

an interview with
DREW HAYDEN TAYLOR

Conducted by Birgit Däwes

The influential Canadian Native theater group Native Earth Performing Arts was founded in Toronto in 1982. Its 1986 production of Cree playwright Tomson Highway's *The Rez Sisters*—which officially represented Canada at the Edinburgh International Festival in 1988—earned it mainstream recognition. Ever since, Native theater has been increasingly popular and successful. In Drew Hayden Taylor's words, "If in 1986 there was one working Native playwright in all of Canada, today at least three dozen playwrights of aboriginal descent are being produced and published. If that rate of increase continues, by the year 2020 it is conceivable that everybody in Canada will be a Native playwright."

Drew Hayden Taylor, born in 1962 on the Curve Lake Reserve, Ontario, to an Ojibway mother and a European Canadian, "white" father, has been celebrated as the "Neil Simon of Native theater" and is certainly one of Canada's leading Native playwrights. His career did not begin with theater, however. After graduating from Seneca College with a diploma in radio and television broadcasting, in what he calls the "journalism phase" of his life, Taylor worked as Native affairs reporter for CBC Radio and wrote for *MacLeans*, *Southam News*, and *This Magazine*, among others. He has written, directed, or worked on seventeen film and video documentaries, including *Redskins*, *Tricksters*, and *Puppy Stew*, a documentary on Native comedians and various forms of Native humor in Canada. In the field of television, shows such as the *Spirit Bay* series, *Danger Bay*, and *Liberty Street* have benefited from his advice

as a consultant. Other TV shows have been enriched by his talent as a scriptwriter, among them well-known and popular examples such as *The Beachcombers*, *Street Legal*, *North of Sixty*, *Prairie Berry Pie*, and *Tales from the Longhouse*. In addition, his writing credits include *The Strange Case of Bunny Weequod*, a TV mystery-drama in Ojibway, which was aired on CBC in 1999.

Since he began his theater career in 1988 as playwright in residence for Native Earth Performing Arts, Drew Hayden Taylor has witnessed almost sixty professional productions of his plays on an international scale, from his first play, *Toronto at Dreamer's Rock*, which was produced in 1989 by the De-Ba-Jeh-Mu-Jig Theatre Group on the Sheshegwaning Reserve on Manitoulin Island, Ontario, to his most recent comedy, *The Buz'Gem Blues*, first produced in 2001. In 1992, Taylor won the Chalmers Canadian Play Award for *Toronto at Dreamer's Rock*, followed the same year by the Canadian Authors' Association Literary Award for Best Drama for his comedy *The Bootlegger Blues*, the Native Playwrights Award in 1996 for *The Baby Blues*, the Dora Mavor Moore Award, also in 1996, for *Only Drunks and Children Tell the Truth*, and finally the James Buller Award for Playwright of the Year in 1997.

Taylor has experimented with various forms and styles in his plays. *Toronto at Dreamer's Rock* (published by Fifth House in 1990) is a play for young audiences which brings together three sixteen-year-old boys who share the same cultural heritage of Odawa and Ojibway but who come from different points in time. Bridging a temporal frame from the 1590s to 2095, they discuss their tribes and traditions, personal problems, and places in society, as well as larger cultural issues of survival, identity, and colonization. After a series of power struggles and outbreaks of violence, each returns to his time, enriched by a dialogue that has led to a deeper understanding of difference. Here, as in *AlterNatives* (first performed at the Bluewater Summer Playhouse in Kincardine, Ontario, on July 21, 1999, and published by Talonbooks in 2000), Taylor questions "traditional" cultural borderlines and essential approaches to identity by deconstructing elements of ontological substance and appropriation. In *AlterNatives*, six characters from different ethnic and social backgrounds try to negotiate their positions in witty dialogue and violent fights at a dinner party. Reminiscent of Edward

Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Taylor's play provides an exorcism of stereotypical labels and attitudes for the sake of honesty and human understanding across cultural differences.

