

**A BALANCING ACT:  
THE CANONIZATION OF TOMSON HIGHWAY**

by

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## ABSTRACT

In this thesis I will examine the critical and popular success of playwright Tomson Highway. Highway's two published plays, The Rez Sisters and Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing, are taught on university and high school syllabi across the country and abroad, as far away as Copenhagen. These two plays have also been performed in Canada virtually from coast to coast. These facts are interesting in and of themselves, but specifically when taken into account with the fact that Highway is a Cree playwright, born in northern Manitoba, who didn't become fluent in English until reaching his teens. Moreover, Highway is the only native playwright to have achieved this level of wide-spread acclaim. In this thesis I will examine how and why this phenomenon came about and posit some hypotheses to help to explain it.

I will take three steps in dealing with the sudden rise in popularity of Highway's work. In Chapter One I will trace the roots of his success through a selective production history of his two published plays across the country. It will also be important in this chapter to give a brief personal history of the playwright as this will prove an integral reference point. In the second Chapter I will firmly situate Highway within the Canadian dramatic canon, such as it is, through an investigation into where and in which contexts Highway's plays are taught and where they are currently being produced in Canada and abroad. In the final Chapter I will provide some reasons that may account for his success and his rapid canonization. In the conclusion I will discuss the ramifications of his canonization and some of the larger implications of his rapid rise to fame.

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## INTRODUCTION

Dealing with the question of the Canadian dramatic canon is a perplexing endeavour. The Canadian canon cannot be as easily defined as the Western canon or even the American dramatic canon which, while not as monolithic, still has a solid foothold on stable canonical ground. In Canada however we have yet to produce a canon of dramatic writing of the quantity, calibre and international renown of other nations. Not that playwrights, educators and theatre professionals haven't attempted to put forth a body of work to give Canada representation in the international theatrical arena.

As Charles Altieri explains, "In Canada, we have a shifting but identifiable curriculum that is often misread as a canon" (quoted in Johnson 1995, 35). This "shifting but identifiable curriculum" is a commonly agreed-upon set of texts that comprises what one might call the historical canon of Canadian dramatic literature. Although some would argue and many academics indeed consider that "...Canadian dramatic literature [is] an oxymoron" (Johnson 27), these texts, around thirty of them in total, have been anthologized and thus enter into both academic and theatrical culture. There are three major anthologies that categorize these texts as central to the "shifting but identifiable curriculum": Richard Perkyns' 1984 edition, Major Plays of the Canadian Theatre 1934-1984, Modern Canadian Drama, edited by Richard Plant and published in the same year, and Jerry Wasserman's 1985 Modern Canadian Plays. It is important to stress the domain of these play texts as being primarily academic as opposed to being part of the current Canadian theatrical repertoire. The plays in these anthologies are, in fact, quite rarely produced nowadays in regional theatres and even less frequently by experimental companies or

amateur groups. If anywhere, these plays are receiving attention in the university setting. As Chris Johnson explains, "The Canadian canon is a much stronger presence in campus theatre than it is in the Canadian professional theatre" (41). And often, if the plays are produced by a university theatre group, the production may be an exercise in theatre history as much as anything else. Johnson continues, saying, "...in Canada the national canon is not represented in the national repertoire to the extent that it is in the United States, the UK or France" (34).

Processes of canonization are complex and multi-faceted. Steven Totosy de Zepetnek posits a theory of cumulative canon formation which he describes thus: "Canonization is a cumulative process, involving the text, its reading, readership, literary history, criticism, publication mechanisms, (ie. the sale of books, library use etc.) politics etc" (1994, 109). Zepetnek is addressing the notion of a literary canon, and so to amend this theory for dramatic literature, we must add factors such as frequency of production, theatrical space and audience response. It is certainly important to consider all of these factors when examining the plays involved in the canonical process in Canada.

Perhaps it is necessary to briefly look at the texts that dominate the three major anthologies. All three of them feature John Herbert's Fortune and Men's Eyes; two of the three feature David Freeman's Creeps, David French's Of the Fields, Lately and John Coulter's Riel. Plays by the following playwrights appear in all three editions: Herbert, French, Sharon Pollock and James Reaney; and two out of the three volumes feature these playwrights: Freeman, Coulter, Michael Cook, George Ryga, George F. Walker and Gwen Pharis Ringwood. The following appear in at least one of the anthologies: Herman Voaden, Robertson Davies, Gratien Gelinas, William Fruet, Carol Bolt, Rick Salutin, Aviva Ravel, John Gray, David Fennario, Erika Ritter, Margaret Hollingsworth, Allan Stratton. The list can be boiled down to just a few names

that would seem to encapsulate 50 years of play writing; commonly Ringwood, Coulter, Davies, Reaney, Ryga, Cook and French are named the most important Canadian playwrights of the modern period (Knowles 1991, 96). Six out of the twenty-two playwrights are women, one playwright is French-Canadian -- none of the anthologies specifies that it is dealing specifically with English-Canadian theatre -- and none of the playwrights is a member of a visible minority.

The plays in these anthologies tend to follow a similar course. Richard Paul Knowles, in his article "Voices (off): Deconstructing the Modern English-Canadian Dramatic Canon," attacks these anthologies quite harshly for supporting a highly rigid and conservative dramatic form among other things. He states:

The modern English-Canadian dramatic canon, then, is shaped by the conservative, hierarchical, and nationalistic structures of theatrical production and funding, and by the interests of reviewers, academics, teachers, and audiences who for economic and historical reasons tend to be from the 'professional-managerial class'. The canon therefore tends towards literary realistic or naturalistic plays written in recognizable genres on explicitly Canadian subjects that deal in universalist ways with individual psychology (100).

Knowles presents the historical canon as predominantly realistic and logocentric in form, historical in subject matter, Canadian in setting and only in a limited sense regionally representative. In addition, the playwrights that make up the traditional canon of Canadian plays are by and large white, male and of Anglo-European descent.

Throughout the past two decades, though, change has begun to take place. There have been important offshoots from the traditionally white, middle-class, male hold on Canadian theatre including many more women playwrights, playwrights of colour, gay and lesbian playwrights and native playwrights. Plays by Banuta Rubess, Brad Fraser, Sky Gilbert, Drew Hayden Taylor, Judith Thompson and Tomson Highway are no longer relegated to the margins.

Several anthologies have been keeping stride with this trend, such as the second volume of Jerry Wasserman's Modern Canadian Plays, a volume entitled Canadian Mosaic and others. This is, of course, not a uniquely Canadian inclination but a widespread one. There have been numerous attacks on the monolithic Western canon by women and minority groups for several decades. Works by these writers are now included on university syllabi around the world. In the United States many anthologies, such as The Heath Anthology of American Literature, provide students with an alternate perspective to that of the traditionally monocultural Norton Anthologies. In Canada the situation is comparable. But as Tracy Ware is quick to point out, the trend of opening up the canon has had less of an effect in Canada because our canon has always been less rigidly constructed. She says: "Canonical interrogations 'have not deconstructed the monolith in any way similar to the way it has been deconstructed in other countries' because there is no monolith here" (quoting Lecker in Johnson, 47).

In light of this recent, if unofficial, policy of inclusion, we may need to ask ourselves how much of this new acceptance of plays by non-white playwrights, women and gay and lesbian playwrights could be considered tokenism in an attempt by white, middle-class, liberal-minded educators, theatre professionals and audiences to assuage the heavy burden of "white guilt." The issue of tokenism in regards to Highway's phenomenally rapid rise to canonical status is a complex one. The word "tokenism" is a harsh term that lessens the value and achievement of a work. In this instance, we must think of Highway's canonization as tokenistic only in that his status is disproportionate to the acknowledged quality of his work. It is not a clear case of tokenism, but may be considered so due to the facts of his speedy canonization and current monopoly on native theatre for a white audience. No other native playwright in Canada has achieved the level of critical and popular fame that he has. I would argue that Highway made an



impact on the white community during a time in which the political climate was favourable to the acceptance of a native voice in the performing arts. Starting in the late 1980s and continuing today there has been a burgeoning of interest in and sympathy towards First Nations peoples, history and spirituality that had not previously existed to the same degree. The sweeping trend of political correctness, among other things, has attracted many members of the non-native community to native North American culture. As a result, the white middle-class, educated, liberal community was likely, in the late 1980s when Highway's plays were getting national attention, to accept a native playwright into the contemporary Canadian canon and the national repertoire. Highway's plays are easily accepted and canonized by a white audience for several reasons: most importantly he has found an innovative and unique balance between Western theatrical convention and native content that makes the plays both accessible and original. No other playwright has found as effective a balance between these two things. His work certainly merits the praise it has received although there are some fundamental flaws in both major plays that reinforce the notion of tokenism. His writing is touching, intelligent and funny. However, reviewers have remarked numerous times, as we will see later, on his problems with plot structure and character motivation, among other things. Although the form in which he presents his material may be flawed, the material he presents is important, as is the fact that he is native, and thus he is entered into the Canadian canon as a representative of a culture that is deemed needy of representation by audiences, canonisers, educators and critics. His plays are so often canonized, taught and anthologized probably because it is eminently readable and teachable. Both plays are excellent forays into reserve life, current native social issues and spirituality that many educators are eager to have students learn. Because of the combination of Highway's humour and sensitivity in his writing, the plays appeal to students of many different age ranges

as well as to instructors.

Tokenism is an unfortunate fact for most canonized minority voices in North America. Because we live in a colour-conscious world and a nation in an evolving struggle with post-colonialism, the inevitable result of conscious inclusion is tokenism. In the case of Highway, as is true for many other minority playwrights, the infrastructure is not yet in place for his canonization to be anything other than a form of tokenism. Both pragmatically and conceptually, there is room for only one native playwright in the minds of Canadians and the theatres of the country right now. Because of the lack of precedent for any kind of native presence in the arts, we, as the white theatre-going public, are not fully prepared to accept an onslaught of native theatre artists. Any more than one canonized native playwright would require us to more drastically change our ways of thinking. Were this to become any larger a movement right now, we would perhaps perceive this as a threat to our notions of theatre and as a result not support any more native theatre. This kind of a change must take place gradually, over many years. Any more than one successful native playwright also presents a strain on resources. Until there are establishments for the training of native actors, directors and theatre technicians, the industry will remain dominated by the non-native population and there will remain a token native presence in the theatre.

Highway's first widely-seen play, The Rez Sisters, was produced at the Native Canadian Centre in Toronto in 1986 and seen and appreciated by white and native audiences alike. With the wild success of this play, he was granted passage through the regional theatre circuit and then to the Edinburgh Festival. This was just the beginning for this playwright, seemingly earmarked for success. His roughly ten-year career would see him become one of Canada's most celebrated playwrights, let alone Canada's pre-eminent native playwright. In this thesis I will examine

closely Highway's rise to prominence in order to find ways of explaining this phenomenon.

In Chapter One I will give a selected production history of his plays, starting with his work in two native theatre companies, De-ba-jeh-mu-jig Theatre Company on Manitoulin Island and Toronto's Native Earth Performing Arts Inc. I will concentrate most closely on his two published works, The Rez Sisters and Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing. These two plays define his style and technique and are the only plays of his to be regularly performed and taught in Canadian theatres and schools. I will start with his debut on the Canadian scene with The Rez Sisters in Toronto, and briefly examine the subsequent cross-country tours. I am also interested in the success of and controversy over his second major successful play, Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing. I will address the changes that his plays individually and his work as a whole underwent as productions of his plays were allotted larger budgets, venues became larger and more and more people came to see his plays.

In Chapter Two I will examine Highway's situation, as a playwright and as a public personality, in the mainstream, predominantly white, realm of theatrical, academic and, to a limited extent, popular culture. Using data culled primarily from the World Wide Web I will demonstrate with what surprising frequency both of Highway's published plays are studied in university and college settings from coast to coast in North America and in Europe. A telling element of this investigation is to discover the context in which Highway's plays are taught -- in a course entitled "Canadian Literature" or one on native literature -- and what other works are commonly studied alongside his plays. In this section I will also briefly look at the regularity with which Highway's plays are currently being produced in Canada and the United States. In Canada I believe him to have a much more widespread appeal than in the U.S. Whereas his plays are regularly produced in regional theatres in Canada, he is more likely to be considered an

experimental or developing playwright south of the border. With both of these investigations I will demonstrate Highway's placement firmly within the current national academic and theatrical repertoire.

In the final section of this thesis I will provide some possible answers to the question of Highway's phenomenal rise to mainstream popularity. There are several ways to attack this question and I will use an approach that factors in not only Highway's dramatic influences and writing style, but the contemporary political events of the time in which Highway emerged as a major Canadian dramatic talent. Insights into audience response are also of vital importance here, as they will provide further understanding of the question of his fame.

With this project I hope to create an insightful analysis of Highway's work and his impact on the contemporary Canadian theatre. There are many different forces at play pulling Highway's work into various spheres of importance. My approach to answering the question of Highway's appeal is multi-layered and thus will present several different perspectives. Using my own data and the theoretical and critical works from many and varied sources, I intend to expose the issues at play that govern the Highway phenomenon, in order to uncover the reasons for his rapid rise to fame.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Following the Path to Canonization

Before finding answers to the complex phenomenon of Highway's canonization, the facts of his ascent to fame must be clearly mapped out. In this chapter I will conduct a selective production history of his two major plays, The Rez Sisters and Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing, using reviews of the many different productions as clues to the plays' critical and popular reception and their success on a broad scale. The original and touring productions of the two major plays are of primary interest here whereas part of Chapter Two will be devoted to subsequent regional theatre productions. A critical look at this rise to fame is necessary for a more thorough understanding of the phenomenon. Throughout this chapter I will attempt to uncover the different socio-political mechanisms at work behind the canonizing impulse. Almost as important as production history to the understanding of his rise to fame is Highway's own personal history. This brief biographical look at the playwright will make for a better understanding of the implications of his success in terms of the mainstream white acceptance of his work.

#### 1. *Highway's 'Life and Times'*

The story of the birth, childhood and education of Tomson Highway has been told and retold so often that it has practically reached mythic status. Academic papers, newspaper reviews and interviews often use his unique and peculiar upbringing as a point of departure. The factors that shaped his childhood and adolescent life figure prominently in his later writing and it is important to understand Highway's personal life in order to appreciate the significance of his

achievements. This information is vital to the understanding of not only his plays but their reception by a broad audience. In fact, Highway has dedicated a novel to the telling of his own story. His first attempt at novel-writing, entitled Kiss of the Fur Queen, is soon to be published. This is a lightly veiled autobiography with emphasis on the relationship between two brothers, ostensibly Highway and his brother Rene. As this information is so vital to understanding Highway and his work, I will begin this chapter on the evolution of Highway's popularity at the very beginning of his life.

