before leaving, he places his hand respectfully on the rock.

RUSTY:Ah, meeg-wetch (Thank you.) (72, 75)

Mathew Jack in *Teach Me the Ways of the Sacred Circle* also solves his internal psychological conflicts when he discovers himself to be the spirit of his grandfather come back to earth. He will continue his studies in the city, but now he is determined to come back to the reserve after graduation, in order to assist his community in moving towards self-government and improved economic growth: "I won't change the course of Indian history, but I'm going to make change as the human being I am" (36). David in *The Bootlegger Blues* goes Native when menaced to be abandoned by Marianne who, not as heroic as others in moral caliber, demands:

...bannock, not whole wheat. I want to fry my food, not microwave it. Especially that quiche stuff of yours. The Creator meant eggs to be fried, not baked...I hate tofu, alfalfa sprouts, soya bean curd, and most of all, and I really mean this, David, I really hate skim milk. (72)

John in *October Stranger* is torn between the duty to learn his father's ways and his desire to become published as a writer uncommitted to the social problems of his people. When he is eventually swallowed up by a crowd made up of the chorus members, we intimate he gets wise to himself and finds a solution midway. Anne in *The Land Called Morning*, cannot, however, come to peace with her Indian lineage and blows her head off in a clover field. Her death follows the self-immolation of other Greek heroines in having a positive result: the regeneration of Peter, who so far only interested in pool and intergalactic battle machines, now decides to make a move and search for an outlet; just like his brother-in-law to be, Robin, a modern Indian who subscribes to a traditional way of living and, at the same time, becomes the Canadian champion in the Olympic Games. Janice in *Someday* is again caught at the crossroads between the Anglo and the Indian societies, but this time she decides to metaphorically sell her soul for material self-advancement. Nevertheless, all might soon be righted, or at least so much is inferred from the lines closing the play:

RODNEY: When do you think you'll be back?
Janice looks up at the now empty window.

JANICE: Oh, someday, I suppose. Goodbye, Rodney. And Merry Christmas.

...

The lights go down to a magical sparkling moonlight on the snow; and slowly fade to black. (80-81)

Despite Native bleak reality, Indian playwrights believe human nature is capable of change and therefore plan for the morrow. Their bets on the future, however, avoid the notorious demerits of self-pity and the negativity of pure protest. The pain is there, it is felt, it is abundant, but they do not push it, rather let it lie beneath the surface and turn tragedy around with humour and fantasy. In other words, they write comedy.

4. COMEDY

Comedy takes over the gay manner of farce and the grave manner of tragedy, assures Eric Bentley (227). Misery, theft, dispossession, greed (305), mistaken identities, lack of self-knowledge and misconceptions (309) are classic subjects of this pseudo-barstard genre, which “reaches positive statement by inference from negative situations” (308). Comedy is imbued with a sense of morality, it aims at the general, lives on types (42), prevents the audience from identifying with anybody on stage (308), and serves to cope “with despair, mental suffering, guilt and anxiety” (301). The comic artist, Eric Bentley continues, has a dual equipment: “on the one hand, a ‘lust for life,’ ‘an evolutionary appetite,’ an eagerness and zest in sheer being, and on the other a keen and painful awareness of the obstacles in the path, the resistances and recalcitrancies, the trials by fire and water, the dragons, forests, and caves that menace us, and the thickets and swamps in which we flounder” (298). But, he goes on to say a few pages later that this “surface of the terrible conceals beneath it a kind of cosmic beneficence, a metaphysically guaranteed good luck” (313). This interplay between joy/humour, white magic as source of strategic and therapeutic confidence, and everyday painful reality is the essence of Native comedy.

4.1. TAKING THE PAIN BY THE HAND

Matt in the Dudoward’s piece knows well what the statistics say about Indian people:

I know what the statistics say about us, about Indian people. Our child death rate is twice the national average. As recently as eight years ago, more than half of our people were on welfare, social assistance. Our unemployment rate is higher than the national average. A lot higher. We die at an earlier age than the national average. (35)

Tragedies are an inevitable part of the growing pains of the Indian community as it regains control of its own identity, and, as such, they are understood and examined by playwrights, so as to anticipate what the future can hold.