Two further plays—*Someday* (first produced by the De-Ba-Jeh-Mu-Jig Theatre Group in 1991 and published by Fifth House in 1995) and its sequel *Only Drunks and Children Tell the Truth* (first produced in 1996 by Native Earth Performing Arts, published by Talonbooks in 1998, and anthologized in *Seventh Generation: An Anthology of Native American Plays* in 1999)—also have a strong political agenda: they deal with the historical case and consequences of the time when Native children were forcibly taken away from their families by the Canadian government to be set up for adoption. Despite their political themes, all these plays contain strong elements of humor, providing comic relief for the issues of colonization and resistance but also adding touches of irony and sarcasm to apparently serious, “politically correct” discussions.

This humorous element is obviously placed in the foreground in Taylor's comedies. Of his ongoing *Blues Quartet*, three parts have been brought to the stage: *The Bootlegger Blues* (which premiered on the Wikwemikong Unceded Reserve in August 1990 and was published by Fifth House in 1991), *The Baby Blues* (first produced at the Arbour Theatre in Peterborough, Ontario, on February 21, 1995 and published by Talonbooks in 1999), and most recently *The Buz'Gem Blues* (first produced in Port Dover, Ontario, on July 4, 2001 and published by Talonbooks in 2002). In plots containing a dedicated mother who illegally sells alcohol to raise funds for the church, an involuntary and unaware father who is romantically interested in his daughter, and a young woman, one-sixty-fourth Native, who tries to teach reserve residents the New Age version of indigenous traditions, Taylor creates highly likeable characters and involves them in a-laugh-a-minute dialogues to cast a less dramatic light on intercultural clichés and intracultural difficulties such as family life and love relationships.

In line with *Toronto at Dreamer's Rock*, two more of Taylor's plays are primarily addressed to young audiences: *The Boy in the Tree House* (premiered in May 2000 in Winnipeg, published by Talonbooks in 2000) and *Girl Who Loved Her Horses* (first performed in 1995 by Theatre Direct Canada and published in *The Drama Re-*

view 41.3 [1997]). The former is an original piece that addresses a young boy's vision quest to come to terms with his mother's death, while the latter, like *Someday*, Taylor developed from one of his short stories. Both story and play have at their center the fate of a lonely young girl who, for lack of an endurable familial reality, discovers the power of imagination in creating a fictitious horse character that may provide the love and protection denied to her in real life.

To round off the variety of genres, Taylor has also written an agitprop piece entitled *Education Is Our Right* (written for his mentor and director Larry Lewis in 1990, produced by De-Ba-Jeh-Mu-Jig, and published that year in the same Fifth House volume as *Toronto at Dreamer's Rock*), which borrows its structure from Charles Dickens's *Christmas Carol* and deals critically with the cap that was put on postsecondary education for Native students by the Canadian government in the 1980s. In yet another contribution to the dramatic arts, Taylor proudly served as artistic director for Native Earth Performing Arts in Toronto from 1994 to 1997 and is presently a member of the Factory Theatre Playwrights Lab of Toronto.

In addition to his ten published plays, Drew Hayden Taylor has three volumes of essays in print: *Funny, You Don't Look Like One: Observations of a Blue-Eyed Ojibway* (1998), *Further Adventures of a Blue-Eyed Ojibway: Funny You Don't Look Like One Two* (1999), and *Funny, You Don't Look Like One Two Three: Furious Adventures of a Blue-Eyed Ojibway* (2002). The satirical commentary on indigenous life and political issues in these collections originally appeared in magazines and newspapers such as *The Globe and Mail*, *Now Magazine*, *This Magazine*, *Aboriginal Voices*, and *The Toronto Star* and provides ironic and humorous points of view on a universal spectrum of topics, ranging from "the erotic Indian" via political correctness, low-fat powwows, and vegetarianism to birthdays, elections, and simply everyday life.