Tomson Highway was born on an island in Maria Lake, northern Manitoba, in early December 1951. He grew up on the Brochet Reserve, the eleventh of twelve children born to a trapper/fisherman/dogsled-racer father (Highway Rez, VI). When Highway describes the facts of his childhood, he tends to use a romantic and highly idealized language, as we can see in the introduction to The Rez Sisters: "For the first six years of his life he lived an exquisitely beautiful nomadic lifestyle among the lakes and forests of remote northwestern Manitoba, trapping in winter, fishing in summer" (Highway Rez, VII). He described his life similarly in an address at an event sponsored by the Canadian Human Rights Commission at Carleton University in 1994. He said of life in northern Manitoba,

...we have these beautiful, beautiful caribou hunts by dog sled, racing a team of huskies across these pristine frozen wastes. It was so beautiful to grow up that way, to have nothing but the sound and rhythm of the land...It was just us and the land. Us and this immense silence.  
(Highway "Portrait", 1)

It is possible that he describes his early childhood in these idyllic terms because this lifestyle was abruptly taken from him at age six when he was sent to a government- and church-run residential school in The Pas, Manitoba. Highway, along with the rest of the children on his

reserve, spent nine years at this Roman Catholic residential school, visiting his family only once a year ("Thank You for the Love You Gave"). Highway was among several generations of native children, from the turn of the century to the early 1960s, to be subjected to the residential school system across the country. Trying to justify their native heritage while under the control of white society proved difficult for these children. In keeping with the government's assimilation policy for Aboriginal populations in Canada, these schools regularly punished students for many culture-related activities, such as speaking their mother language or expressing fidelity to any non-Christian belief system. For example, in a British Columbia residential school, the offence of "Speaking Indian" was greeted by a punishment of having to "Work During Recess" while a student caught "Indian Dancing" or "Playing ... Forbidden Games" would be given "Extra Work" (Carlson 102). Highway describes in his own words the experience of growing up in such an environment:

The education system was such for us indigenous types that we were told as five- and six-year olds that we had no culture, no history, no past. Our languages were third rate, our lifestyle was third rate. This other system of thought, this theology was better somehow. (Highway "Portrait", 1)

In 1990 Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs head Phil Fontaine publicly stated that he and many others like him had been the victim of extensive abuse at the hands of the residential school system. This declaration prompted similar statements across the country from other victims of residential schools as well as those from orphanages run by Roman Catholic priests, like the Alfred Institute for Boys in Ontario and Mount Cashel Orphanage in St. John's, Newfoundland, both cases in which numerous charges of sexual abuse were filed, shocking and greatly disturbing their respective communities. Following this series of public statements, the

Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples was established, conducting public hearings across the country. Finally, in 1994, the First Nations Health Commission of the Assembly of First Nations released a report stating that "physical, sexual and emotional abuse had been so widespread in residential schools that it was almost universal" (Miller 462). In a talk he gave at the University of British Columbia in 1996 Highway admitted that he and his younger brother Rene were physically and sexually abused while under the care of the residential school system in Manitoba (Highway "Reclaiming"). In the CBC Life and Times profile of Highway, he talked about the effect that this widespread abuse of native children had on generations of Canadian Aboriginal populations. He says, "it made Mount Cashel look like peanuts" ("Thank you for the Love you Gave").

It was during this harsh and demoralizing time that Highway, at age 13, discovered his love of music and talent for playing the piano. He took up the piano while at boarding school as a means of escape from the problems of his everyday life in this atmosphere. When he was 15, he moved to Winnipeg to go to high school and lived in a series of white foster homes. Then in 1970 he went to the University of Manitoba to study classical piano and during that time took a year of study in London, England with teacher William Aide. He later transferred to the University of Western Ontario and completed his Bachelor of Music, Honours in 1975. The following year was spent taking English courses that would give him a Bachelor of Arts (Highway Rez, VII).

It was at this time that he met playwright and academic James Reaney, a man who would encourage Highway to write for the theatre. He worked with Reaney on a stage adaptation of John Richardson's 1832 novel Wacousta, translating passages into Cree and then teaching them to the cast. He says that watching Reaney make Canadian history exciting and vital for



Canadians aroused in him the desire to do the same for native people in Canada and their history ("Thank you for the Love You Gave"). Of his first exposure to Reaney's Donnelly Trilogy he says,

Seeing the Donnelly Trilogy was one of the great moments for me. With those characters, the mother and the father of the Donnelly clan, James Reaney was putting down roots. They become characters that remind me of Mother Earth and Father Sky in our stories. (Conlogue "Mixing")

It was also during his studies at the University of Western Ontario that he saw his first Michel Tremblay play, Sainte-Carmen de la Main, which would prove to be another formative experience. In fact Highway said, "It's because of Tremblay that I decided to write plays." He says that Tremblay's play "made him realize it was possible to write about the people he knew with all their problems, poverty and gaiety" (CP "Highway's"). A quick comparison between The Rez Sisters and Les Belles Soeurs shows the two plays to be similar in structure, character and social settings. Both playwrights have given voice to a group of people that had never spoken on the Canadian stage before. Les Belles Soeurs and The Rez Sisters -- even the titles are similar -- both feature a group of working/lower class women, with similar penchants for bingo, who speak languages that had never before been spoken on stage. As the introduction to The Rez Sisters explains, "he would write plays about 'the rez', just as Michel Tremblay wrote about 'The Main'" (Highway Rez, VIII).

After completing his formal education, Highway decided not to pursue a career as a concert pianist in favour of working directly with native communities, starting at The Native People's Resource Centre in London and later going on to work at The Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres in Toronto. For seven years he travelled around the country working with native people in prisons, cultural centres, and on the streets, "just generally familiarizing

himself intimately with the organizational network of native lives and politics in this country" (Highway Rez, VIII). Out of his work in native cultural centres grew a desire to foment social change through the arts. Many of his early plays were conceived, developed and performed in this setting. It was out of this environment that his foray into the world of the theatre began.

## *2. The Evolution of the Playwright and his Success*

The shift from counsellor to playwright seems to have been a natural one for Highway. His formal involvement in the theatre began in the early 1980s with his affiliation with two relatively small all-native companies, Native Earth Performing Arts Inc.(NEPA), based in Toronto, and De-ba-jeh-mu-jig Theatre Company on Manitoulin Island. As we will see, his work on these early productions is indicative of his later formal playwriting career. These plays were intended and performed largely for all-native audiences, often centred around contemporary native social issues and infused with aspects of First Nations mythology and culture.

From 1982 to 1986, Highway was steadily involved with NEPA, whose goal was "To help maintain and strengthen the pride and identity of native peoples by providing a unique artistic platform for the expression of traditional and contemporary native themes" (Preston 138). He worked as composer, musical director, director and actor alongside Gloria and Muriel Miguel, Monique Mojica, Billy Merasty and his brother, dancer and choreographer Rene Highway, all of whom would later be featured in productions of Highway's two mainstream hit plays (Preston 139). Highway's presence at NEPA is considered of vital importance to the company's creative and financial development and the raising of awareness for a Canadian native voice in the performing arts. Jennifer Preston, NEPA historian, notes that Elaine Bomberry, one-time general manager of NEPA, "claims that Highway gave the company its vision and suggests

that without him the growth would have been significantly different" (Preston 157).

It was also around this time that Highway was working with the De-ba-jeh-mu-jig Theatre Company. De-ba-jeh-mu-jig was founded in 1984 in Wikwemikong, Manitoulin Island by Shirley Cheechoo with a mandate "to develop plays by and about people of native ancestry" (Lauzon 90). The first incarnation of The Rez Sisters was workshopped and performed here in 1986 as was an early Highway piece called A Ridiculous Spectacle in One Act in 1985 ("Playwrights" 1).

In 1987, one year after the initial NEPA performance of the final text of The Rez Sisters, Highway wrote a one-person show for NEPA actor Makka Kleist entitled Aria. The play was directed by Larry Lewis and performed at the Annex Theatre in Toronto in March of that year. The play was an "intensive exploration of the identity and the character of native womanhood and its place in and relevance to contemporary society as a whole." Kleist effectively portrayed more than a dozen different characters while Highway provided on-stage piano accompaniment. Reviews were positive and the show was nominated for a Dora Mavor Moore award for Best Production, Small Theatre Category. The play then travelled to the Asia Pacific Festival in Vancouver as well as the Aasivik Festival in Greenland (Preston 144). Highway's propensity for writing scripts for and about native women first surfaces here. This is clearly a very important element in both The Rez Sisters and Dry Lips, as well as an issue of great contention, as I will later examine.

New Song...New Dance opened the 1987/88 season of NEPA. It was a multimedia/modern dance production featuring Rene Highway, Alejandro Ronciera, and Raoul Trujillo. Highway composed the music, wrote the script and performed the accompanying music as Weesageechak, the Trickster. His brother Rene choreographed as well as acted in the show.

Rene Highway in an interview in the Toronto Star discussed the thematic structure of the play and the creator/performers' own experiences in residential schools: "The theme explores the Indian experience [...] and how growing up in a foreign environment affected all of our lives" (Preston 145). Elements of this show would seem to demonstrate Highway's affinity for the blending of different creative media and also mirror the use of dance and stylized movement found in both of his major plays.

In March of 1989 Highway, along with Rene and Billy Merasty, created a piece called The Sage, the Dancer and the Fool to open the 1988-89 NEPA season. It was performed at the Native Canadian Centre in Toronto with Kenneth Charlette, Alejandro Ronciera and Billy Merasty in the title roles. Highway wrote the words and music, Rene choreographed the piece and together they directed it. The play followed a day in the life of one native man and his constant struggle as a native person in a modern, urban setting. Highway described the play as a "...combination of Cirque du Soleil, Robert Derosiers and a Pow Wow" (Preston 146). The production was nominated for a Dora Mavor Moore Award as well as having been critically and financially successful for NEPA. John Sakamoto of the Toronto Sun said in a review that "this play will touch anyone who has ever struggled with their identity - in other words, all of us" (Preston 147). Here again can we see traces of his later and more successful work in the eclectic blend of stylistic elements and his addressing of the constant struggle of being native in a modern Canadian setting.

The Rez Sisters, a play about eight women living on a fictional Cree/Ojibway reserve named Wasaychigan Hill on Manitoulin Island, began Tomson Highway's life in the spotlight in a modest and unassuming way. The initial version of the play was workshopped at the De-ba-jeh-mu-jig Theatre Company on the Wikwemikong reserve upon which this fictional

reserve is based (Highway Rez, X). The work-in-progress performance was directed by Larry Lewis, a man who would work closely with Highway on many subsequent productions of both The Rez Sisters and Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing. The cast featured several actors that would later appear in productions of Highway's plays. Both Gloria Eshkibok and Doris Linklater had roles in the workshop version of this play and later went on to play Nanabush in the original and touring Dry Lips. Eshkibok also played the role of Emily Dictionary in the original production of The Rez Sisters and on its cross-country tour. Other cast members included Mary Assiniwe, Greta Cheechoo, and Mary Green (Highway Rez, X).

On November 26, 1986, the first full-text production of The Rez Sisters opened at the Native Canadian Centre in Toronto, opening the doors to Highway's career. The production ran for only two and a half weeks but in that short time garnered enough public attention and critical praise to launch Highway's career. The show was a co-production of NEPA and Act IV Theatre Company and was directed by Larry Lewis. The cast included real-life sisters and Spiderwoman Theatre Company members Gloria and Muriel Miguel as fictional sisters Philomena Moosetail and Pelajia Patchnose. Playwright and actor Monique Mojica played Marie-Adele Starblanket, Anne Anglin was Annie Cook and the aforementioned Gloria Eshkibok was the tough, raunchy Emily Dictionary. Margaret Cozry played Veronique St. Pierre, Sally Singal was the mentally handicapped Zhaboonigan Peterson and Rene Highway took the role of the spiritual and mythological guide, Nanabush.

Judging from Jennifer Preston's reports of the company's strict budgetary constraints it is safe to assume that the show had a limited set and few special effects. Despite the play's modesty it was met with a wildly positive reaction and received support from native and non-native audiences alike. The success of the play was certainly propelled along its trajectory by the

glowing review given by Toronto Star writer Henry Mietkiewicz. Preston describes the effect his review had on the production:

For the first week of the run audiences were sparse; on the second night people were enticed off the street to fill a Canadian Actors Equity requirement of having more people in the audience than on the stage. During the second week one member of the Toronto press gave the show an exceptional review. By the final night of the three-week run, 200 people were turned away from the 100-seat auditorium (Preston 135).

In his now-famous review, Mietkiewicz calls the play, "One of the most touching, exuberant cleverly crafted and utterly entrancing plays in Toronto." Mietkiewicz praises the writing, especially Highway's talent for characterization, and then exalts the actors in saying, "To single out any actress for praise is not only unfair but impossible." This reviewer had nothing but kind and appreciative words for this play that "has suddenly appeared, seemingly out of nowhere...being staged not in any conventional theatre, but -- of all places -- at the Native Canadian Centre on Spadina Rd" (D24). As this is the only major review the show received, it is not surprising that the production was seen as such a huge success.

This review is a very important clue to understanding the first phase of the Highway phenomenon. I believe it is possible that at this point, the development of native theatre in Canada being in its embryonic stage, this reviewer was heartily surprised that this play, written and performed by members of the First Nations, lived up to any basic theatrical standard that the reviewer might have had. Native theatre had not existed in a form that was easily accessible to a widespread audience before this play, and as it had no precedent, it had no set of expectations to maintain. I think that we will find, as we follow the reviews and Highway's further success, that as the audiences and venues get bigger and expectations of the playwright and actors rise as well, the reviews become increasingly negative. Through the run of The Rez Sisters over the two or

three years following the original production, the majority of the reviews are either glowing or generally positive with a few contentious issues. By the time Dry Lips is being performed at the Royal Alex, however, the criticism becomes more harsh and very few of the reviews give the production unconditional praise. This negative criticism, as we will see, does not stop the playwright from being awarded prizes and entered into the current Canadian canon, however. This paradoxical relationship between the debatable quality of the work and its importance as a groundbreaking piece of theatre helps illuminate the nature of his acceptance as perhaps a complex form of tokenism

The year 1986, however, proved to be one of landmark significance for The Rez Sisters, Tomson Highway and NEPA. The play's Native Canadian Centre debut was a springboard to success for the playwright, cast and crew. The play was the 1986-87 recipient of the Dora Mavor Moore Award for best new play of the Toronto season. Highway said of this experience, "It was a thrill to be nominated for a Dora beside people like Margaret Hollingsworth whose writing had electrified my imagination" (Conlogue "Mixing"). That same year, The Rez Sisters was runner-up for the Floyd S. Chalmers award for outstanding Canadian play. This young, unknown and relatively inexperienced playwright was receiving an outstandingly positive reaction to his first play to reach a broad audience. It is important to note also that Highway had only been involved in the theatre for roughly four years and written four plays previous to this one, most of which were created in a collective setting. Ray Conlogue of the Globe and Mail describes the success of The Rez Sisters as follows:

When The Rez Sisters opened last year in Toronto it was overlooked by most of the media. It was presented in the Native Canadian Centre, which nobody had ever been to before and it ran very briefly on slim funding. But the few people who saw it were passionately committed to the show. They threw all their votes into it for the Chalmers award

and helped it to win the Dora for best new play (Conlogue "Mixing").

The Highway phenomenon had officially begun.

Before returning to Toronto in late November for its Factory Theatre run, The Rez Sisters opened the Manitoba Theatre Centre's Warehouse Theatre 1987-88 season in Winnipeg, running from November 4-21. The production was received perhaps as well by Randal McIlroy of the Winnipeg Free Press as it had been by Henry Mietkiewicz in Toronto. It would seem that the audience was prepared for the event, as indicated in McIlroy's review: "Impressively, the debut performance triumphed... a feeling evidently shared by others in the sellout crowd of 230." This reviewer seemed to notice the importance of the emergence of something new in the Canadian theatre, although this is not expressed clearly or effectively. He says, "The native concerns are presented strongly, notably in one of Pelajia's passages, and naturally" (McIlroy "Engaging", 47). One may be led to wonder exactly what these "native concerns" are and what makes them "strongly" presented. McIlroy's commentary on the social issues of the play may be difficult to interpret, but is worthy of note. He does seem to be acknowledging an innovative and distinct perspective being presented on stage.