According to Comeau and Santin, most reserve communities across the country suffer from tensions triggered by abject poverty (1995: 40). Almost half of reserve families live below the poverty line; this rate is three times the Canadian average, they assert. "You have such a different life," Barb tells her acculturated sister in *Someday*, "It's like you have everything everybody on this reserve doesn't" (60). Houses are crowded, in poor physical conditions and some, like Anne's in *Someday*, even lack basic amenities.

The only sources of employment on-reserve are the band council and the few band-owned enterprises and, as a result, more than 66% of Indians of working age are either unemployed or on welfare. On this ground, Comeau and Santin comment: "Welfare programs robbed native people of their self-esteem, and the education and child welfare policies implemented by the non-Native administration made them feel ashamed on their heritage"(43).¹⁸ The only recreation activity of choice is lotteries, and bingo gambling, to which several communities have resorted to supplement federal revenues,¹⁹ or, otherwise, sniffing gassoline or drinking alcohol. "I can't do anything right except drink" (46), Rusty tells Michael, a proud Indian from the future who, in his turn, declares with unshakeable conviction:

This particular period of time was known in Aboriginal history as the "Alcoholic Era." From the mid 1800s till the late 1900s, Native people suffered due to an addiction to this liquid. Of course, the problem didn't start and stop at those times. It slowly led up to it then tapered off, much the same way the Black Plague did in medieval Europe. (Taylor 41)

No surprise suicide attempts, shooting and car accidents, sexual abuse, spousal abuse, delinquency and vandalism run rampant among young people with nothing to do, in both fact and fiction. Life off the reserve fares no better. Young native prostitutes hanging around seedy bars and old drunkards fallen on the streets are a common sight in the cities of Moses and Kenny.

Education is cited, by both Native and non-Native people alike, as the key to a better life for Indians. "In...knowledge, salvation can be found. Salvation not only of the soul, but of the mind and spirit" (86), the Spirit of all Knowledge informs Cadieux in *Education is Our Right*, a piece conceived, written and produced less than a year after one of the many federal attempts to frustrate Native progress: the decision taken in 1989 by the then Indian Affairs minister Pierre Cadieux²⁰ to place a cap on the department's post-secondary education budget, limiting spending to \$130 million annually. The move was based on the minimal results obtained in Native education during the 25 years since the release of the White Paper, in spite of the government's investment of \$7.6 billion. Cadieux's decision to restrict the number of students attending university and college meant that, first, the band councils would face the task of determining which students would receive school funding and, second, that thousands of Indians living in urban centres would have to apply for provincial loans, with slight chances of getting them. The Indian community was furious because they considered the cap to be a violation of their treaty rights. The official view was somewhat different: "It's true that education is guaranteed in most treaties, but you have to understand that when these treaties were signed, things were different. Education then meant on-reserve education, not post-secondary" (Taylor 83).

Federal arguments notwithstanding, Indian protestors, starting in early March, began occupying the department offices across the country. The cap still remains in place today, academic performances continue to be poor and

the prospects are bleaker still for the next three years. The liberal government is planning massive cuts in transfer funds to the provinces; these shortages are expected to double or triple the cost of post-secondary tuition. It is unlikely that the same federal government would approve substantial increases in funding for the Indian post-secondary education program to match the sudden rise in tuition costs. The message Indian leaders received regarding policy change from the Conservative government in 1989 is the same as that delivered by the Liberal government in 1995: the provinces, and Indians themselves, will have to make up the shortfall. (139-140)

That much had already been intuited by Enenezer Cadieux, when in the role of teacher at a futuristic university he apprised the matter thus:

CADIEUX (as TEACHER): You in the third row, what does COPSSE stand for? Wake up. I look out at your shining little white faces and I tremble for the future. COPSSE. C.O.P.S.S.E. is an acronym meaning the Cap On Post-Secondary School Education. Why? you ask. Why would the government decide to limit the amount of money available for Native students to pursue a higher level of education? Was it because it was becoming too expensive to finance the growing number of students? Was it because the then Minister of Indian Affairs was a certifiable crackpot? Or was it really a political move aimed at restricting the call for Native self-government? Think about it. We know the Native people fought COPSSE tooth and nail. Marches, hunger strikes, plays were written about it. Several years later Cadieux was almost assassinated by Cree terrorists. Lucky for him his policy made it impossible for them to properly put their bomb together. Couldn't read the instructions. At any rate, COPSSE was passed. Native enrollment in post-secondary schools went down. (132)