In a collection of twelve short stories entitled *Fearless Warriors* (1998), Taylor explores and demystifies contemporary Native life in Canada. His narrator and protagonist, Andrew, lives in the city but frequently returns to his Ojibway home, the Otter Lake Reserve near Peterborough, Ontario, where the short-story cycle takes

place. From the angle of a more or less distanced observer in his twenties, Andrew paints a multifaceted picture of his surroundings, with frequent flashbacks and childhood memories, revolving around the characters of Andrew's sister Angela, his girlfriend Barb, and his best friend William and their relationships to other reserve residents. In a convincing oral style, Andrew establishes himself as a personal storyteller who addresses and involves the reader, allowing no escape from his bittersweet mosaic of people who die too young in car accidents or from drug overdoses, children who lose their parents or vice versa, old alcoholics with regrets, a "man who does not exist," and an elder who builds an ark because he believes that Natives are the chosen people of God. When Andrew says in "Ice Screams" that "contrary to popular belief, not a lot of exciting things happen on reserves," his own tales of the wave of forced adoption, a lesbian relationship in a homophobic community, or an "Ojibway stand-off" in a bar prove the exact opposite. In their world of Kraft dinners, domestic violence, strawberry daiquiries, racism, James Bond, alcoholism, and Oliver Stone movies, the characters' tools of survival are friendship, love and care, and eventually also storytelling. Taylor's short stories reveal a strong and powerful narrative voice in their depiction of contemporary Native life on a reservation.

Taylor's lifelong dedication to Native issues also went into an anthology entitled *Voices: Being Native in Canada*, for which he served as co-editor in 1992, and continues in the regular columns that he contributes to three newspapers: *Wind Speaker*, *The Regina Prairie Dog*, and *The Peterborough Examiner*. As a contemporary storyteller, Drew Hayden Taylor strongly enriches the literary tradition of Canada, especially on the stage, with plays that highlight the cultural, social, and political issues of the indigenous people of North America and, at the same time, reach out beyond cultural borderlines by addressing basic human values. His major contribution to the literary and larger cultural scene is that of demystifying contemporary Native life and encouraging a dialogue that transcends ethnic borderlines and focuses on intercultural understanding and respect.

The following interview was conducted on May 12, 2002, at the Ratskeller in Würzburg, Germany, in the context of a conference,

"Global Challenges and Regional Responses in Contemporary Drama in English," at the University of Würzburg, at which Drew Hayden Taylor presented a keynote lecture, "Native Theatre in Canada," as well as an enthusiastically received reading from his plays. In this excerpt, the playwright talks about indigenous theater in Canada; historical and political issues such as forced adoption, stereotypes, and appropriation; his experience with Germany; his creative process and experience as a writer; his position on the element of the trickster in Native literature; and his current and future projects.

Q. Why is Native theater so much more successful in Canada than in the United States?

A. It has to do with the representation. I think the Native voice is much more prevalent in Canadian society: we have very strong political representation, and we have very strong cultural and artistic representation in the larger Canadian mosaic. And Native people are the constant and predominant nonwhite presence available in Canada, whereas in the States, it's the complete opposite. There are Native people there, but they are fragmented; they don't have any unified voice, and there are other cultures that are more represented in the media than Native people. Take the example of African Americans and Native people and their representation in the dominant media in Canada and in the United States. If you look at Canada, there have been—to the best of my knowledge—no television series that deal specifically with the black population, but there have been at least three dealing with the Native situation, as well as a very popular CBC radio show called *Dead Dog Cafe* [created by Thomas King, Floyd Favel Starr, and Edna Rain]. The aboriginal voice in the past fifteen years has been amazingly strong and vital in the theatrical community.

Q. But why theater? Isn't that an unusual medium to have such an enormous success in our times?

A. I have a theory of why Native theater is so popular in general, and why it's popular in Canada. In the mid-eighties, it occurred to people that theater is the next logical progression in traditional

storytelling—the ability to take the audience on a journey using your voice, your body, and the spoken word, and also the fact that unlike other media you don't need secondary knowledge.