The Factory Theatre remounting of The Rez Sisters proved to be slightly less successful than the first Toronto run of the play. The show ran in November and December of 1987 and Ray Conlogue's Globe and Mail review was hardly as flattering as Mietkiewicz's 1986 commentary. Conlogue was the first reviewer to address faults in Highway's writing. He attacked the play's very structure, saying that "it does not hang together as a play...It splits its focus among too many stories which are not threaded back together in the final moments in such a way as to produce a satisfying conclusion." Conlogue was impressed with neither the set nor the direction on the whole. However, he comments that the acting was generally good, Sally Singal having given an



exceptional performance as Zhaboonigan. It seems that the change of theatrical venue was one of the chief contributors to Conlogue's dislike of the piece. He states: "One has the impression that a show designed for a smaller stage has not been well adapted for the Factory stage" ("The Rez" A29). This comment often recurs in Highway criticism and is an issue that I will further address, specifically when dealing with the Royal Alexandra Theatre production of Dry Lips. Conlogue also makes a comment that shows, I think, the extent to which the general theatre community was still adjusting to a First Nations presence in the theatre at this point. He says "Gloria's stolid and monumental face lends a comic aspect to Pelajia's longing for Toronto: as if a pre-Columbian stone carving longed to land on Yonge Street" (Conlogue "The Rez"). This notion of the 'Stoic Indian' was obviously very alive in the mind of this reviewer. This kind of comment that makes a thematic link between a museum object and a human actor shows the extent to which Highway's play and the work of these actors was constantly breaking new ground and old stereotypes.

The play then went on to the Vancouver East Cultural Centre and ran for most of January 1988. Reviewer Lloyd Dykk of the Vancouver Sun agreed with Conlogue on the awkward and unimaginative set and the heavy-handed use of the spirit Nanabush. Dykk enjoyed the acting, saying that the "performances [were] governed by an overriding earthy charm" (C1). This Vancouver reviewer also commented upon the social issues particular to native communities. He paints a bleak and desolate picture of reserve life, discussing "the dirt roads' endless dust, the routine drunkenness, wasted time, the shame of welfare and all the self-loathing these bring." Dykk goes on to describe the play as "powerful, funny and genuine [in] its evocation of the life of too many native Indians" (C1). Here again we see an acknowledgment of the addressing of native social issues, an element vital to the reception of this play.

1988 proved to be another exciting year for The Rez Sisters. The play was selected as one of two to represent Canada at the Edinburgh Festival. Highway's play would take on the role of Canada's theatrical ambassador in this international setting. His being chosen as a representative of Canada on the world stage is another step towards Highway's general acceptance within the country as a prominent playwright. At the very least The Rez Sisters was gaining a larger audience and Highway was gaining a chance at international kudos. The script was also published, this same year, by Saskatoon publishing company Fifth House, a firm devoted to furthering native writing in Canada. The fact that The Rez Sisters was published meant that it could be bought, read, and therefore easily accessed all over the country. More importantly, the play could now be included on college, university and high school syllabi.

The following year there was one other major regional production of the play -- at the Centaur Theatre in Montreal in March and April of 1989. The original cast was never again fully reunited after 1988, however. For this production Alanis King replaced Sally Singal as Zhaboonigan and Shirley Cheechoo played Marie-Adele Starblanket. Montreal Gazette critic Pat Donnelly praised many aspects of the show, saying that it "featur[ed] some of the most dynamic actresses in the country " and is "superbly directed by Larry Lewis." In fact, in this review we see shades of Henry Mietkiewicz's original and highly positive review. In summation, the reviewer goes so far as to say, "The Rez Sisters is a mind-altering experience enhanced by magical set transformations and lyrical off-stage percussion that ranges from early tom-tom to Las Vegas show biz " (Donnelly "Rez" C1).

At the height of Highway's success with his first play, he workshopped a brother piece to complement the first, initially entitled The Rez Brothers, later Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing. Highway workshopped what would be his second major mainstream hit in April

and May of 1988 at the Playwright's Workshop in Montreal, a different atmosphere indeed from the De-ba-jeh-mu-jig Theatre Company where The Rez Sisters was developed (Preston 147). This move already indicates Highway's embrace by the mainstream white theatrical community. As he becomes more successful he moves further away from the all-native setting in which he began. One year later, on April 21, 1989, Dry Lips premiered at Theatre Passe Muraille in Toronto as a co-production between Passe Muraille and NEPA. The cast included some well-known native actors such as Graham Greene in the role of Pierre St. Pierre and Gary Farmer as Zachary Jeremiah Keechigeesik. Doris Linklater played the female Nanabush, Ben Cardinal was Big Joey, Errol Kinistino played Creature Nataways and Kenneth Charlette was the mute Dickie Bird Halked. Ron Cook played Spooky Lacroix and Billy Merasty took the role of Simon Starblanket. The production was directed by Larry Lewis and choreographed by Rene Highway (Highway Dry Lips, 7).

Reviews of the Theatre Passe Muraille production appeared in the Toronto Star, the Calgary Herald, The Globe and Mail and Maclean's magazine. In three years Highway's status had changed enough for his second major production to be reviewed by four major Canadian publications, as opposed to the lone review in the Toronto Star that The Rez Sisters prompted. Unfortunately for Highway, Dry Lips did not experience the same critical fate as its companion piece. All four reviewers commented on the play's structural and thematic problems, some at great length. Robert Crew of the Toronto Star said that the play is "overly long, loosely structured in parts and... sometimes hurt by a lack of clarity" (Crew C1). Ray Conlogue, Globe and Mail reviewer, called it a "chaotic and sometimes effective new play." He went on to assert that "These many strands - bloody, comic, classical, contemporary, native and European - are not satisfactorily drawn together" (Conlogue "Emotionally", A17).

It was generally accepted that the acting in this production was uneven. Crew wrote that "some of the acting is of poor quality" (Crew C1) while Conlogue more gently phrased a similar sentiment: "the all-native actors have wildly varying performance backgrounds and stylistic unity is out of the question" (Conlogue "Emotionally", A17). Graham Greene was indubitably a critical favourite. Ray Conlogue says Greene gave "an *unbelievably* inventive and forceful clown performance" (Conlogue "Emotionally", A17). Robert Crew agrees, saying his performance was "broad but rich in detail" (Crew C1). In truth, Greene was the most experienced actor in the cast and has amassed a reputation and a body of work which undoubtedly preceded his performance here. A few others were singled out for their work, such as Gary Farmer, whose Zachary was "beautifully played," and Ben Cardinal as Joey who gave "another good performance" (Crew C1).

Despite the play's lukewarm critical reception, Dry Lips was highly favoured at the Dora Mavor Moore Awards for the 1988-89 Toronto season. Having been nominated in six categories, it won in four: Best Production, Best New Play, Most Outstanding Male Performer (Graham Greene), Most Outstanding Female Performance in a Supporting Role (Doris Linklater). Highway also won the Floyd S. Chalmers Award for Outstanding Canadian Play in the Toronto area for Dry Lips. The play was also published that year by Fifth House and was one of three plays short-listed for the Governor General's Award for Drama. This seemingly contradictory situation is puzzling. If the play was not universally loved by the critics, its numerous flaws well-documented in the press, then why was it so well-received by the Doras? Perhaps the play was being awarded honours for what it represented as opposed to the quality of the actual piece. The play's success at the Doras in the face of practically unanimous negative criticism sets a precedent for the treatment of Highway's work as important though flawed. As we will see in

articles on the Royal Alex production, several reviewers remarked on the importance of the work to the Canadian theatre even though the play and production are far from perfect.

The first major regional theatre production of the play came in 1990 at the Manitoba Theatre Centre in Winnipeg. Dry Lips opened their '90-91 season, just as The Rez Sisters had done three years earlier, running from October 24 to November 17. The cast was once again under the direction of Larry Lewis although there had been some significant cast changes. Billy Merasty went from playing Simon Starblanket to the role of Creature Nataways and Dwayne Manitowabi took over Merasty's original role. Jack Burning and Tom Jackson joined the cast in the roles of Zachary and Spooky Lacroix respectively. Gloria May Eshkibok, The Rez Sisters' original Emily Dictionary, played Nanabush in this production. Graham Greene, Ben Cardinal and Kenneth Charlette remained in their original roles.

Winnipeg Free Press reviewer Randal McIlroy did not take kindly to the show and its nearly three-hour length, saying "it looks as if it was wheeled out of the workshop three weeks too soon." McIlroy's major criticism is with the writing, as we can see from comments like this: "An awfully cheap ending seems to be borrowed from TV's Dallas." He did however praise the ensemble acting, singling out Graham Greene and Tom Jackson for their work. McIlroy commented that "it was difficult to join in with the two standing ovations and curtain calls" (McIlroy "Dry Lips", 42). Evidently the audience did not have criticism as harsh as McIlroy's for this production.

In March and April of 1991, before going to the Royal Alexandra Theatre in Toronto, Dry Lips was performed in Ottawa at the National Arts Centre (NAC). The cast remained the same as that of the MTC production with the exception of Gary Farmer replacing Jack Burning and reprising his role as Zachary. The play was still receiving mixed reviews at this point. A

common criticism of this and subsequent productions of the play is, as Montreal Gazette critic Pat Donnelly puts it, that the "show...appears to have sold its soul to Broadway" (Donnelly "Greene", E12). This production is described in reviews as having used special effects, flashing lights and furniture that was flown in from the fly gallery. Donnelly further condemns this approach to the play, saying, "Surely the original Theatre Passe Muraille production had a more authentic feel" (Donnelly "Greene, E12). Globe and Mail critic Stephen Godfrey remarked in his review upon the audience's reaction to some of the more risque elements of the show. He says of the scene in which the female Nanabush appears as God on a toilet, doing her nails, "You could hear the clucking of the NAC audience voicing its disapproval" (Godfrey C1). The Ottawa audience was likely comprised of a professional, conservative, non-native majority. Here we can see the beginning of the trend that opens Highway's play to more criticism as his work plays to an increasingly white, upper-middle-class audience, as with the NAC and the Royal Alex.

The April/May run of Dry Lips at the Royal Alexandra Theatre in Toronto was met by a flourish of publicity. It was covered by the Toronto Star, the Globe and Mail, the Winnipeg Free Press, Maclean's and The Financial Post. Controversy surrounding the show also sparked three commentary articles in the Globe and Mail. Many of these reviewers commented on both the Highway phenomenon and the importance of this production, despite noticeable flaws attributed to Highway, the cast and Lewis. Jay Scott of the Globe and Mail called the production "a landmark in Canadian Theatre History" (Scott C1). The Financial Post's Martin Knelman pointedly remarked, "Has any writer in Canadian theatre history had a faster media build-up than Tomson Highway, the 39-year old author of Dry Lips and other plays about the Canadian native experience?" He goes on to say, "last weekend Highway's lofty status was confirmed with an extraordinary event at Toronto's Royal Alex, when Dry Lips moved beyond the fringe into the

world of Edwardian glitter, plush velvet seats and a celebrity-studded opening-night audience" (Knelman 30). John Bemrose of Maclean's points out that this was the first Canadian play in eight years to be performed at the Royal Alex (Bemrose 60). The Rez Sisters was featured on the same subscription billing as the Old Vic's Carmen Jones, the Shubert Theatre's production of Buddy: The Buddy Holly Story and Les Miserables (Knowles "Reading", 282).

As we saw with the NAC production, the technical aspects of this production were much more complicated than the original *Passe Muraille* production. Jay Scott comments that "it has been staged, on a set full of flying furniture, with a slick show-biz assurance and emotional precision..." (Scott C1). Globe and Mail critic Robert Cushman agrees, saying that "John Ferguson's design retains elegance and wit" (Cushman C3). One of the harshest criticisms of the staging is one that is familiar: the theatrical space is too cavernous and overpowering for the content and context of the play. Jay Scott was harsh on the changes that occurred due to the change in venue. He uses the example of one of the most crucial scenes in the play: "The choreography of the rape, contemplated through a proscenium arch many yards away rather than witnessed in the same room a few feet away takes on the distanced artifice of modern dance." He succinctly phrases this problem, saying "the megaphone has mangled the message" (Scott C1).

The ensemble acting of this production was generally seen as a positive aspect of the show. Marian Botsford Fraser explains that "the acting is focused and high-energy, everything from the virtuoso comic turn of Graham Greene to the male ingenue purity of Kenneth Charlette" (Fraser C1). Geoff Chapman of the Toronto Star mentions Graham Greene and Billy Merasty for their "hugely comic performances." He also comments that Ben Cardinal and Gary Farmer's performances are "thoroughly credible, tough, declamatory, yet precise." He goes on to say that Kenneth Charlette gave "a poignant performance," that Tom Jackson was "effective" and that

Dwayne Manitowabi gave "a passionate reading" (Chapman C1).

Highway's writing is the aspect of the production that most often comes under attack in these reviews. Maclean's critic John Bemrose calls the dramatic sequences "heavy" and "tedious" and explains, "Highway has not found a language to express his characters' pain" (Bemrose 60). In the Financial Post, Martin Knelman says, "For all its energy and flashes of talent, Dry Lips is a bit of a mess. Highway wants to cram in his tragic vision of native history, but his ideas aren't fresh or coherent; he keeps striking hysterical notes" (Knelman 30). This vein of criticism is familiar. Similar comments have been made on the problems with Highway's characterization and dramatic structure since the play's debut in 1989. As the audience size, venue size and press coverage have all increased, the amount of negative criticism has increased exponentially.

In Bronwyn Drainie's commentary in The Globe and Mail, she notes the audiences' response to the play. She says,

David Mirvish deserves full credit for pushing such a high-risk and controversial play under the noses of the wealthy white audiences who prefer viewing the plight of the downtrodden at a romantic distance (as in *Les Misérables*) rather than confronting the harrowing realities of an Indian reserve in northern Ontario today.

In this article she describes immediate viewer response: "The Toronto audience on Tuesday night seemed stunned and pretty unhappy...A lot of seats were empty for the second act, and a well-dressed older woman in the washroom commented, 'I don't know how they can allow them on the stage'" (Drainie C1).

All of this may lead us to wonder how he has secured his place as such a renowned playwright in Canada in the face of increasingly negative criticism. Highway was embraced by the white community early on in his career because he presented subject matter that held a considerable amount of novelty. As he grew more popular and the element of novelty



diminished, the expectations of audiences and critics began to rise. When Highway reaches the high point, Dry Lips at the Royal Alex, he is faced not only with negative criticism from reviewers, but from audiences as well. In the face of all of this criticism, Highway's plays remain anthologized, taught in courses and performed all over the country. Why? Because his work is significant, though flawed. His work is significant in the sense that he is the first native playwright to be writing plays about native people today. It is not chosen and accepted on the basis of quality of writing alone. It is chosen because the impulse of educators, canonisers and theatre professionals is to include minority voices, and Highway's is the best representation of the native voice in theatre that exists to date.