Problems between the Canadian federal government and Indian education are no news. At the turn of the 20th century, Ottawa signed an agreement with church missionaries operating schools on some reserves: in exchange for boarding an even larger body of Native students, Ottawa agreed to finance the construction and operation of these schools. The result was residential schooling, more social problems and cultural genocide:

CADIEUX: These residential schools, were they as bad as everyone says?
 PAST: Children kidnapped, taken to religious schools. Beaten, sexually abused, all approved and encouraged by government. This is a way of education? (97)

Obviously not. However, when in the 1960s, at the insistence of the Indian community, Ottawa began phasing out the residential schools, child welfare agencies stepped in. Comeau and Santin explain that "during the period from the early 1960s to the early 1980s, many Indian communities across Canada lost an entire generation

of children, scooped up by professional workers who claimed to be working in the best interest of the child” (141). The parents of the children, who had themselves endured a litany of horrors at residential schools, felt lost about their new parenting roles and, consequently, became victims of alcohol and drugs and, in their turn, made their own children victims of physical abuse. Taylor’s *Someday* echoes some of the tragedies undergone by Indian children placed for adoption in non-Native families, but Janice is more than lucky in his fictional piece:

JANICE: ...why did you give me up?

BARB: You weren’t given up, you were taken.

Barb takes a deep breath.

BARB: Brace yourself, it’s really stupid. The stupidest thing I’ve ever heard. Times were hard around here, little or no money to be made. So Dad got this idea to join the army, regular money, and they take care of you. Sounded like a good idea.

JANICE: He was a soldier?

BARB: Uh huh. And there were rumours that Indians lost their status when they got discharged, so my dad, our dad, never told them he was an Indian when he joined. He sent money home so Mom and you could eat. But the Indian agent became suspicious of a single mother living on the reserve and not on welfare. He called the Children’s Aid and they sent an investigator who didn’t find the home life...

ANNE: “suitable.” My home wasn’t suitable. What the heck do they know about what makes a home? I clothed you. I fed you. I loved you. Out here that was suitable. When that investigator woman stood there in my own kitchen not a foot from where you are sitting right now, when she stood there and said I’d been abandoned and I asked her what she was talking about anyways, and she said right to my face that I was a woman whose husband walked right out on her, I wanted to yell in her face...But I couldn’t. Frank made me promise on the Bible not to, no matter what. He said it might get us in trouble. We got in trouble anyway. They took my little Grace right out of my arms and I never saw her again after that terrible day, God help me. They wouldn’t even tell me where they took you. And poor Frank when he got back, and found out what happened, went drinking for four days. He’d never done that before. I almost lost it then but one of us had to be strong, so I was strong for the both of us. (72-73)

For education to benefit indigenous populations, Indians must regain control over it and become independent from Ottawa and the provinces in the realms of law and politics:

MICHAEL: Every culture must progress. You’d be amazed and pleased to see what we’ve achieved...We are in control of our destiny.

KEESIC: But weren’t we always?

MICHAEL: Not until we achieved self-government in the 2020s.

KEESIC: Self-government? When did we lose it?

MICHAEL: In the late 1700s and early 1800s I believe.

KEESIC: What happened to us?

MICHAEL: We signed treaties with the white government and were put on reserves of land and left there to die. (67)

4.2. NATIVE HUMOUR

If, as Albert Camus writes in a 1936 entry in his *Notebooks*, “(a) certain persistence of despair finally gives birth to joy” (59), it follows that Native writers be particularly prone to tell their horror stories with humour. Humour thus helps endure the sufferings of the present as positive signs of new life emerging, and serves two main purposes: educating by correcting certain anti-social behaviour, and entertaining, allowing us to release our psychic violence. Avner Ziv in his book *Personality and Sense of Humour* has still another purpose in mind. According to him, humour involves not only the ability to derive pleasure out of potentially painful situations, but it also involves a sense of fellowship with other human beings (32)²¹. If Native playwrights aim at joining a mixed-race audience in fellowship, complicity and membership (I believe this to be one of their main goals), humour stumili must not be addressed to a knowledgeable local audience and, certainly, they are not in the plays under analysis.