Q. The annual festival of the Native Earth Performing Arts Theatre Group—

A. Weesageechak Begins to Dance

Q. —was first organized in the late eighties and seems to have been highly influential in the rise and success of Native theater in Canada. What is your own experience with that festival, and how do you evaluate its position in the theater scene today?

A. Well, I was only part of the first or the second festival, then missed a few. It used to be the only venue for the development of Native theater in Canada during the late eighties and early nineties, but as I've often said, Native theater has become so popular and caught on so much in Canada that almost every Native theater company within every two to three years produces an existing Native play or develops one. You can get a Native play produced and workshopped almost everywhere in Canada today. So while Weesageechak used to be the only game in town, now it's one of a lot of different games.

Q. In your own theatrical work, are there any playwrights, directors, or theater icons who have influenced you?

A. Most obviously my mentor Larry Lewis, who used to be the Artistic Director of De-Ba-Jeh-Mu-Jig Theatre Group on Manitoulin Island, Ontario. He has degrees in literature and theater and is classically trained. Although he is non-Native, he was, in my opinion, largely responsible for igniting the fire that became contemporary Native theater. He dramaturged and directed all of Tomson Highway's work, as well as my first six plays. During my tenure, or what I refer to as my "mentorship," with De-Ba-Jeh-Mu-Jig from 1989 to 1991, I lived on Manitoulin Island, in Wikwemikong, with him, writing six plays for him in two years, and all were produced. I would not be who I am or where I am or what I am without Larry

breathing down my neck those two years. And, to a certain extent, Tomson Highway. But our styles are so different, and while Tomson is obviously the *grand fromage*, the big guy, and was instrumental in me starting my career, I can't really say he influenced my writing, because we have just two different styles. In looking at non-Native writers, I found I really liked Eugene O'Neill, and to a certain extent George Bernard Shaw.

Q. Do your plays have a political agenda?

A. I would say, Yes, they do, because being born Native in Canada is a political statement in itself. Anything to do with an oppressed people and telling their story is bound to have some level of politics. I write different types of stories. In my comedies, I make jokes about what happened at Oka and about race relations, cultural relations, political situations, drug and alcohol abuse, cultural loss, and a number of different things, and that is a political statement. So even though I often refer to my comedies as having no socially redeeming qualities whatsoever, that's an inaccurate assessment. And then I do what I call my "dramas," which are usually plays with a very strong social or political core to them, be it about Native adoption or cultural identity, or something like *Alter-Natives*, which has a whole grab bag of issues involved in it. Most of my plays intentionally or unintentionally do have a strong political message somewhere within the text.

Q. You mentioned Oka. What were the political stakes involved there, and how do you evaluate the historical relevance of that event?

A. Oka occurred in 1990, as an escalation of 270 years of frustration. Oka is the small white town next to a Mohawk community called Kanehsatake, which was a Native community that was looked after by a group of monks, the Oka monastery. Over the years, the monks would sell parcels of the reserve land to make money, and so the reserve of Oka looked much like a checkerboard with parcels missing here and there. The Mohawk community had been trying for 270 years to get a lot of this land back, and in the process had various problematic relations with the local municipal-

ity of Oka, the provincial government of Quebec, and the federal government. Oka had a nine-hole golf course right next to some Native land called The Pines, a traditional burial ground. The town of Oka decided in 1990 that they wanted to change the nine-hole golf course into an eighteen-hole golf course, and they were going to go in and bulldoze The Pines. In protest, the Mohawks occupied that land, set up tents, and lived there, as a protest saying, "This is our land." So then, with the Indians there, the SQ [Sureté de Quebec, the provincial Quebec police] was sent in, and one policeman was killed by gunfire in a shoot-out. Then a group of armed Mohawks took possession of The Pines, formed a barricade, and refused to leave. Over seventeen days, I think, a group of other Natives came to join them in this protest of sovereign land. Then the SQ backed off and the Canadian government sent in the army. Eventually, it became a standoff between the Canadian army and a group of Mohawk warriors. So Oka is currently taking a place in aboriginal mythology as a stand against suppression and cultural absorption.