### *3. The Politics of Success.*

Tomson Highway has achieved what no other has before him: national and international recognition as a Canadian native playwright. Success does have its price, however. The Royal Alexandra production of Dry Lips resulted in several severe problems of misinterpretation of the intention of the playwright. This was due to several factors. Not only was the content of the play spectacularly out of place amid the Edwardian splendour of the theatre in which it was presented, but the audience was also incongruous with the material. The following examination into the debate surrounding the misogyny of this play raises some questions about exactly how successful Highway has actually become.

In The Rez Sisters, Tomson Highway wrote a play about seven women. Very little criticism has been heard in regards to his choice to write in the opposite gender or his appropriation of women's voices in this play, but he has received repeated condemnation for the role of women in Dry Lips, a play with seven male characters. Is Dry Lips a play about misogyny

or a misogynistic play? This is a question that has sparked much debate between men and women, native and non-native. Highway is certainly walking a fine line between irony and straight presentation with the role of Nanabush in this play; perhaps it is never clear enough that the portrayal of women in this light is intended to be a commentary on men's misogyny, not a support of misogyny.

Marian Botsford Fraser wrote one of the most biting commentaries on the misogyny of Highway's play in an article in The Globe and Mail. She convincingly argues that "Dry Lips is not only about misogyny but is a drama studded with misogyny; in its structure, tone, language and point of view...Contempt for women, both implicit and explicit, overshadows the richness and vitality of the play as a whole" (Fraser C1). Two days earlier, in the same newspaper, reviewer Robert Cushman maintained the opposite stance. He said in his review, "This is the most powerful play I have ever seen about misogyny, and it is fitting that it should be the work of a man" (1991).

The play does present very disturbing imagery of the role of women in society, violence against women and men's misogynistic and stereotyped views of women. Stephen Godfrey of The Globe and Mail said "the one actress in the play is most often used to parody female icons and attributes in a camp way" (Godfrey C8). Another reviewer remarked on the gamut of ridiculous roles the actress, Gloria Eshkibok, playing Nanabush is subjected to:

To say that her talents -- as opposed to her breasts -- remained underexposed in Dry Lips is an understatement. In one scene she appears wearing a garter belt and tassled pasties, climbs on a table and does ye olde twirling-tits act. In another she sits bare-breasted on top of a juke box, pretending to give birth. Sometimes she arrives by trapeze. At one point she floats on a giant hockey puck propelled by a huge illuminated hockey stick. (Donnelly 1991)

Other reviewers concurred. Fraser says, "Nanabush takes form in an exhaustive catalogue of

female stereotypes and is only briefly, scarily, a real character..." (Fraser, C1). The "brief, scary" glimpse of a real woman that Fraser describes is likely the horrifying rape scene, one which, as Stephen Godfrey points out, seems to be more about the men involved than the woman: "A horrible abuse of a woman focuses not on the woman abused, but on the suffering of the abuser" (Godfrey C8). Fraser states, "The empowered women are absent; what we see are images of their degradation, shame and fallibility" (Fraser C1).

Not surprisingly after character sketches like the aforementioned, reviewers and commentators seem to have great sympathy for the actor playing Nanabush. Fraser calls Doris Linklater's Royal Alex Nanabush "excellent" and "dignified" and says "it is to the credit of Ms. Linklater that she carries all of this off with aplomb." Pat Donnelly, reviewing the pre-Alex NAC show in Ottawa, saw Gloria Eshkibok in the role and says "To Eshkibok's credit she carries it all off with bravura." Everyone who sees the play seems to acknowledge the difficulty of the part and the demands it makes on an actor. In the Montreal Gazette, Donnelly points out that "the role is hardly a great leap forward for native actresses who in the past have complained that rape-victim roles, like that of Rita in George Ryga's The Ecstasy of Rita Joe, were their only career option" (Donnelly 1991).

Marie Annharte Baker, a Salteaux poet and activist, laments the image of native women that this play puts forth in an article called "Angry Enough to Spit but with *Dry Lips* it Hurts More than You Know," published in the Fall 1991 issue of Canadian Theatre Review. She speaks of how native women felt torn between support of a play of this nature, one that presents native issues using an all-native cast, and unhappiness with a work that presents native women in this light. Baker says, "I cheered and stood up with fist raised to celebrate the achievements of native theatre...but I walked away praying that plays would be written to further their talents but give

them a choice as to how they would want to portray their own people." Baker comments, as does Fraser, on the epigraph Highway gave the play both in the published version and the production programme: "...before the healing can take place, the poison must first be exposed..." Both writers find this an attempt to excuse what follows. Baker says, "It is convenient to make enough commentary to be unaccountable for any inadvertent racist or sexist imagery."

"I had heard of native women having night-mares for a week or feeling depressed after seeing *Dry Lips*; myself, I had to fight the downer I experienced" (Baker 89). For Baker and many other native women this play affected them viscerally when it should have been an experience of solidarity. Instead of fighting a sexist and racist stereotype created by the dominant culture, they were pitted against one of their own. She says that she identified with the male characters, but "No, I did not identify with the women in this play" (89). Baker presents a unique perspective on the problem, being able to speak as a native woman to the issues surrounding the portrayal of a subject she knows intimately in Highway's play.

Conversely, there was very little criticism of this nature when the play opened at Theatre Passe Muraille in 1989. Neither has this vein of controversy followed post-Royal Alex remounts, such as the 1995 Vancouver Arts Club production. None of the three articles written in major Vancouver newspapers made a hint of a comment on offensiveness or misogyny. But the show is the same, and as written, the play contains all those aspects of misogyny that came under such harsh scrutiny by the initial critics. Perhaps what allows for a misogynistic reading is not the script, but the play in production. This is exactly the argument that Jay Scott makes in an article in The Globe and Mail. He says that the cavernous theatrical space of the Royal Alex and the higher budget allotted to the production marred the play's original meaning and forced the audience to interpret the action of the play in a different manner, one not faithful to the

playwright's intentions. He says, "The text is the same, most of the cast is the same, and the director, Larry Lewis, is the same, but the clarity has been subtly dimmed by a conventional, Broadway-(s)ized stylization detrimental to Highway's art" (Scott C1). Pat Donnelly of the Montreal Gazette agreed, saying "Surely the original Theatre Passe Muraille production had a more authentic feel. Even the table-top dancing scene probably seemed earthy -- as opposed to tacky -- in a more intimate, less commercial setting" (1991). So it appears to be the production, or rather the production values, that have mangled the playwright's intent. Scott concludes his article, which incidentally follows Fraser's commentary by five days, by saying, "The confusion/antipathy of those hearing Highway for the first time on the subject of misogyny via this production is understandable" (C1).

Oddly enough, Highway's views on this subject and on the role of women in society, native culture and spirituality seem to directly contradict critics of the role of women in his plays. In his interviews and public speeches he is clearly not a misogynist and does not advocate this point of view. Highway's extraordinary empathy with and for women and his ability to successfully write in the female voice has often been remarked upon as well, particularly with reference to The Rez Sisters. Jay Scott of The Globe and Mail referred to Highway as "a playwright clearly more sympathetic (like Tennessee Williams) to women than to men" (C1). Highway explains that he does feel very close to women: "I am sensitive to women because of the matrilineal principle of our culture, which has gone on for thousands of years. Women have such an ability to express themselves emotionally. Men are all clogged up. As a writer you need to express emotion" (Conlogue 1987).

Highway is seeking, through his work, to rebuild a nation of peoples whose culture, spirituality, mythology and language have been decimated. In order to heal the wounds made by

crimes perpetrated upon on the indigenous populations of this country, due largely to the Christian missionary works and residential school system, he advocates a return to traditional notions of native spirituality which are often highly woman-centred. In both of his major plays he emphasizes the dual sexuality of the central spiritual figure of the Trickster, Nanabush in Ojibway and Weesageechak in Cree, in opposition to Christian notions of male-dominated and patriarchal spirituality through the figure of Christ. He says that a lot of what his work is trying to accomplish is "the displacement of god as a man and the establishment of god as a woman" (Tompkins and Male 16).

Highway's views on this subject go further than spirituality and sensitivity. He takes a pro-active stance on eradicating violence against women and wishes to use his work as a means to this end. He says, "I think 'man' deserves to be put in his place. And I think that's what I'm trying to do in my work" (Tompkins and Male 16). He says he has been prompted to seek action on this iniquity due to the high number of acts of sexual violence perpetrated by white men upon native women and the amount of domestic violence within native communities. He says:

This happened to lots and lots of Indian women who have been raped with broken beer bottles and all kinds of unspeakable things. Nothing was ever done about it. What I want my work to do is  
 (a) prevent that kind of thing happening to another native woman and  
 (b) to educate our sons and our sons' sons that it's cruel...I will write this sort of stuff until the world stops treating women so poorly.  
 (Tompkins and Male 22)

Clearly these statements oppose critics' views that Highway's plays are misogynist. No doubt his plays, especially Dry Lips, present the audience with a barrage of disturbing and problematic imagery. As Marian Botsford Fraser says, "It is not easy for a woman to sit comfortably through Dry Lips." But as Lyle Longclaws' epigraph to the play suggests, we are not meant to be comfortable while "the poison" is being administered. The problem comes in the gap

between Highway's intent and the audience's interpretation of the work. Somehow Highway seems to have lost control over the audience's perception of his meaning in his move from the intimate and earthy atmosphere of the small Theatre Passe Muraille production to the glitzy, conventional and "Broadway-(sized)" Royal Alex production. Ironically enough, as the playwright has worked his way up the ladder of success, as he has "crossed over from the ghetto of fringe theatre to become the darling of Canada's mainstream culture" (Knelman), garnering national and international attention, awards, financial gain and ultimately canonization along the way, the only thing to suffer is the integrity and intention of the original work.

Having traced the path of Highway's route to canonization and examined the evolution of the criticism of his work, in the following chapter I will demonstrate his placement firmly within the canon. Of primary interest to me is the extent to which his plays are studied in universities, colleges and high schools. It is in this setting that his plays take on a very powerful role, in that his ideas on native history, current social problems and spirituality are being studied and discussed by a larger cross-section of the population than would see one of his plays on stage. A critical analysis of his status among other canonized figures will further the understanding of the Highway phenomenon. Another clue to the popularity of his plays is how firmly placed within the current Canadian canon they are. I will briefly look at two productions of his plays that were not affiliated with the original and touring productions, as well as give a glance at his production history in the U.S. One of the most integral factors to his canonization, one that is not often considered, is his power as a public figure. Highway, by virtue of his success in the theatre, has become a semi-celebrity in Canada. I will examine the influence of this celebrity upon the canonization of the playwright's work as well as his significance as a public figure in his own right.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Highway in the Canon

As we have seen in the previous chapter Tomson Highway, in the last ten years, has made a rapid rise to the position of one of Canada's most revered playwrights. Highway is very often described as such by interviewers, journalists and academics. He is ascribed titles like "Canada's most prominent and internationally recognized native dramatist" (Lutz 89), "Canada's most celebrated native playwright" (Petroni 172), and even "the most important new Canadian playwright to emerge in the latter half of the 1980s" (Johnston 254). In this chapter, I will demonstrate the solidity with which Highway is entrenched within the current canon of Canadian dramatic literature. A multi-faceted approach is vital to an examination of Highway's current canonization and will confirm Highway as a prominent Canadian figure, both in the artistic community and the larger public sphere.

As indicated by Steven Totosy de Zepetnek 's theory of cumulative canon formation, there are many factors that make for the canonization of a text. The prevalence of a text within the university atmosphere ensures that many students read, appreciate and criticize the work. This is certainly the case with Highway's plays in today's Canadian universities as is his frequent appearance within the Canadian national theatrical repertoire. His plays have not only been performed often at the major regional theatre level across the country, but in smaller regional theatres as well as by experimental and university theatre groups in the United States. However, Highway's canonization extends beyond the purely theatrical world and into the collective consciousness of the Canadian public. As an engaging and unique person, he has carved a niche



for himself that has provided him a favourable amount of publicity and raised his profile in the eyes of the public.

### 1. *Highway in the Curriculum*

The Rez Sisters and Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing are used on university curricula from coast to coast in Canada -- from Dalhousie University in Halifax to the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. I have grouped my findings on the subject into three categories: one for courses on native North American literature, another for courses on Canadian literature and the third for Western and world literature courses. One of the most important factors to remember in this analysis is the expected audience of the course and the number of students that are likely to attend. The differences between the number and type of students in a general survey course and a graduate seminar are numerous. Another component of this exploration of Highway's work is to seek patterns within the syllabi. We will find that often Highway is the only native playwright listed on a course with primarily Canadian content, the same being the case for a course with international content. That he is the only representative playwright from native culture on these courses and that he tends to be less celebrated and renowned a writer than the other writers he is grouped with both reinforce the notion that Highway's canonization may be a form of tokenism.

It is not surprising that plays by Highway are often taught in courses on native literature. A course of this nature is likely to be an upper-level English course and thus appeal to fewer students than would a general survey course. Native Literature courses, whether in an autonomous Indigenous Studies department or a department of English, are offered in several universities across the country. At the University of British Columbia students enrolled in

English 427, "Studies in First Nations Writing," will be asked to read the following: Jeannette Armstrong's Slash, Maria Campbell's, Halfbreed, Beatrice Culleton's In Search of April Raintree, Linda Griffiths and Maria Campbell's The Book of Jessica, Tomson Highway's The Rez Sisters, Thomas King's Green Grass, Running Water, Ruby Slipperjack's Honour the Sun and Shirley Sterling's My Name is Seepeetza ("University of British Columbia" 6). Similarly at the University of Toronto a student in English 254Y, "Contemporary Native North American Literature," will study a repertoire of native writers that includes work by Paula Gunn Allen, Jeannette Armstrong, Beth Brant, Maria Campbell, Louise Erdrich, Joy Harjo, Tomson Highway, Basil Johnston, Emma LaRoque, Lee Maracle, N. Scott Momaday, Daniel Moses and Leslie Silko. This course description stresses the placement of these works in a current social, political and cultural sphere: "The writings are placed within the context of aboriginal cultures and living oral traditions" ("University of Toronto" 10). McMaster University offers a course that is essentially the same as the two aforementioned courses, offering The Rez Sisters along with novels by Beatrice Culleton, Thomas King and Louise Erdrich. Through these three examples, we can see a canon of native North American literature emerging that very clearly includes Tomson Highway. Within this canon, Highway is the only playwright to appear repeatedly. As has been previously discussed, there are other native playwrights, but none of them is as consistently taught as Highway.

Schoolnet, an on-line course recommended for students of Grade 11, offers a course of study on "Images of Aboriginal Peoples in Canadian Literature." The students are asked to examine many different issues surrounding this topic and one of the questions reads as follows:

Native theatre has exploded over the past decade. Obtain a play by one of the following playwrights: Tomson Highway, Drew Taylor, Daniel David Moses, Monique Mojica, Margo Kane, Billy Merasty.

Choose a short scene and perform it for your class. Be sure to explain to the class why you selected the scene, and get their impressions afterward ("Images of Aboriginal Peoples in Canadian Literature" 5-6).

Highway is placed at the top of this list, perhaps indicating to students that he is the first native playwright in terms of significance. None of these other dramatists has achieved the success that Highway has and it is refreshing to see the work of these more marginal playwrights being studied at the high school level. Highway's place as the most celebrated native playwright in Canada is clearly even further reinforced through his placement on curricula. Note as well that this course is intended for high school-aged people, a much younger target audience than the aforementioned university courses or even a regular subscribing audience to a regional theatre.