Humour as a socially integrating force does not rule out the possibility of using it as a catalyst for splitting the self into subject and object. In his book *Satire, parodie, calembour: Esquisse d'une théorie des modes dévalués*, Lionel Duisit asserts that humour may also act as a catalyst in bringing the spectator to a new kind of self-awareness. According to him in the functioning of humour there is a certain doubling of the self, in which the subject coincides with the object of laughter, or is confused with it; he explains that the subject can be in turn he who sees and he who is seen. To look at oneself objectively and to laugh at what one sees is a necessary step towards social integration (75-80).

The spectator, both Native and non-Native, thus becomes detached from himself/herself and is capable of looking at him/herself objectively. It could be argued that Duisit's theory of the division of the self works for Native audiences—I already referred to ghettoization and the fact that most characters on the stage are Native—but that it does not necessarily apply to a non-Native viewer. I believe, however, that the non-Native spectator experiences the same doubling of the self when, encouraged by techniques of approach, s/he perceives the other as self.

Be that as it may, the Indian capacity for humour is recognized as a blessing by Hanay Geoiagamah, Kiowa playwright, “I see it as one of the fundamental miracles of our lives. It's a miraculous thing that's pulled us through so much” (79). Miraculous it is, for humour, like magic, allows spectators to open a fracture in the real.

4.3. GHOSTS NEED A RESERVE TO HAUNT

Magic serves the cause of reifying the hero's inner conflicts, i.e., mirroring the confused state of characters in a particular social situation, and of gaining revelation and knowledge. It is magic what makes possible the encounter between the villain Cadieux and the three Spirits of Knowledge in *Education is Our Right*. The Federal Minister is guided on a tour along the trail of knowledge and across time “(to) understand why things are the way they are” (87). As in a morality play, the spirits are depicted in a realistic style. Cadieux asks the Spirit of Education Present about her place of work. Her manner is frivolous, her meaning grim:

CADIEUX: You've got an office?

PRESENT: Yeah, we start work at 9 and work till infinite. Education Past is right down the hall from me. Boy, he really doesn't like you, you know. He told

me the other day, 'Me like drop kick skinny white man.' *She laughs lightly*. All right, to business. I suppose I got to show you around a bit" (107)

And show him around, on and through different time-scapes Taylor does. By making time elude established norms and share the compressed vision of place, the dramatist interrogates conventional concepts of temporality and narrativity. The overall result is a panoramic reframing of history that balances the destruction in the past with the possibility of survival in the future. The implication is that a movement back is necessary for a movement of advance.

The Spirit of Education Past, impersonated by a tall and traditionally dressed Indian, transmits Cadieux to the beginning "back when Elders taught and children learned knowledge, family and community responsibility" (93). The past is invested with immediacy, making possible our synchronic apprehension of historical time. The Spirit of Education Present, performed by a young woman in a contemporary powwow dancing outfit, with an angry, impatient attitude, takes Cadieux on his second astral projection and presents him with painful images. The Spirit of Education Future is presented by a security guard with a clipboard who keeps changing characters every few minutes. His example not only illustrates the constructedness of character but also the possibilities the future can hold. Cadieux, however, does not gain revelation, his mind is brick wall, and the Indian community eventually loses in its struggle with Ottawa. But the blackest future imagined is, however, pre-figured by Michael, a 16-year Odawa from 2095 "dressed in unidentifiable futuristic garb" at Dreamer's Rock:

We've lost our culture. It really isn't there. It's all been explained away and forgotten or just walked away from. Even our cheekbones are going. The poverty that once plagued us is gone, but at what cost? The language only exists on digital discs, the sweatlodge is gone, and Dreamer's Rock is a tourist attraction (53)

In the play three boys meet across time on a sacred enclosure. Michael discusses on the purpose of dream quests, the meaning of traditional storytelling, traditional migratory patterns, environmental pollution and self-government as the great desideratum of the colonized nations, with Rusty, a 16-year-old Odawa/Ojibway from the late 1990s, and Keesic, a 16-winter-old Odawa from approximately the 1590s. Problems of language prevent communication between the English-speaking Rusty and the Indian-speaking Keesic, and Taylor bridges the linguistic schism through magic, which seems to spark out of the physical environment: "Rusty reaches up to touch Keesic's sleeve, but the moment contact is made, the magic happens" (16). Keesic shifts into English and "not believing or understanding the new language he is speaking, grabs his throat and struggles to talk his own language, but he has forgotten it" (17).