Q. How did it end? What were the results?

A. As there was a lot of validity in the Mohawks' protest against the way the land deal was brokered over the years, the federal government, in order to save face and make everybody happy, said, "We will buy the land known as The Pines from the municipality and give it back to the Mohawks if you surrender." So all the Mohawks put down their guns, because nobody wanted a bloodbath or a gunfight; it was just a matter of this traditional burial ground. They were arrested, but only two or three of them went to trial, and the government bought the land as promised. I don't know where exactly it stands now, twelve years later, but things have calmed down substantially.

Q. That sounds reminiscent of what happened in the United States on the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota in 1973, when there was a seventy-one-day siege and the FBI fought alongside the reservation's paramilitary police force [the Guardians of the

Oglala Nation] against protesting members of AIM [American Indian Movement, an activist political group founded in 1968].

A. Yes, very similar. But Pine Ridge was different from Oka in that it was Indian against Indian: AIM was an urban-based organization, created in the cities by displaced Native people trying to find their tradition. They were called in by a lot of people in Pine Ridge to help them fight a corrupt tribal government, so they would go there to help protect these traditional people against another group of Native people, who were raised in boarding schools, who had been taught to hate their culture and their language. It was Indian against Indian, but different factions—urban against rural, traditional against assimilated.

Q. Those political questions seem to circle around issues of authenticity and appropriation, and that is usually the case with literary discussions as well. There are voices in Native theater (and literature in general) claiming that Native themes should only be put on stage by Natives. What is your position on that?

A. That is a question that has been debated in the Native community for two decades now, and my stance is that I have no problem with non-Native writers writing Native characters—I have too many unemployed Native actor friends who could use the work. And I have written white characters in my plays. The whole issue of appropriation is about where you draw the line: is it appropriation if I write female characters, Mohawk characters? What I may have a problem with is non-Native writers assuming a Native point of view for a story or writing a Native story. It's OK to have a Native character, a Mexican character, a German character, whatever you want, because we have these people coming into our everyday lives, having a say in our lives and contributing to them, but at no point does that person start telling our story.

Q. In "Reasons Why You Should Be Nice to Native People" you take up these issues and mock non-Native tendencies to "try to 'out-Indian' Native people," or to "chase Native people around because they think there's a spiritual connection there somewhere."

Are these examples exaggerated, or is that something you actually encounter? And has anything changed since you wrote the article?

A. The interesting thing is this modern recognition it receives in the Native communities. When *The Baby Blues* was produced in Tulsa, Oklahoma [by the Tulsa Indian Actors Theater, with its premiere on May 25, 2000], the director, Merlaine Angwall, was white, from Wisconsin, and she really liked the Summer character [the naive non-Native woman who comes to a reserve in order to find spiritual guidance and to celebrate her own, peculiar notions of Native culture]. Merlaine said, "You know, it's a really fun character to plan; it's just a pity that it's a little over the top and not realistic." And then all the Native actors in Tulsa told her, "Oh no, it's not over the top—it's very, very real." I invited the cast of the premiere production in Toronto up to my powwow, which was happening at the end of September, and the white actress who was going to play Summer came up with us. There was this tall, blonde woman with blue eyes wearing a buckskin skirt and moccasins, dancing every intertribal and powwow dance, glowing with aboriginal pride. So it's still existent. I just reached a point in my life where I decided to look at it with more humor than annoyance.

Q. What's your experience in Germany concerning this issue?

A. I haven't really found the "new-ager, Summer influence" here, though people tell me that you guys have clubs and powwows and festivals that deal with it, but I haven't seen it myself yet, so I can't really comment on that. But I have met so many people here who have a genuine interest in Native culture, which I'm more than happy to discuss.