Highway's plays are very often featured in university courses devoted to the study of Canadian Literature or Canadian Drama. These courses are often second- or third-level courses and thus will attract a broader cross-section of the student population. Hence, Highway's plays are likely to reach more students through a course on Canadian literature than a course specifically on native literature. At the University of Manitoba, English L03, "Focus on Canadian Literature since 1967," examines "works that...explore widely divergent aspects of the 'problem' of Canadian identity...ways that class, race, region, gender and ethnicity work to construct the artist's sense of identity and his or her relationship with Canadian culture." Highway's Dry Lips is on the syllabus along with Margaret Atwood's Bodily Harm, Joy Kogawa's Obasan, Timothy Findley's The Stillborn Lover, Di Brandt's Questions i asked my mother and Robert Kroetsch's Seed Catalogue ("University of Manitoba" 6). The pairing of Highway and Atwood is a frequently repeated match. Margaret Atwood is, of course, a Canadian writer of international renown, having received numerous prizes and awards, including the Governor General's Award and the Booker Prize, and holds several honorary diplomas. Atwood

has seemed to surpass her status as a great Canadian writer and become simply a great writer. Her work is recognized, read, taught and studied all over the world. Highway's work, though not important in the same degree as Atwood's, is expressive of issues surrounding Canadian identity and thus has been included with hers on this syllabus.

Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, offers a course on "Canadian Literature and Culture" which is described as follows: "We will consider issues of national identity both within an officially bilingual, bicultural Canada, and for Canadians within a North American Context -- defining themselves in relation to a powerful neighbour to the south" ("Kenyon College" 10). Novelists on the course listing include Margaret Atwood, Robertson Davies, Mordecai Richler, Michael Ondaatje, Gabrielle Roy, Marie-Claire Blais, Anne Hébert. The course also looks at the work of short-story writers Mavis Gallant, Keath Fraser, Rudy Wiebe, Margaret Atwood, Margaret Laurence, Thomas King and poets Earle Birney, Irving Layton, Al Purdy, John Newlove, Daniel David Moses, Daphne Marlatt, P.K. Page and Beth Cuthand. Highway is the only writer from among those on the list who is a dramatist. Here he is not a representative of native Canadian play-writing, but a representative of Canadian play-writing in general. This is an indication of the value placed on his work within the Canadian literary canon and his placement over other playwrights in Canada. According to this professor, Highway is the best Canadian playwright to articulate, for the purposes of study, issues surrounding the notion of the Canadian identity.

The University of British Columbia offers English 423, a course on "Canadian Drama" that uses as its primary text Wasserman's two-volume anthology, contained in which is Highway's Dry Lips. The on-line calendar describes the course thus: "This course will take a glance at the evolution of contemporary Canadian drama generally..." ("University of British

Columbia" 5). It is not surprising that Highway's work would be included under such a rubric, as his contribution to contemporary Canadian theatre has been significant. An examination of the other plays on this course demonstrates how Highway fits into the evolution of the loosely-defined Canadian dramatic canon. In another incarnation of this same course, on British Columbia's Knowledge Network's Open University, a weekly series of television programmes examines one Canadian playwright and his/her work. It is a "survey course in Canadian drama from 1967-1992" and is "designed to introduce you to contemporary drama and theatre in Canada..." ("Open University" 1). The textbook remains Wasserman's two volume Modern Canadian Plays. Students are asked to watch one-hour weekly segments that include the following plays: Ryga's The Ecstasy of Rita Joe, Tremblay's Les Belles Soeurs, Pollock's Walsh, Cook's Jacob's Wake, Walker's Zastrozzi, John Gray and Eric Peterson's Billy Bishop Goes to War, Joan MacLeod's Toronto, Mississippi, Robert Lepage and Marie Brassard's Polygraph, Sally Clark's Moo, Ann-Marie Macdonald's, Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet), Highway's Dry Lips and Judith Thompson's Lion in the Streets. This list clearly expresses the evolution of dramatic writing in Canada over the last several decades. Earlier playwrights like Ryga and Cook belong to the white mainstream, the starting point of Canadian drama, while playwrights like Tremblay and Pollock demonstrate an offshoot from the previously English-Canadian male domination over the Canadian theatre. The more recent plays on the list show a straying even further from the mainstream with the avant-garde theatre of Robert Lepage, the feminist/lesbian writing of Ann-Marie Macdonald and the First Nations perspective presented in Highway's work. So while Highway's work is a more recent addition to the evolution of Canadian drama, it is nonetheless an important and integral one.

At the University of Copenhagen one of his plays is featured on a course entitled

"Canadian Literature." This is "a survey course concentrating on a small range of topics." These topics include:

Versions of Prairie Realism in Frederick Philip Grove, Sinclair Ross, Margaret Laurence and Alice Munro, the poetry of Al Purdy, Margaret Atwood and others; Images of Multiculturalism in Joy Kogawa and Michael Ondaatje; the indigenous Population as seen by others (Newlove, Wiebe et al.) and themselves (Tomson Highway, Thomas King) ("University of Copenhagen" 13).

This syllabus reflects a familiar grouping of authors. Here we see Highway placed in the same context as Kogawa and Atwood, as we have seen before, as well as a placement with Ondaatje, another Canadian author of great renown. Most of the writers on this list and on previous ones are generally more prolific than Highway, are more internationally known and have won more literary awards than he. Many of these writers have won the Governor General's Award and while Highway has been nominated twice, he has never won. These facts do not stop his plays from being studied alongside great Canadian authors nor his work from being valued in the same light by being placed in this context.

Tomson Highway's writing has made enough of an impression upon academia for professors in Canada and the United States to offer one or both of his plays in a course that does not deal specifically with Canadian Literature or native Literature. Several of these courses offer one of his plays in either a general English literature survey course or a course on the intersection of literature and politics within the sphere of World literature. There is no denying that Highway has become an important writer. According to Dalhousie University's English Department his writing is as important as that of Toni Morrison and Chinua Achebe. In its introduction to the course listings the department's philosophical mandate states: "English is a discipline which can and does adjust to include writings by Tomson Highway, Toni Morrison, Chinua Achebe alongside the works of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Austen and the rest..." ("Dalhousie

University" 2). Here the university has created a triumvirate of non-white writers which may be studied in juxtaposition to or in harmony with other highly canonical authors. Highway is classified not only as a playwright worth studying, but as a writer who, while divergent from the traditional canon, is being given equal importance. He is also given equal status to that of African-American Morrison and Nigerian Achebe, two of the most influential, important and internationally renowned writers of this century. Morrison is a Nobel and Pulitzer Prize winner and Achebe has been awarded numerous international literary awards and holds more than twenty honorary doctorates from universities around the world.

At least two universities in Canada include Highway on a broad survey English course that features writers from all periods and genres of Western literature. Survey courses like this are likely to be taken by hundreds of students from many different disciplines across the university. McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario has The Rez Sisters as required reading for English 1D6, the only first-year English survey course. The course description reads, "A selection of various areas of literary study (such as periods, genres, contexts and approaches) will be examined using texts from a wide variety of periods and forms in English literature" ("McMaster University" 5). In this context Highway's work would be studied as a work of dramatic literature alongside long-standing canonical world poets, short-story writers, novelists and other dramatists such as Shakespeare, Faulkner and Atwood. Clearly the English Department at McMaster, like that of Dalhousie University, deems his work worthy to be included in the company of some of the most important writers of the Western literary tradition.

At the University of Northern British Columbia in Prince George, British Columbia, Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing has been on the syllabus for three different sections of a course entitled English 100, "Introduction and Theory." This course is designed as "an

introduction to methods and theories used for understanding literature and its relation to culture" ("University of Northern British Columbia" 1). As such, it offers in Section 1 Highway's play along with Williams' A Streetcar Named Desire, Chinua Achebe and C.L. Innes' African Short Stories, Hayden Carruth's edition The Voice That is Great Within Us and Ross Leckie's The Introduction and Theory Booklet. Already a pattern has begun to emerge whereby Highway is paired with Chinua Achebe, both of whom are representative of post-colonial literature. Highway is also paired here with another gay playwright, Tennessee Williams. Both A Streetcar Named Desire and Dry Lips deal with male sexuality and power in unique but similar ways.

In Section 2 of this same course, Dry Lips is on the syllabus with Alice Munro's novel Lives of Girls and Women, Gary Geddes' poetry anthology 20th Century Poetry and Poetics, and once again Chinua Achebe and C.L. Innes' African Short Stories as well as Ross Leckie's The Introduction and Theory Booklet. Munro and Highway are the only representatives of Canadian literature here. Munro is a double-Governor General's Award-winner and Booker Prize runner-up. Highway's plays, though award-winners, have not achieved the kind of national critical success that Munro's work has. In the third section of this course, "an introduction to the three major literary genres: fiction, poetry, drama" ("University of Northern British Columbia" 2), Dry Lips is on the syllabus with Timothy Findley's Not Wanted on the Voyage, Joy Kogawa's Obasan, Achebe's African Short Stories, and the Harbrace Anthology of Poetry. Findley, a prolific novelist, playwright and television and radio script-writer, is a more critically celebrated author, as is Munro, than Highway. Findley won a Governor General's Award for his novel The Wars and has had numerous plays and television shows produced in Canada. Kogawa and Highway make another post-colonialist pair, one that we will see repeated. Both writers are members of a visible minority whose work confronts issues surrounding the struggle of the non-



white in Canadian society.

In other universities, Highway's work is included in courses aimed at combining writing and its political environment. Both the University of Toronto and Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago, offer a course of this nature. The University of Toronto's English 140Y, called "Literature for our Time," is described as "An exploration of the ways 20th-century literature responds to the complex realities of our world... [it] include[s] works that engage significant issues of their day." The course features the work of Faulkner, Gordimer, Joyce, Morrison, Munro, Naipaul, Rushdie, White, Woolf, Beckett, Highway, O'Neill, Shaw, Soyinka, Stoppard, Eliot, Frost, Heaney, Plath, Rich, Wayman, Walcott, Yeats ("University of Toronto" 7). Here we see Highway included not only on a list of post-colonial writers but in the same category as such long-standing canonical writers as Beckett, Woolf and Shaw. Highway is, however, the only representative of a native voice and as such he represents all native literature that addresses issues concerning indigenous populations as a "significant issue of [its] day."

The department of Theatre at Northwestern University in Chicago includes both of Highway's published plays on a course entitled "Contemporary Drama, Theatre and Resistance." As the on-line course calendar explains, "This course will examine a range of contemporary plays and contemporary theatre practices, as modes of cultural negotiation and political inquiry." The playwrights featured on the syllabus include Beckett, Bond, Brecht, Caryl Churchill, Brian Friel, Athol Fugard, Cherrie Moraga, Wole Soyinka and Luis Valdez among many others ("Northwestern University" 10-11). This syllabus blends canonical writers who were revolutionary in their day, like Beckett and Brecht, and contemporary playwrights whose writing is subversive to notions of colonial oppression like Fugard, Soyinka and Highway. Within this list he is the only representative of a North American indigenous population. As with the

University of Toronto course, Highway is included with many world-class, highly and internationally respected authors. What is most surprising is that this course is offered in Chicago, a city in which neither The Rez Sisters nor Dry Lips is likely to have been performed. It makes sense that the University of Toronto, a university in a city that has seen major and minor productions of all of Highway's plays -- not just the two published ones -- would be familiar enough with his work to offer it on a course. Evidently, his plays are applicable enough to students and educators to cross borders. This demonstrates even further the kind of monopoly Highway has over the native play writing market. Highway is not only Canada's best native playwright, but, it would seem, the best native North American playwright.

It is hardly surprising that Highway's plays have been so readily embraced by academia. There are many facets of his work that make them readable, teachable and accessible for students of all ages. His unique blend of Western theatrical convention infused with a Cree sensibility added to a writing style that combines humour, pathos and tragedy makes his work original and readable. Not to be overlooked is the discussion that the reading of his plays may provide. Many students may be approaching reserve life for the first time through Highway's plays. Both plays expose the uninitiated to the realities of modern life on the reserve and many of the social and political issues facing indigenous people today. So from a purely pedagogical standpoint, the plays are an excellent teaching tool for the content they present, as well as for the format in which they are presented.

There are three different environments to consider here -- in fact three separate canonizations to dissect. Within the native Canadian and North American canons that were presented in the first part of the chapter, Highway seems to be the most frequently included dramatist. In many cases he is the only playwright included on the course listing. Highway seems

to have a kind of monopoly in this arena. Very few -- if any -- other native playwrights in North America are writing plays that are as accessible to a general audience as are those of Highway. There are undoubtedly other native playwrights that could be included on these syllabi, like Drew Hayden Taylor, for example. Taylor has in fact written several plays that are specifically intended for use in schools and universities. His work is much more pedantic, however, and has not found an effective balance of Western convention and native elements. Plays of his like Toronto at Dreamer's Rock are much more simplistic than Highway's and demonstrate inferiority of writing style in comparison.

Within Canadian canons, he is always the only native playwright to be included, and often one of a few native writers on the list. Often these courses on Canadian literature address the issue of multiculturalism in Canada and notions of Canadian identity, and the inclusion of a native voice is an important perspective to present in this context. Although Highway may not be as celebrated a writer as someone like Margaret Atwood or Michael Ondaatje, his voice contributes a unique perspective in a unique form to the comprehensive addressing of these specifically Canadian issues.

But Highway's importance can and does move out of the Canadian sphere. In the last part of this section we observed Highway's inclusion on several courses that provide students with an international selection of required reading. In these cases Highway is most frequently used as a representative of a voice from a group of indigenous writers. He is in no way the same calibre of writer in terms of international recognition, awards and prestige as someone like Toni Morrison, yet he is repeatedly grouped together with highly celebrated writers like her. His work in this forum seems to be a means of introducing students to another post-colonial perspective, that of a native North American, and as such his plays are included on courses because of the content of

the plays and his perspective, not solely on artistic merit. So again we see in most of these circumstances, Highway is presented as the token native, but mostly out of necessity, I would argue. Highway's are the most accessible, original and teachable plays available from a Canadian First Nations perspective. If an instructor is interested in presenting a native perspective in theatre on his/her course, there is very little from which to choose, a fact which constantly reinforces Highway's acceptance within the white mainstream.

## *2. Highway at Stratford? Not Quite...*

Another important facet of Highway's current status as popular artist is his placement within the national repertoire, in addition to his presence in the academic sphere. An analysis of the frequency with which his plays are given productions in Canada and the United States will establish his current theatrical position. As was demonstrated in Chapter One, both of Highway's published plays have played in theatres across Canada from Centaur Theatre in Montreal to the Arts Club Theatre in Vancouver. Apart from the original and touring productions of both The Rez Sisters and Dry Lips, there have been significant remounts of both shows at major regional theatres in large Canadian cities. I will take a brief look at two such productions: the 1990 Alberta Theatre Projects' (ATP) The Rez Sisters and the 1995 Vancouver Arts Club production of Dry Lips.