A surrealistic atmosphere of myth and magic also permeates *Coyote City*. In the play, Johnny and Lena act out an old story of Coyote, when the latter, Orpheus-like, seeks his wife in the Land of the Dead. Coyote fails to bring her back, though this time he is not killed by the band of bacchantes. The spirits of Johnny and Thomas come from the land of the dead in the play, the presence of ghosts surrounding John in *October Stranger*, who flow into the stage dribbling disconnected fragments of memory by free association; and the dreaming events in *Teach Me the Ways*, infuse the ordinary with a

sense of mystery in a magic realist or surrealist way. Dramatists thus create an alternative world to demystify reified structures, correct official views of reality, and spur the audience into righting the wrongs this reality depends upon. As Fatima Dike puts it, “we don’t want to tell ‘bedtime’ stories to put people to sleep; we want to scare the shit out of them and wake them up” (in Gilbert & Tompkins 137)

Difficult is to determine whether this magic becomes daily reality, and hence magic realism in the sense of Carpentier’s *lo real maravilloso*: indigenous magic; or, on the contrary, magic realism is, as Theo L. D’haen writes, “a (literary) ruse to invade and take over dominant discourse(s)” (195). Magic as ontological reality, and fiction as simply a literal translation of that reality lack credibility, in the face of the invasion of technology reducing the mythic charge of civilizations to practically nothing, the positive contamination of cultures, and the fact that artists living in non-Indian communities inside the cities are trained in Eurocentric institutions and there exposed to academic, postmodern and experimental influences. They also speak English, a language that determines a certain structure of perception.²² In addition, and according to Gerald Graff, their purpose is only attainable when we are able to distinguish between the mythical and the non-mythical, the real and the unreal (27). “The person who confuses the two sets of categories is not eccentric, he is insane” (Eric Bentley 223).

Nevertheless, I believe it wiser to accept that there are different cognitive paradigms and, therefore, different tacit assumptions of plausibility. Be magic inherent in experience or be it produced as a function of human interpretation, it tempers our existential anguish at an un-co-optable world, serves as therapy and psychic shelter from living and, in addition, it provides confidence in the possibility of transformation.

CONCLUSION

Native playwrights are cultural nationalists with an effectively political vision. They are committed to the task of strengthening the unity of the nation and preserving community values. Disseminating them and educating cross-culturally is also part of their project. To effect their purposes they downplay the importance of location, efface tribal conflicts and disparities and highlight universal values, but maintain historical and temporal specificity. In this way they, on the one hand, alienate the Native viewer, i.e. prevent him/her from identifying directly with the figures on the stage, so that s/he perceive the excessively familiar world with a more penetrating lucidity, and, on the other, appeal to white audiences by making them insiders to the social and cognitive experiences observed on the stage. Native drama remains firmly on the social level, but in order to alleviate the pain of a blighted reality, dramatists resort to humour and magic for comfort.

Notes

1. This opinion was expressed during his lecture at the I International Summer Seminar in Canadian Studies, held in Ottawa on August 25-29, 1997.