Q. There is a lot of stereotyping here in Germany, too. Most Germans grow up with the Winnetou myth from Karl May's novels and with the whole nineteenth-century stereotype of the "noble savage." These notions have a high market value, and there is a cultlike affinity between Germans and what they conceive of as "Indians." The German critic Hartmut Lutz has written extensively about this, and he coined the term "Indianthusiasm" to describe the phenomenon. Of course, on the academic level, there is also a

more differentiated approach, and Native literature, for instance, is very popular among Germans. Have you had any personal experience with this German fascination with Native people?

A. Yes. I've been to three countries in Europe—I've been to Italy three times, to Belgium, and it's my fifth trip to Germany. Yet in all those countries—and even when I go to the States—I never get asked to go on a lecture tour. But whenever I'm in Germany for a conference, I have to do a tour of lectures and readings afterwards. I find it very flattering, very intriguing, very unusual. Why there is this fascination, I don't know—it's probably a combination of everything from Karl May to the fact that Germans used to be very tribal themselves, the famous Roman legions battling the Germanic tribes of the Rhine and all that. I just think it's nice to see the genuine interest, and as I said, it's so different from any of the other European countries I've been to, where they have a momentary interest in Native theater; here, I could probably tour giving lectures and readings for another week or two weeks easily.

Q. As with other stereotypes, you have frequently made fun of the image of the trickster. On the other hand, some of your characters do have tricksterlike traits. What is your position on trickster imagery in Native theater?

A. Daniel David Moses has coined the term "spot-the-trickster syndrome" for the way academics seem to believe that nothing can be Native unless it has trickster imagery in it. I tend to find it annoying, because when I used to run Native Earth Performing Arts I had to read all these scripts, and I would story-edit movies, and it got to the point where Native people started to believe that any story they wanted to write couldn't be told without some form of trickster imagery in it. It had just gotten ridiculous, so—other than a movie script I wrote and hope to turn into a book, called "Motorcycles and Sweetgrass"—I've tried to avoid trickster imagery completely, just because I think it's an overused cliché.

Q. In your preface to *Boy in the Treehouse*, you wrote that *Girl Who Loved Her Horses* is your favorite of all the plays you have written. Is that still the case?

A. Yes, but that's a tough question, because it's like saying "who's your favorite child?" if you have eight or nine children. You really can't say, because each one is something special to you. *Toronto at Dreamer's Rock* was my first play, and my most successful; *AlterNatives*, I think, is my most complicated play, so I'm proud of that; *Only Drunks and Children Tell the Truth* strikes on a really unique emotional level and has also been one of my most successful plays; but when I sit down and read them, *Girl Who Loved Her Horses* is the only play that makes me think, "Wow! I wrote that!" It strikes me on a completely different level, because it's the only play I've written that makes me feel like an artist.

Q. Please tell me something about how you write—about your creative process and how your ideas are turned into plays.

A. The creative process varies from project to project. In a case like *Girl Who Loved Her Horses*, the idea came from a story one of my best friends was telling me, a non-Native woman named Danielle, who was raised in an urban, white environment. Her mother would invite kids over to draw on her wall. And Danielle told me of this little girl who would show up, a white, shy little girl who would draw a horse week after week until one day she just stopped coming. Danielle said they always wondered about that, and the image stuck in my head. And then my creative process was like the way language functions in Ojibway, where you have the root word, and you add bits to it, and it gets bigger and bigger, until I actually had a story. It's easier when you start with a humorous situation. When I was doing *The Bootlegger Blues*, I remembered a story that happened on my reserve, and I ended up pumping it up and then I had a play. With *The Baby Blues*, I first developed a character and then created the worst possible type of environment I could for that character. *Someday* came from interesting origins, when I noticed that I knew a lot of Native adoptees. And then I found out about the scoop-up, when Native kids were taken away for adoption by the [Canadian] federal government, and I was absolutely amazed that nobody knew about it. And I thought, well, this might make an interesting story. So my work in process either takes a visual image or a specific idea and then adds on to it, develops it, gives it a beginning, a middle, and an end.