Calgary's Alberta Theatre Projects' 1990 production was a significant milestone in the history of The Rez Sisters. This came only one year after the first touring production had finished, and was the first step towards the establishment of Highway in the current theatrical repertoire. The cast and production team were completely unaffiliated with the original production, which seems to have been to the play's detriment. This production also cast two non-

native actors among the mostly native cast. Director Allen MacInnis's cast was made up of six native actors: Bernelda Wheeler as Pelajia, Cheryl Blood Bouvier playing Marie-Adele, Pamela Matthews as Emily, Tina Louise Bomberly as Veronique, Lee Crowchild as Nanabush and Shirley Cheechoo in the role of Annie Cook. The actors playing Philomena and Zhaboonigan were both non-native, Jane Logie and Loretta Bailey. Martin Morrow, of the Calgary Herald, calls the acting "uneven...the actresses here are of decidedly mixed ability," and goes on to say that "characterizations, for the most, part, haven't jelled." He has some harsh words for some of the actors; for example Wheeler's "delivery seldom goes beyond a stiff recitation of her lines," and Lee Crowchild as Nanabush is "none too nimble." The acting was just one of the play's many faults according to Morrow, who expands upon the weaknesses of the directing, script and set. He calls the staging "uneasy," and the set "ramshackle...[it] sits unsteadily on a frequently used stage revolve and seems in danger of collapsing on the cast" (Morrow D1).

Morrow makes a pointed comment on the social and political implications of the play and brings up some issues that had not been dealt with in earlier reviews of The Rez Sisters. He says, "In a time of anger, it attempts to give us an understanding. In a time of barriers, it shows us common ground." These comments are particularly poignant and timely as this production in Calgary coincided with the armed standoff between Mohawk Warriors and the Canadian National Guard at the Kanesatake reserve in Oka, Québec, that took place during the late summer of 1990. However, Morrow is quick to point out, clearly and unapologetically, that "It isn't a great piece of dramatic writing, there are some fundamental flaws, but it is a significant one" (Morrow D1). This is the first articulation by a critic of the paradox of Highway's writing, and is a highly significant realization for the implications of his canonization. It is a significant play

because it successfully articulates for a white audience some of the issues surrounding native life today. Although the way the material is presented is "fundamentally flawed," the material itself is important and thus the play is awarded significance. Perhaps a large part of the reason that this play was produced by ATP at this time was simply because of the Oka crisis and the accessibility of native issues to the contemporary audience. Morrow says that the play has "nothing to do with Oka" (Morrow D1), but I would argue that this production of The Rez Sisters has everything to do with Oka. This production was likely to do several things for ATP. Firstly it was likely to draw audiences because of the topical nature of the content of the play. It was also likely chosen because of the message it brings of accessibility and understanding. As Morrow states: "In a time of barriers, it shows us common ground" (Morrow D1). Again we see that Highway's plays are chosen as a sort of indigenous ambassador to the white public. In this production's being deigned "flawed but significant" by the Calgary critic resides the fundamental fact of his canonization. He is not the greatest playwright, but he is the best native playwright.

After the momentous 1991 production of Dry Lips at the Royal Alexandra, major remounts of the show were infrequent. Four years after the Royal Alex production closed, however, there was a notable production at one of Vancouver's regional theatres, The Arts Club Theatre. In this production, a concerted effort was made to cast First Nations actors in all of the roles and engage native theatre professionals for the production team. The play ran from March 24 to April 15 and was directed by D. Maracle, a Mohawk. In this production, the previously noted problems of finding a native cast with uniform ability and skill seem to have been surmounted. This point was stressed in Robert Mason Lee's article in the Globe and Mail. In it he lists the ancestry of all significant cast and production team members. Evan Adams, playing Creature Nataways, and Sam Bob who played Zachary are both Coast Salish. Marie Humber

Clements and Tracey Olsen as Nanabush and Big Joey, respectively, are Métis. Glen Gould in the role of Simon, set designer Teresa Marshall and Denise Lonewalker, playing Dickie Bird, are all Mi'kmaq, Lonewalker being also of Hopi and Apache ancestry. Garrison Chrisjohn as Spooky Lacroix is Iroquois, costume designer John Powell is Kwakwaka'wakw (Kwakiutl) and assistant director Sophie Merasty is Cree (Lee D2). Barbara Crook of the Vancouver Sun called the play "a spirited evening that also introduces Arts Club audiences to the talents of First Nations designers and actors whose work deserves to be showcased" (Crook H8). This important production is a step in the direction of the establishment of more native-run theatrical ventures. These West Coast native actors have not been in successive previous productions of Highway's plays, as is the precedent with his productions, and represent a new generation of Canadian native actors. With Highway's work at NEPA and the success and publication of his two major plays, he has laid the groundwork for successful all-native ventures like these which will hopefully lead to the establishment of more formal venues all over Canada and future productions of this sort.

Barbara Crook speaks highly of this production, saying, "Having studied the play and seen less successful productions, however, it is gratifying to see how well this interpretation works. Themes and conflicts that didn't fully make sense before....spring to life here." The only problematic production element is the casting of a woman as Dickie Bird Halked. She says, "Casting Lonewalker as Dickie Bird is an unusual choice that achieves only mixed success" (Crook H8). Robert Mason Lee in the Globe and Mail also enjoyed the production, particularly the set, which he described as "a breathing, brooding presence of earth and moon in dreamtime" (Lee D2). Clearly this was a successful and innovative production, which seems to have avoided the kind of controversy that the 1991 production garnered. The fact that major regional theatre

companies in Canada like the Alberta Theatre Projects and the Arts Club Theatre are producing Highway's plays well after each of their original debuts lends credence to Highway's position within the national repertoire.

Aside from major productions like the two aforementioned, Highway's two published plays have also been produced in smaller regional theatres such as Theatre Aquarius in Hamilton, Ontario, in 1995 and The Grand Theatre in London, Ontario, in the same year. Both of these cities are predominantly white, largely conservative communities where the kinds of issues Highway's plays present are rarely seen on stage. Remounts of The Rez Sisters and Dry Lips are not a thing of the past; this year's season at the Sudbury Theatre Centre in Sudbury, Ontario, featured The Rez Sisters. The rest of the playbill offered standard Canadian and Anglo-European fare such as Wingfield's Progress, A.R. Gurney Jr.'s Love Letters, Mrs. Warren's Profession, a staged adaptation of The Secret Garden and J.B. Priestly's An Inspector Calls. A few other more marginal Canadian pieces were also offered, but Highway was the only major Canadian dramatist to have a play produced by this company this year. As with Highway and curricula, we see here the placement in the same theatrical context of Highway's work and that of highly canonical writers like Shaw. This further demonstrates Highway's solid foothold within Canada's white mainstream theatrical consciousness.

While Highway's plays are standard fare for theatres large and small in Canada he is only beginning to gain modest recognition at the experimental and university company level in the United States. This dichotomy is not unusual, however, as no popular Canadian playwright has reached a similarly elevated status in Canada and the United States. Nonetheless, I found his plays, in one form or another, being performed in four different American cities within the last five years.



It is not surprising that a play like Dry Lips would be produced in a city as cosmopolitan and theatrically vibrant as New York City. This year, New York's La Mama Experimental Theatre Club presented Highway's second major play as part of their season. La Mama "has become an internationally recognized venue for the creation of new work" and has featured over the last thirty-six years many "cutting-edge ensembles." The group is also dedicated to producing work by playwrights from around the world, and especially work that is politically motivated. The 1996/97 season featured Israeli playwrights Victor Attar and Geula Jeffet Attar, Bulgarian Peter Todorov and Yugoslavian Ivana Vujic. The company also offered works by visiting groups such as The Polish Theatre Institute and L.E.F.T., The Latino Experimental Fantastic Theatre. La Mama highlighted Canadian playwrights Richard Fowler and Tomson Highway, and the work of Americans Johnny Barracuda and Edward K. Evans ("La Mama Experimental Theatre Company" 1). Even in a theatrical Mecca like New York City, his work has not reached the kind of mainstream popular appeal that it has in Canada.

It would seem that the La Mama production of Dry Lips was the most professional attention the play has gotten in the United States, according to my research. I have found that The Rez Sisters has been given performance at a few other apparently small, relatively marginal theatres. The play ran for a mere two days, November 25 and 26, 1994, at the American Indian Heritage Centre in Tulsa, Oklahoma, an atmosphere probably similar to the original production of The Rez Sisters at the Native Canadian Centre of Toronto ("State Arts Council of Oklahoma" 1). It also played the New Heights Theatre in Texas. A staged reading of his as yet unproduced new musical Rose was given not in Canada at all, but at Illinois State University's Second Annual Festival of Native Plays which ran from November 10 to 19, 1995.

### 3. *The Man; the Art; the PR.*

Highway has reached a position of prominence in Canada that extends beyond the domain of the professional theatre. He is one of the few contemporary playwrights to have achieved a level of public prominence apart from his success as a writer. There are many different aspects of public life in which Highway has been involved that increase his societal profile and make his work more well-known. Highway's ebullient personality, wit, intelligence and numerous talents make him an ideal candidate for a life in the public eye. From motivational speaking to advertising, this playwright has made a name for himself almost as much in the public sphere as in the world of theatre.

Public speaking seems to come easily to Tomson Highway. His manner of delivery is casual, honest and engaging. It is not surprising that he and his agent have capitalized on these favourable qualities in his self-promotion. He has been involved in public speaking ventures, in different incarnations, for several years. In 1990 he was the host of the Dora Mavor Moore Awards in Toronto, a ceremony that he had attended frequently in past years and at which he had won several awards, including the previous year when he had received four Doras of his own. In 1993 he gave the commencement address at his alma mater, the University of Western Ontario. One year later he was awarded the prestigious Order of Canada.

One of his speaking engagements that I find both intriguing and ironic was at a conference entitled Choices for the 21st Century which ran from May 14 to 17, 1995, in Winnipeg. The conference "was designed to showcase effective business/education partnership models and to focus on clear strategies for business and education to work together to better prepare students for the world of work." Highway was one of "an eclectic group of plenary speakers" which seemed to include mostly executives like Greg Mason, Managing Partner,

Prairie Research Associates Inc, Gordon Cressey, President of The Learning Partnership and Susan Hart-Kulbaba, President of the Manitoba Federation of Labour. Eclectic would certainly be an accurate description of the grouping; Highway's inclusion among these executives and civil servants seems almost random. However, an article written on the success of the conference gauges the audience's response to his address: "Highway's words were heard by a hushed audience as he spoke of his life from his birth on a northern trap-line to the current day where he lives in Toronto and travels worldwide. Education played an important role as his life unfolded" ("Choices for the 21st Century" 1). His perspective was likely a refreshing change from the lectures on financial management and his presence must have lent an air of diversity to the event.

One of the highlights of this conference seems to have been a series of presentations entitled "Disney Day" during which representatives from the Disney corporation gave talks entitled "Service, Disney Style" and "Management, Disney Style." The pairing of Highway's talk with the strong presence of the Disney corporation is rife with incongruities. Disney's recent feature-length cartoon Pocahontas has been met with harsh criticism by native and non-native groups due to the film's racist undertones, its colonialist attitude and promotion of stereotypes. The juxtaposition of Highway's First Nations perspective and Disney's big-business approach to North American history may have provoked a spirited discussion, or perhaps the contradiction went entirely unnoticed.

Highway is a featured speaker for an organization called VOXTALKS, a company that arranges public speaking engagements for corporate, education-oriented and public audiences: "VOXTALKS are based on the philosophy that ideas make a speech last beyond the moment. VOXTALKS involve those who have ideas that can change - shape - assist us all as we explore our futures." Other speakers included in the company's repertoire are media mogul Moses

Znaimer, chair of the Ontario Arts Council Paul Hoffert, hockey star Ken Dryden, writer and broadcaster Daniel Richler, television journalist Pamela Wallin and sex educator Sue Johansen ("VOXTALKS" 2). This is another eclectic group of people whose careers and backgrounds are greatly divergent. And yet again Highway is included on a list of people that are by and large white and of European descent.

A 1992 article in Eye Weekly magazine reveals a side of Highway that is not often emphasized: Highway as model and product promoter. This article concerns Highway's leaving NEPA as Artistic Director and Floyd Favel's taking over the position. It describes "Highway, as famous for his Gap ads as for his hard-hitting play-writing..." ("On Stage, Eye Weekly" 1). The Gap is a popular and trend-setting multinational clothing store. Its advertising campaign featured celebrities, local and otherwise, wearing Gap clothing in black-and-white portrait-style photographs. The ads featuring Highway probably ran all over Toronto in bus stops, subway stations and billboards. These ads are likely to have made Highway more publicly known than any amount of play-writing could do.

Another incarnation of the Highway phenomenon is his presence in Canadian television. He has been profiled on three major television programmes over the last six years. In 1990 he was featured on the CBC's "Adrienne Clarkson Presents," a programme in which Clarkson interviews prominent Canadian artists. Other profiles have included Leonard Cohen and Karen Kain. Similarly, he was interviewed by June Callwood for Vision Network. In April of 1997 the CBC biographical programme "Life and Times" was devoted to his career in the theatre as well as his family and personal life. Other famous Canadians profiled in the "Life and Times" season include artists Christopher and Mary Pratt, cartoonist Ben Wicks, figure skater Barbara Ann Scott, sports broadcaster Don Cherry as well as Tom Jackson, a First Nations singer, songwriter

and actor. As with the VOXTALKS list, Highway is again featured with celebrated Canadians who, while having wildly divergent professions and personalities, tend to share, Tom Jackson excepted, a common Anglo-Saxon background that Highway does not.

It would seem Highway's prominence as a celebrity and a member of the First Nations has made him a figure of authority on native culture in Canada. An article in the Kingston Whig-Standard on Bruce McDonald's 1995 film Dance Me Outside clearly indicates as much. This article briefly addresses the controversy surrounding this film's native content: the script is adapted from a story by white writer W.P. Kinsella and directed by a white director, Bruce McDonald. It reads:

Given that the film is based on a novel by W.P. Kinsella who has taken heat from native groups for treading on their turf, one wonders how accurate this vision of life on the "rez" might be; although the thank you in the closing credits to native playwright Tomson Highway (who first brought the director to a reservation) does give the film a seal of approval ("News Waves" 1).

Since this film is based on "rez" life and, as we know from his plays, this is one of Highway's creative specialties, his validation of the film seems to dispel any further controversy. It is intriguing that Highway's lofty position is so secure that an approval from him indicates that a film is authentically native.

Highway, over the course of his ten years as a playwright, has been accepted by, awarded prizes from and now has equal artistic status to members of the white mainstream population that has dominated not only generations of First Nations people in North America but Highway's own life. There are many examples of this conflict such as his 9-year stay in the residential school system and resultant abuse at the hands of the Catholic priests among countless other wrongs done his people over the centuries. He has now been deemed worthy by the culture that, in the

not-so-distant past, set about to systematically eradicate First Nations people, their spirituality, language and culture. This makes his canonization all the more complicated. As with the widespread acceptance of many other minority voices into the canon or mainstream, the paradox comes when success is awarded by the oppressors.

In light of the new fascination with native life and history in the popular media and the minds of many North Americans, it is not surprising that Tomson Highway has become a popular public figure. The combination of his talent, his charismatic and engaging speaking skills and his peculiar and unique life story makes him an excellent candidate for semi-celebrity. Most importantly, I think, is that many liberal-minded, educated white people really want to like native people. Recently many of us have begun to become aware of the history of oppression and denigration of native people in North America and, perhaps propelled by an overwhelming sense of "white guilt," we want to make amends in any way we can. We want to accept and like native people, to understand them and to apologize, perhaps, for centuries of oppression. White guilt can be a very powerful motivator, and this has probably been an accelerator for Highway's success. With Highway's high visibility and accessibility to a large white audience in Canada, he is providing a sort of passageway into native culture in general. As we saw with the situation with Bruce MacDonald's film Dance Me Outside, Highway represents a sort of authority on native culture, and once he is accessed, through hearing him at a public speaking engagement or seeing his profile on the CBC, native culture is resultantly accessed. Once we have been let in to this other world, we can begin to understand it, and while being open to it we can assuage our portion of the guilt we feel about the centuries of oppression and violence that our ancestors perpetrated against First Nations peoples.