2. See Introduction to *The Land Called Morning*, vii-viii.
3. The theatre anthropologist Victor Turner argues that ritual forms the basis of all theatre activity, as well as other sorts of worldly action and interaction. Ossie Enekwe finds that "ritual can easily be transformed into theatre and vice versa—in a number of ways. A ritual becomes entertainment once it is outside its original context or when the belief that sustains it has lost its potency." See Gilbert & Tompkins, pages 55 and 59 for references.
4. I am indebted to Honor Ford-Smith for the use of this term. She writes: "I use the term cultural worker to evoke the notion that the cultural worker wants to break with some of the forces that constrain the life of the artist in the west and north. S/he wants to break out of that particular notion of sensitive passivity, intelligent and inquiring powerlessness. The task of the cultural worker is an attempt to re-create life so that the realms of thought, feeling and action are no longer kept separate and distinct" (1989-1990: 27).
5. Concerning this issue see Gilbert & Tompkins, 156.
6. I take genre definitions more as abstract concepts than as confinements. "Categories," writes Eric Bentley, quoting Bernard Berenson, "are only a compromise with chaos" (1991: 310), and as such I understand them here.
7. *Toronto at Dreamer's Rock* was produced in 1989 by the De-Ba-Jeh-Mu-Jog Theatre Group, Wikwemikong Unceded Reserve, Manitoulin Island, under the direction of Larry Lewis. *Education is Our Right* was also produced by the De-Ba-Jeh-Mu-Jig Theatre Group also under the direction of L. Lewis and was first performed in East Main, Quebec, in 1990, "less than a year after Pierre Cadieux, then the Federal Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs, announced a cap on post-secondary education for Native students. Needless to say," Drew Taylor comments in his production notes, "this announcement did not go over well in Native communities, and there is still much discussion over this controversial policy" (1990: 78). *The Bootlegger Blues* was first performed on the Wikwemikong Reserve in 1990. *Someday* premiered on 4 November 1991 at the same reserve.
8. The play is designed as theatre-in-the round.
9. The idea is not new. Dr. Johnson had already spelled the point out in the 18th century, when he said that nothing could please many and please more than representations of a general nature (in Bentley, 43). Krupat's opinion is shared in by other ethnic or "minority" playwrights, like, Ricardo Khan (1989-1990: 42), Aishah Rahman (1989-1990: 23) and David Henry Hwang (1989-1990: 17); and even by Native political leaders. Such is the case of Louis Stevenson, Indian leader from Manitoba, who in 1987 invited the South African Ambassador, Glenn Babb, to visit the Peguis reserve, north of Winnipeg. "His goal," Pauline Comeau and Aldo Santin write, "was to clearly link Canada's treatment of its aboriginal people with the apartheid system in South Africa. If the level of media attention surrounding the event was any indication, the ploy worked." (1995: 49)
10. Language is not the key site of struggle for the dramatists under analysis. Indigenous words are interposed throughout some of the texts, but communication is never blocked for white viewers because the gap that might be established is always bridged through translation and contextualization.
11. Dudoward also interpolates music in her piece, where three Indian youngsters insist on rehearsing "Teach Me the Ways of the Sacred Circle" in its instrumental version for the high-school graduation dance.
12. Taylor advises: "Since many of the numerous characters in the play are only on stage for a few moments, it's suggested that each actor carry a variety of roles" (1990: 79). A similar device is also used by Daniel David Moses in *Almighty Voice and His Wife* (1991).
13. In this respect the most illustrative example is *Coyote City*, a play in which the characters replay their mythical counterparts.
14. Since most of the protagonists are male I will be favouring the masculine pronoun from here onwards.
15. On the possibility of classing Native American literatures among the postcolonial literatures of the world, see Krupat, 30-31.

16. Like Ibsen's dramaturgy, Native drama presupposes that the key to social progress is the family. The idea has a more than logical foundation in the case of Native families, given their extension. A vignette in *Someday* is illustrative in this respect. Anne introduces Janice to her long lost relatives through photographs:
Anne puts the albums down on the table with a thump.
 ANNE: Altogether you have 14 aunts and uncles, and too many cousins to count.
 JANICE: And they're all in there?
 BARB: Are you kidding? We have boxes under every bed and in every closet. Decades of family life and people that nobody ever looks at.
Anne opens up one of the multitude of books and starts leafing through it" (1993: 61-62)
17. Like in pure farce, Rusty seems to have no responsibility for his own fate, presented as a force outside him.
18. Media favourable to stereotyping and nostalgic mythologizing also had a role to play in the building of negative self-images. References to this issue abound in the plays under analysis.
19. Some of the characters even win a lottery, like Anne and Barb in *Someday*.
20. Referred to in the play as "a poor misguided bureaucrat, who seriously thinks he's doing the right thing" (121).
21. Henri Bergson in 1911 also affirmed that those who laugh assert their membership in society and their complicity with other laughers, real or imaginary. See his essay *Laughter*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: Macmillan, 1911).
22. "Our way of seeing," writes Coral Ann Howels, "is structured by the forms in which our language enables us to 'see'". See her "Re-visions of Prairie Indian History in Rudy Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear* and *My Lovely Enemy*." *Revisions of Canadian Literature*. Ed. Shirley Chew (Leeds: University of Leeds, Institute of Bibliography and Textual Criticism, 1984: 61). Taylor also deals with language as a tool to sustain a certain reality in *Toronto at Dreamer's Rock*:
 RUSTY: ...English is spoken everywhere and we were sort of dragged along with it.
 KEESIC: But our language is formed by our thoughts. Our thinking forms our words. I do not like this language, English. There is no beauty in it. In our language, when we talk about the earth or the forest, you can smell the leaves around you, feel the grass beneath your feet. Until our language is spoken again and rituals and ceremonies followed, then there are no more Oddawa (1990: 66).

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