Q. And do you work on several projects at the same time?

A. Kind of. I may have two or three projects juggling, but when I sit down to write, I will write a draft all the way through, because I'm what's called a "momentum writer." I have to pick up speed as I'm writing, or I'll lose the thread of what I'm trying to say. But once I get it down, I can always come back to it later, so when I have one project in front of me, I tend to focus my entire attention on it.

Q. In another conversation, you have talked about the "ingredients" of the creative process and how they sometimes turn out differently in the reading or staging. How does this apply to your work?

A. I've come to the conclusion over the years that in terms of what people read into a play, text and subtext, a third is intentional, a third is unconscious—which means that I know I have to get this idea, this image, or this feeling across, but I'm not sure exactly why or how—and a third of it is just completely accidental, a complete fluke. I'm always puzzled and amused by English teachers and professors and students who read and analyze my works and the works of other writers and get all the sort of subtextual stuff that may or may not be there. I remember bumping into a woman who was doing a research paper on *Only Drunks and Children Tell the Truth*, and she was complimenting me on the use of the name Janice for the adoptee character. She said, "Well, I just think it's a great metaphor, using Janice in terms of the Roman two-faced god Janus." This is a great idea, and I would love to take credit for it, but I can't. That was just a complete fluke.

Q. You once said that when you write your plays, your characters actually do the work for you. How exactly does that work?

A. As a writer, I've worked on plays when neither the story nor the characters have been developed. Over the years I've found that the more finely tuned your characters are—the more three-dimensional they are—the easier it is to write a play, because if they are as real as the world around you, they will help you with your writ-

ing and even write a large percentage of your play for you. There have been many situations when I've been backed into a corner, trying to figure out where I'm going to go with a scene, and I don't know what to do. Then I just sit down and think about the character as a real person, with certain preferences and skills, and I try to imagine what he or she would do. And while I sit there, the character will come up with an idea, and I'll be saved. It always works, and it's so fulfilling when you know that your characters are on your side, that you don't have to push your characters, but sometimes they push you.

Q. That sounds like a moment of satisfaction—you know, a moment when, more than at any other time, we know exactly why we do what we do. Do you remember any other such moment during a production, or during the process of writing, when being a writer just felt particularly good?

A. Well, it could be when I got the check for \$10,000 for the Chalmers Canadian Play Award! [Laughter] But yes, every once in a while something really unusual throws me out of my normal complacency loop and shows me what can be done. After *Bootlegger Blues*, when *Someday* was staged, I saw people crying in the audience and realized that in addition to humor and making people laugh, I had the ability to make people cry. I felt a weird type of pride, knowing that this manipulation of emotion is possible.

Q. And how about in a negative sense—have you ever had a reaction from an audience that made you angry or that you didn't understand at all?

A. I didn't understand the bomb threat I got for *AlterNatives* in Vancouver. [In 1999, the Vancouver production of *AlterNatives* received a bomb threat for its alleged "racism against white people."] That was such a negative response, and I don't understand that. Also, a Native woman would come up to me and say, "Is this what you *really* think of Native people?" So I get responses like that, but everybody is entitled to an opinion, and you just have to accept that and move on.

Q. Speaking more generally about the reception of your plays, who, roughly, are your audiences? If you had to give percentages, are most of them Native?

A. No, I would say that 10 percent are Native, 90 percent are white.

Q. Ninety percent? That's a lot!

A. Well, I mean, to the best of my knowledge there is only one theater company located on a reserve, and that is De-Ba-Jeh-Mu-Jig on Manitoulin Island, which was founded by Shirley Cheechoo and others in 1984. Even with companies like Native Earth, I'd say the percentage is 30 percent Native, 70 percent white. With other companies that have produced my plays, like Carousel Theatre or Fire Hall Arts Center, both in Vancouver, the amount of Native theater-going is minimal; the audience is primarily non-Native.