My examination of Highway's placement within the current Canadian theatrical canon

has approached the issue from several different angles. The common occurrence of Highway's plays on university syllabi across the country and in the United States and Europe is a clear gauge of his success in the academic sphere. As a popular playwright Highway has also demonstrated his appeal through the numerous productions of both of his major plays at regional theatres across the country and smaller experimental theatres in the United States. Highway has also achieved a level of fame as a personality apart from his play-writing career. The particularly outstanding factor in most of these areas is that Highway is the only First Nations playwright to have reached this kind of status. He is often grouped together with other writers and public personalities, all of whom are white. All of these diverse factors knit together to produce an image of Highway as an extraordinary Canadian who has attained prominence in areas that very few other people of First Nations descent have.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Dissecting the Highway Phenomenon

There is no disputing the fact that Tomson Highway has been accepted as Canada's foremost native playwright. One might counter that by saying that he is Canada's only native playwright. This is an extreme viewpoint, true, but not actually as severe as it may seem. Highway was the first native playwright to write plays about contemporary First Nations people in Canada and to be accepted by the Canadian theatrical and academic communities. There are others writing in a similar vein, notably Daniel David Moses and Drew Hayden Taylor, but neither has made the impact that Highway has. It has been said that native theatre in Canada has blossomed in the last ten years, but the truth of the situation is that Highway and his plays have not, in fact, paved the way for dozens of fledgling First Nations playwrights. Highway is simply the only native playwright to become anywhere near successful, reinforcing the notion that the white mainstream is not yet comfortable enough with this trend to support more than a token native presence in the Canadian theatre.

Why does white culture identify with his plays to such an extent that they are produced in regional theatres and taught in courses? What can possibly account for his being the only First Nations playwright to be successful and break away from the ghetto in which most minority voices reside? The answers to these questions involve a number of phenomena. First, an examination of his theatrical style and language will show that it is firmly rooted in the Western theatrical tradition, making his work easily accessible for a white audience. Second, several elements of his work are truly innovative. His particular brand of theatre is unique in several different ways and this also helps account for its popularity. Finally, the timing of his emergence



onto the scene is essential to understanding his success. Highway became popular along with a burgeoning of awareness of issues surrounding First Nations history, spirituality, and social problems, all of which contributed to an atmosphere conducive to the acceptance of his work.

### 1. *From Aristophanes to Brecht to Highway.*

Some First Nations theatre companies produce theatre exclusively for a native audience and consequently present works with many more traditional elements of native cultures, like dancing, singing, drumming, dressing in traditional regalia and text spoken in native languages. One such example is Tunooniq Theatre based in Pond Inlet, an Inuit theatre company that uses drumming, throat-singing and traditional dance as a means of furthering a connection to the traditional way of life (Innuksuk 22). Some other native theatre groups are passionately committed to producing highly political theatre, such as New York's Spiderwoman Theatre, which is dedicated to a feminist First Nations agenda. Neither the traditional nor the political is overpowering in Highway's plays. The political sentiments are kept at a fairly subtle level and are of secondary importance in relation to elements of character development and plot. Highway uses traditional native forms, like the figure of Nanabush, the use of spoken Cree and Ojibway and elements such as the pow-wow dancing bustle in Dry Lips, at a level that is acceptable to an audience without previous knowledge of Cree or Ojibway language and culture. While we don't necessarily understand the traditional cultural aspects of the plays or have not been previously aware of some of the social issues expressed here, we are willing to accept them because the framework within which they are presented is a traditional Western form of art with which North American theatre-goers are generally comfortable.

By virtue of Highway's formal post-secondary education in both music and English

literature, he is able to draw broadly on forms of theatrical thought and style from Western theatre history. He says,

I can combine the best of the training I had - classical structure - because my musical instruction extended far beyond just playing piano, and into the basic structure of, for example, string quartets, sonatas, and opera, which brought me to the structure of Greek dramas, and the study of painting - Rembrandt, Fra Angelico. It was just a matter of combining classical structure with Indian street reality and here we have these plays that, unlike classical forms, can speak to everyone. (Morgan and Brask 132)

Because of his extensive and clear use of this theatrical vocabulary, North American audiences are able to accept his work, although different in subject matter from the white mainstream norm, as similar enough in style to their notions of the theatrical form.

Within the body of academic and media-related criticism of Highway's work, the references to theatrical giants from throughout time runs the gamut from Aristophanes to Sean O'Casey. Links between Highway's work and Greek mythology and play-writing are plentiful in Highway criticism and his own commentary. In keeping with Highway's attempts to supplant Western notions of the monotheistic, male-dominated belief system with the polytheism of mythological belief systems he has made a conscious effort to call upon Greek mythology and use it in concert with Cree and other native mythologies. Delaware playwright Daniel David Moses writes of the importance of these myths to Highway's political and artistic agenda: "just as Greek myths served as a foundation for the plays of the ancient Greeks, so he believed that native Canadian myths can permit the development of Canadian works of equal stature" (Moses 87). The classical connections are even more direct than this. As Alan Filewod remarks, "Highway himself has said that Dry Lips is built around the cosmic conflict of Hera's furious jealousy over Zeus' infidelities" (Filewod 1992, 19). Using classical mythological allusion ensures that there

will be a basic level of recognition between his plays and a Western audience.

Dry Lips certainly owes much to Aristophanes with the exaggerated sexual traits of the female Nanabush rivalling those of the women in Lysistrata. The broad comedy that verges on slapstick, as witnessed in the character of Pierre St. Pierre, infused with a biting social commentary is highly reminiscent of Aristophanes' brand of humour. Alan Filewod writes, "In both plays comedy of character and community life expands to mythic proportions as a simple metaphor grows and transforms into a satiric gesture that reconstitutes the action, as if a sit-com turns into Aristophanes" (Filewod 1992, 19). Aristophanic comedy is one of the most pervasive theatrical forms that exists today. Highway is tapping into an ancient and easily-recognizable genre through this classical technique

Highway has borrowed not only from one of the greatest comic playwrights, but also from one of the triumvirate of classical theatre's great tragedians, Sophocles. Roberta Imboden, in her article called "On the Road with Tomson Highway's Blues Harmonica in Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing," draws a comparison between Big Joey and Oedipus. Imboden sees links between Oedipus' journey between Corinth and Thebes and Big Joey's pilgrimage to Wounded Knee. In both cases the character expects to be avoiding the destitution and destruction of his fate, but in making the journey, each exacerbates the problem. She explains:

Big Joey, in attempting to flee the fate of misery on the reservation, goes to Wounded Knee in 1973. But instead of finding liberation from his fate he finds murder and assassination. When he returns to the reservation, he brings with him the hatred and violence of the South Dakota site. Seething in hatred and despair, he becomes responsible for the three strikingly tragic events of the play. (Imboden 116)

Oedipus is faced with the same result upon his departure from Corinth and his ill-fated arrival in Thebes. Oedipus and Big Joey have in effect secured their own bloody failures while attempting

to escape their own destinies. Sophocles' masterpiece is, of course, one of the most important works of drama ever written. Highway's allusion to this great play solidifies his connection with Western forms of theatre and, as a result, his connection with a Western audience.

Highway has drawn further classical comparisons, as Ray Conlogue demonstrates in his review of Dry Lips in 1989. He says, "The first half of the play is a frenetic comedy suggestive of commedia dell'arte." He makes another connection in saying that "Highway is also using the device of the all-enclosing dream sequence (as in Taming of the Shrew)." Shakespeare and commedia dell'arte are two of the most important and influential aspects of Western theatre history. It is hardly surprising that Highway makes use of these ubiquitous forms. The fact that he merits these comparisons demonstrates how accessible his plays are to audiences familiar with these elements.

Highway's plays also make connections with the work of renowned dramatists of the more recent theatrical past. Denis Johnston puts the playwright in excellent company when he comments that "Highway is perhaps the first Canadian member of the international tradition of accomplished writers who work in their second language. Among playwrights, this tradition includes Samuel Beckett in French and Tom Stoppard in English" (Johnston 255). Robert Cushman in the Globe and Mail remarks that "Sometimes he suggests a grown-up Sean O'Casey" (Cushman 1991). The working-class environment of an oppressed people would seem to be common elements to the work of both playwrights. His new musical Rose seems to display shades of Brecht. The blending of cabaret-style music and political issues as well as the juxtaposition of serious and comic within the same breath is highly suggestive of the great German dramatist. Highway's use of trends found in twentieth century theatre as well as those of the ancients further demonstrates his ability to write within the Western theatrical paradigm. In

doing this, he is ensuring that his plays will be, while divergent from the norm in terms of content, faithful to the norms of North American theatrical production.

## *2. Highway as Theatrical Innovator.*

Novelty and innovation may be hard to distinguish, but in Highway's case there are several factors that mark him as an innovator, rather than a merely novel presence in the world of Canadian theatre. By virtue of his unique up-bringing, education and lifestyle Highway has been able to weld aspects of his life and experiences to a Western theatrical framework to create thoroughly new theatrical ventures. How many other playwrights can count within their realm of experience having been raised in a residential school in Manitoba and having spent a year in London studying classical piano with renowned teacher William Aide? How many other playwrights can say that their work combines "knowledge of Indian reality in this country with classical structure, artistic language...applying sonata form to the spirit and mental situation of a street drunk" (quoted in Petrone 173)?

What makes the man different from other people makes the playwright different from other playwrights. All of the facts of his life -- his birth on a trap-line in northern Manitoba, residential school, the effect of his classical education at the University of Manitoba and the University of Western Ontario and his work in native community centres -- enable his plays to be cohesive expressions of a unique life experience and thus a unique form of theatre. He says of this influence of Western culture on his creativity: "I can't help but be influenced by the fact that I've seen Superman or Joan Collins or Archie comic books, or for that matter, that I've heard the work of Beethoven. They are all irreparably, irretrievably a part of my imagination now" (Hutcheon and Richmond 354).

His work is, of course, not original just by accident. As has been previously discussed, Highway appropriates Western theatrical forms and styles and infuses them with a Cree perspective in terms of language, culture, contemporary social issues and spirituality. It is this fusion, and the effective balance of both elements, that makes his work original and different from other types of theatre and ensures its ability to surpass cultural boundaries. Diane

Debenham explains that

It is this liberated vision of life which Highway wishes to communicate through a 'new form of theatre,' which he hopes will blend white and Indian traditions in a positive way. His desire is to create a theatre 'as unique to Canada as Kabuki theatre is to Japan'... 'Just imagine, a Verdi opera using Indian imagery.' (Debenham 155).

Highway's plays, while easy to grasp for a white audience, are highly subversive to the dominant culture. He takes traditionally Western theatrical notions and structures (both dramatic and thematic) and uses them to show what has never been shown on stage before by a native playwright -- lives of some present-day Canadian indigenous peoples. Renate Usmiani raises the issue of the absence of an art form comparable to drama in many First Nations traditions. She says:

Contemporary native playwrights are forced to work in a genre without direct antecedent in their culture... In the best plays to emerge so far, the authors have successfully grafted the techniques of Euramerican postmodern theatre onto this traditional matrix of ritual and storytelling. The result is a theatre which shares all the surface aspects of Western postmodernism, but differs essentially in spirit. (Usmiani 126)

Not only that, but Highway is inverting the traditionally hegemonic structure of the power dynamics of the two cultures. He takes the form of the play from Western culture and re-interprets and re-presents it. He takes some tools common to the oppressive culture and uses

them to his own culture's advantage. At the same time he is appealing to the audiences from the very culture that he is in fact subverting. Roberta Imboden gives an illuminating example of Highway's unique cultural and formal fusion using Dry Lips as an example. She says:

Hera and Zachary's names are rooted in Western culture. Hera was the wife of Zeus and Zachary was the Hebrew Testament prophet. But Hera speaks Cree to Zachary, and a pow-wow bustle hangs over the poster of Marilyn Monroe on the wall. It would appear that the ingredients of the new society are composed of the richest roots of Western and native society (Imboden 119).

Another important factor to take into account when discussing his originality is the fact that he was, quite simply, the first native playwright to write plays about native people in Canada. Not only this, but his plays were the first of their kind to gain a widespread audience and to be awarded critical and popular kudos. This is not to say that a native character had never appeared on the Canadian stage before. Ukrainian-Canadian writer George Ryga's play The Ecstasy of Rita Joe featured a native woman as the main character. It may be argued that while the play is certainly sympathetic towards the lead character and shows us the horrors of white domination over indigenous cultures in this country, Ryga uses the figure of a native woman as a symbol, not as an actual person in this play. As is the wont of many Canadian playwrights, Ryga uses Rita as an anti-hero figure, an underdog in the extreme, a symbol of the downtrodden. True, Ryga is presenting a uniquely Canadian problem here, but he is presenting it as a Canadian, not as a native. This kind of appropriation, while ground-breaking in the 1960s, is no longer as acceptable today.

Highway's blending of native spirituality and Western theatrical convention combined with a sensitive, humorous and intelligent writing style has made Highway a success, if not an anomaly. Bronwyn Drainie in The Globe and Mail wrote of the Royal Alex production of Dry

Lips that "Canadian theatre history is being made this spring...what is historic, of course, is not just the raw subject matter of the play but the fact that it has been written, directed and entirely acted by aboriginal artists" (Drainie C1). The effect of his plays upon the people who have seen them, particularly in the native community, is also an important step to understanding his canonization. Rene Highway, the original Nanabush, says of the first production of The Rez Sisters and the audiences' reaction: "First of all they'd never seen all those native people on stage before, talking that way...and then the messages that are sent across to the audience, just blows people away" (Preston 143). Elaine Bomberry of NEPA agrees, saying that "seeing our lives on stage" was a moving experience: "it really touched a lot of people" ("Thank You for the Love You Gave"). Larry Lewis, director of numerous Highway plays says,

The Rez Sisters did a lot to awaken people to the fact that... Indian people are living, breathing, eating cornflakes, brushing their teeth; I mean *living*. a lot of non-native people tend to think of native people as statues in a museum, historical reference, sometimes in a romantic light, sometimes it's the drunken Indian, but whatever it is, it's a stereotype. Stereotypes don't allow for a living, breathing civilization and culture. (Preston 144)

Anne Anglin, the original Annie Cook in The Rez Sisters, remarks that the audience, more white than native, upon seeing the show at the Native Canadian Centre knew that they had encountered something new, dynamic and ground-breaking. She says, "the audience said Wow! There's something hot here!" ("Thank You for the Love You Gave").

### 3. *The Importance of Timing*

The wave of political correctness that has been underway since the second half of the 1980s has affected many aspects of life for most North Americans. This trend of cultural sensitivity and minority inclusion has seeped into several facets of home and professional life,



including everything from the Affirmative Action plans to which many businesses and government agencies subscribe to an emergence of minority voices in the arts. This trend had made a lasting effect on the way that we think, having shaped the minds of a generation. If Tomson Highway had been writing his plays a decade earlier, would he have become as much of a success as he has today? Two decades earlier? If he were writing when George Ryga was writing The Ecstasy of Rita Joe, would Highway have written that play instead? The open and accepting political climate of the time in which Highway and his two major plays were most active, roughly from 1986 to 1995, is integral to his initial highly positive reception and resultant swift canonization.