Q. Interesting. Do you think these statistics say anything about the universality of your themes?

A. As I've always said about *Someday* and *Only Drunks and Children Tell the Truth*, which are about Native adoption, the specifics are very Native: Native characters in a Native community, dealing with something that happened specifically to the Native community; however, there's no uniquely Native way for a mother to love her child or to mourn her child being taken away by the state. That is a universality. And that's what I think allows a lot of these plays to be successful outside the Native community.

Q. What were the reactions to your first comedy, *The Bootlegger Blues*?

A. It was surprisingly positive, probably because nobody had ever seen a full-scale Native comedy. We were scared, because we didn't know if it would be funny—we didn't know if people would appreciate it, because up until that time, the vast majority of Native plays were dark, angry, and accusatory toward the white population. Here we were daring to do something funny, something that dealt with bootlegging in a humorous context, and we just did it.

I got the best review I think I ever got in my life from this elder who came to me after seeing the play in Ottawa: he shook my hand and said, "Your play made me homesick." Then I won the Canadian Authors' Association Literary Award for it, and it was published, and people really enjoyed it because it just sort of got rid of the doom and gloom about being Native.

Q. Have you ever written an experimental play, or considered working more radically with theater devices like lighting or structure or sound?

A. Yes, I've dabbled with it, with unfortunately limited success. I wrote a couple of drafts of a play called "Dead White Writer on the Floor," which is a Drew-Hayden-Taylor-meets-Pirandello sort of piece. It's a play about five Native stereotypes. The lights come up on a writer's office, and the writer is white and lying dead on the floor. It turns out that one of the stereotypes killed him, because they were all tired of being treated as stereotypes. And now they're free, and that's where I stuck. I've completed the first act, with Pocahontas, Tonto, a wise old elder—you know, all these different Native clichés—but I haven't been able to find a dramaturge or a theater company that's willing to help me develop that second act. I still think there's something out there; I just haven't mastered it yet. Also, right now I'm working on a one-man show called "Guilty with an Explanation," about being mixed-blood. So I dabble with experiments occasionally, but I'm primarily known for what is called "kitchen-sink drama," which is the straight, linear, "this-is-the-story" type of work.

Q. As a playwright, where would you see your position within the larger scene of Native arts, or your contribution to it?

A. As a Native playwright, I just want to tell some interesting stories with interesting characters that take the audience on a journey. As for my own contribution, I hope that I have provided a window of understanding between Native and non-Native cultures by demystifying Native life. For Native people, I have provided an opportunity to see themselves on stage. I ask a few ques-

tions, hopefully provide a few answers, and we have some fun along the way.

Q. If you were an art sponsor and had enormous financial possibilities, what would you do for Native theater?

A. In a perfect world, I would love to start my own theater company and do three shows a season. I'd like to do one brand-new Native play that we develop, I'd like to do a remount of some existing Native play, and I'd like to do an aboriginal interpretation of an existing non-Native play. For instance, my Brecht-Weill play, an "Indianization" of Brecht's *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* entitled "Sucker Falls: A Musical about the Demons of the Forest and the Soul," which I'm planning for 2003. Or, Tomson Highway has always wanted to direct *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Elizabeth Theobald, the director of public programs at the Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center in Connecticut, who has directed several productions of my plays, has always wanted to do a Native and French Canadian version of *Henry V* based on what happened at Oka. A company in Terrace, British Columbia, wants to do *Romeo and Juliet* from a white and Native perspective. And there are so many other wonderful plays out there. I'd love to do Native adaptations of existing plays.

Q. What are your projects for the near future?

A. In the next two months, I'm going to write a drama, because I haven't written a drama since *AlterNatives* a couple of years ago. I'm a little scared, because it's a very personal story. When you start a play, it's like jumping into a very cold lake: you have to work up the nerve, you have to work up the speed, and then you have to start running and jump into it. I'm just right now working up the nerve, because it's a cold shock when you sit down in front of an empty computer screen. And I am working on a TV documentary on Native erotica—I've been doing a lot of research, and I want to get started on that and have some fun.