Over the last ten years, the concerns of indigenous populations of this country have been brought sharply into focus thanks to a few striking incidents, the result being a new awareness of native history, culture and spirituality. Events such as the Oka crisis, the trial of Betty Jane Osborne's killers, and Elijah Harper's refusal to vote in favour of the Meech Lake accord have all contributed to an atmosphere of acceptance and interest in issues pertaining to indigenous peoples of Canada. Not only have these kinds of issues been brought up in the national media and in the courts and in government policy-making, but this wave of thinking and political action has been directly funnelled into the arts. Highway admittedly writes with a political agenda, and reviewers and interviewers are quick to pick up on the link between his writing and current political events regarding native peoples.

Three reviews of Highway plays made reference to the Oka standoff of 1990. This was an event of great importance to many Canadians and was one in a long line of political actions being taken by native groups to counter the oppressive hold of the dominant white culture in Canada. To begin his review of the Alberta Theatre Projects' 1990 production of The Rez Sisters, Martin

Morrow writes, "With the Mohawks at the barricades and the Peigans at the bulldozers this summer, Alberta Theatre Projects' production of The Rez Sisters couldn't have come at a better time" (Morrow D1). John Bemrose's review of the Royal Alex Dry Lips starts on a similar note. He says, "Last summer, as armed Mohawks stood guard at their barricades in Oka, Que., a new image of Canada's native people forced itself on the national conscience" (Bemrose 60). In Peter Pearson's article in the Montreal Gazette entitled "Canadian Natives Speak up and Audiences are Noticing" he writes, "The Oka Crisis, intertwined with Elijah Harper's... rebuff of Meech Lake forced Canadians last year to pay attention to natives." All three reviewers remark on the importance of timing to the reception of the show and signal its relevance to the audience. Another reviewer in an article on the 1989 Theatre Passe Muraille premiere of Dry Lips commented on the contemporary interest in native issues. Jamie Portman in the Calgary Herald writes, "With native culture a current burning issue, the arrival of a new stage work by as gifted and intelligent a writer as Tomson Highway will certainly generate interest" (Portman D3).

Events other than the highly publicized Oka crisis have also put native issues on the map. The residential school atrocities became publicized in the early 1990s and the resultant trials shocked and stunned the Canadian populace. In a review of the 1995 Vancouver production of Dry Lips, reviewer Robert Mason Lee of The Globe and Mail drew an important link between Highway's play and the trial of Arthur Plint, past United Church supervisor of the Port Alberni Indian Residential School. Lee expresses his horror at the crimes this man committed and relays the words of the judge, Supreme Court Justice Douglas Hogarth: "'The Indian residential school system was nothing more than institutionalized paedophilia.'" Lee goes on to say that "More than 115 priests and pastors have been convicted in Canada for sexually abusing children in their care, many at the Indian schools." He links this to the opening of the Arts Club's production of Dry

Lips, saying, "Arthur Plint will probably die in a cage and that is not cause for celebration...The cause for celebration is the many communities...like the one on stage, that have given life to the words of Tomson Highway."

The rejection of Meech Lake Accord was one in a long line of acts of public native resistance to the dominant, governing culture. When Elijah Harper refused to vote in favour of the Accord that would have awarded Quebec distinct society status, he brought to light the reality of the quest for indigenous populations to seek retribution for past injustices. With this move, Canadians of my generation began to become aware of the mistreatment of native peoples in Canada. Today similar displays of native resistance have almost become commonplace. The media has played a vital role in the disseminating of information on issues like these to the Canadian populace. As Jamie Portman of the Calgary Herald said, native concerns are a "current burning issue" and things such as land claims, trials, treaties, residential schools and native self-government are topics that spark hot debate across Canada from high school clubs to family dinner-table conversation. Political celebrities such as Ovide Mercredi and Elijah Harper make the Canadian public used to seeing traditional regalia and continue to break down the negative stereotypes of the drunk and abusive street Indian.

In keeping with this new awareness universities, colleges and high schools are beginning to offer courses on native history, spirituality and arts, as we have seen in Chapter Two. Many universities have a Department of Indigenous Studies which may feature First Nations professors and have special programmes for native students. These kinds of departments are making important steps towards education as positive social change. This fostering of interest and acceptance allows plays by Highway and other native playwrights to become increasingly validated.

One of the most important factors in the reception of the 1991 Royal Alex production of Dry Lips was Graham Greene's Oscar nomination for his role as Kicking Bird in Dances With Wolves. Every single review of this production, seven in total and one commentary article, mentions this fact in reference to Greene's performance in the play. He is referred to as "Graham Greene, of Dances With Wolves fame" (Knelman), "Graham Greene, at the furthest remove from his wisdom-incarnate role in Dances With Wolves" (Cushman 1991), and "Greene, if you're one of those folk who missed it, the severe, Oscar-nominated Kicking Bird in Dances With Wolves" (Chapman), for instance. An article in the Montreal Gazette written by Peter Pearson, "Canadian natives Speak up and Audiences are Noticing," is devoted mainly to Greene's performance and the impact of both Dry Lips and Dances With Wolves on the collective Canadian consciousness. He says, "While this actor is becoming lionized in Hollywood, his work here deserves even greater attention. For Dry Lips, much more than Dances With Wolves, has something important to say about a strand of Canadian history which is ripping Canada's guts open." Another review article, called "Greene a Scene-Stealer in Dry Lips," seems devoted more to a profile on Greene than a review, as it features a photo not of the production of Dry Lips but of Greene as Kicking Bird. Pat Donnelly starts the review saying, "Depending on what happens at the Oscars Monday night, Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing oughta be the hottest ticket in Toronto next month." While the article is in fact a review of the National Arts Centre production in Ottawa, it is cleverly disguised as an article on Greene and the popular Dances With Wolves. The reviewer gives most attention, several paragraphs worth, to Greene's role as Pierre St. Pierre, and goes so far as to say that "the acting -- except for Greene -- is not as strong [as in The Rez Sisters]." This film and its popularity seems to have been at the forefront of a movement to portray native North Americans in a more positive and accepting light and to dispel the stereotypes that Hollywood

has so long perpetuated. While the film has come under criticism for its replacement of some stereotypes with others, it did help bring native issues to the forefront of the North American consciousness. I expect that there were more than a few audience members in Toronto who went to see Dry Lips specifically for the performance of Greene, an Academy Award nominated actor, who had, like Highway, been accepted into and awarded honours by the dominant culture.

The issue of timing cannot be addressed without looking a bit further into current popular culture for signs of a native presence. Since Highway there have been other native playwrights to emerge and find moderate success. His work and success has helped to pave the way for these other playwrights. Margo Kane's 1991 one-woman show Moonlodge and Monique Mojica's overtly political 1989 play Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots are two examples of post-Highway native plays that have undoubtedly been helped along their trajectory by his success. In terms of more widespread appeal, the popularity of the current CBC television programme *North of 60* is likely due in part to Highway's success. The show features a practically all-native cast and the issues of the show principally concern the native characters in a Northern town. One of the most popular stars of the show is Tom Jackson, who played Spooky Lacroix in the Royal Alex production of Dry Lips. In general, images of contemporary native people living ordinary lives are beginning to pervade the world of television and thus the minds of people across North America. Native actors are even becoming celebrities in their own right. Graham Greene, Gary Farmer and Tom Jackson are all becoming screen icons and sharing the screen with the likes of Kevin Costner and Johnny Depp. The more that this trend continues and the more ubiquitous native people become in the arts and the major media, the less tokenistic their presence will be.

In this chapter I have offered some answers to the question of the Highway phenomenon. His canonization remains a complex issue and concerns several factors that extend beyond the

realm of the theatre. There are several basic elements of his work that can explain his rapid rise to fame. One of the most important of these is his appeal to a widespread white audience through his exciting and innovative balance of Western theatrical form and native North American content. This combined with a poetic and witty writing style and an ebullient and charismatic personality makes him the perfect candidate for both popularity and canonization. Highway has made the kind of impact he has largely due to the political and social climate of the period in which he was writing which was highly favourable to the emergence of a native playwright. Having examined the facts of his canonization, the solidity with which he has become canonized and some ways to account for this phenomenon in the previous three chapters, in the conclusion I will re-examine these issues to uncover the ramifications of his canonization and its bearing on the Canadian theatre.

## CONCLUSION

Tomson Highway's canonization is, fundamentally, tokenism. It is tokenism out of necessity because that is all that native play writing in Canada can be at this point. There is room for only one Native playwright in the minds of audiences, critics and educators and he is the one that has been designated as acceptable. The burden of white colonial guilt has propelled white audiences and critics to seek out one token native playwright in order to lift this burden. Any more than one is not necessary. This is the case not only in terms of popular thought, but due to pragmatics. There does not exist an infrastructure to provide for anything more than a token representation of native theatre in Canada. There is no national network of regional native theatre companies that consistently produce plays for a widespread audience. This would provide for greater visibility of native theatre in Canada and propel the work of native theatre artists even further. As it exists today, there are pockets of theatrical activity, such as the previously mentioned Tunooniq Theatre and De-ba-jeh-mu-jig Theatre, but they are localized and shows are often designed specifically for an all-native audience. A problem that feeds into this is the scarcity of training grounds for native actors in this country; NEPA, for which Highway was of integral developmental importance, is one of them. Until a network of establishments for native actor training is founded, native theatre in Canada will remain relatively limited. While there may be roles written for native actors, there remains a limited talent pool from which to cast. As we saw in the first chapter, the same actors are used over and over again in Highway's plays, chiefly because there are not many other actors to choose from. The scarcity of training grounds for native actors also extends to native directors, producers and technicians of all sorts. Hence the same directors are used over and over, like Larry Lewis for Highway's plays. All of these factors may help account for the absence of a production of Highway's new musical, Rose. The

infrastructure simply does not exist to provide for a production of this play. Finding 14 Canadian native actors that can sing, dance and speak Cree or Ojibway is a logistical nightmare. So this lack of infrastructure also limits Highway's capabilities. He is climbing to the top of a ladder that has not previously existed; he is constructing it as he rises.

All of my data found on the Internet regarding course syllabi as well as his inclusion on lists of public speaking engagements, and the production of his plays alongside other all-white plays support the notion of tokenism. Repeatedly Highway is placed within an environment in which he presents a unique perspective, one that others cannot provide because they are not native. The approach to his work as taken by academics and canonisers falls into the category of tokenism when we consider the repeated criticism he has encountered in the mainstream media. Critics have said over and over again that elements of his plays are deeply flawed. Some common criticism is that his plot-lines don't string together and that his characters are over-drawn and stereotypical and that he simply needs an editor or another few weeks in workshop. Thus, his plays are evidently not being canonized strictly for their superior quality, but because of their value in another domain. His writing style is remarkably witty, powerful and sensitive - poetic in parts and visually and theatrically stunning in parts. But, "for all the flashes of brilliance," as Martin Knelman put it, there remain the structural and thematic problems that have been pointed out over and over again. However, we are ready to accept him, lumps and all -- why? There are other native playwrights in Canada, so why has white culture chosen Highway as the token native to embrace and canonize? This has to do with his particular style of dramatic writing that has found a perfect balance between Western theatrical convention and Cree language, mythology and culture. It is this balance of novelty and convention, originality and comfort -- the Western framework of the drama in terms of plot and dialogue-driven narrative,



infused with a vibrant theatricality and visual innovation based in Cree -- combined with witty, sensitive and powerful writing, that allows for his plays to be well- received by a white audience. As a counter-example, witness the plays of Drew Hayden Taylor, an Ojibway writer who has made a small, non-canonical impact on the Canadian theatre. He has not found as attractive a balance between Western and native. His plays tend toward the realistic, kitchen-sink end of the spectrum and the result is a conventional form of Western drama that, instead of blending two cultural perspectives, supplants white characters and their problems with native characters and their problems. This combined with a conventional, verging on dull, writing style makes for works that are clearly not as innovative, exciting and important as those of Highway.

As previously mentioned, the timing of Highway's emergence as a popular Canadian playwright occurred in concurrence with a climate that would be likely to allow for the inclusion of a native voice into the mainstream white canon. Contemporary political events such as Elijah Harper's refusal to support the Meech Lake Accord, the Oka Crisis and a burgeoning in awareness of native history, spirituality and culture all contributed to an atmosphere conducive to the acceptance of a new Canadian native dramatist. This will likely not happen again for another several generations but the fact is that Tomson Highway's widespread mainstream acceptance is the first step in this direction. Hopefully, over the next few decades, Highway's work will remain standard fare, but it will never be able to transcend its domain as drama by and about Canadian native people. Just as works like Lorraine Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun, August Wilson's Ma Rainey's Black Bottom or Amiri Baraka's Dutchman have entered into the American dramatic canon and become vitally important works to be studied, they will never be able to transcend their being plays by and about African-Americans. They, like Highway's plays, will reach a certain height in the eyes of academics, critics and audiences, but will never fully become part of

the mainstream; their success will always be hampered by the glass ceiling effect of the dominant culture. Until we live in a colour-blind world and construct colour-blind canons, all non-white playwrights will be canonized as different and will never be able to achieve the same status as a white writer. Highway will never be Canada's best playwright. He will be/is Canada's best native playwright. His plays will not, in this generation, supersede their classification as native plays. His work will continue to have an element of novelty because he is not part of the dominant culture.

As we have seen, one of the most problematic ramifications of his canonization has been the "mangling of the message" by the "megaphone" of large venues, high production values and more widespread audiences. The Royal Alex production of Dry Lips provided a set of problematic tensions between venue and material that ultimately harmed the integrity of Highway's play. The accusations of misogyny that flew across the country in the major media in reviews and commentaries on this production are directly in opposition to the playwright's intentions with this play and his philosophy in general. Highway's success is a two-edged sword. His canonization has furthered the place of First Nations people in the arts and has brought an awareness of issues surrounding native history, spirituality and culture to the forefront of the consciousness of many Canadians who had never before been introduced to these issues. However, Highway and the integrity of his writing have been sacrificed to a certain extent to the ultimate benefit of native theatre in Canada. As the leader of a movement that is constantly blazing a trail through unknown territory, he must expect this kind of sacrifice. The more that audiences and critics become comfortable with this movement and the more inundated we are with native play writing, the less this kind of mangling should take place.

Hopefully what his work and his canonization will provide is a pyramid effect. When

Highway stops writing plays, he will leave a place for not just one native playwright, but two or three. When those playwrights move on, they will leave a space for four or five. The more that playwrights like Highway become popular and celebrated, the more comfortable audiences and critics will be with images of native people on stage and in the everyday world. Highway has been the first to reach this kind of status, and though it is not yet evident, his success will make it more likely for other native playwrights to be accepted and produced and for audiences to see the plays and like them. An audience member who went to see a Highway play and enjoyed it will be more likely to go see a play by Floyd Favel or Margo Kane. It will no doubt take generations of native writers and actors to abolish the glass ceiling and put native writing on an equal footing with the writing of the dominant culture, for cultural boundaries that relegate texts and productions into separate categories to become blurred and eventually disappear. This may not be for hundreds of years to come, but Highway and his canonization have been the first step. As Highway says:

If we have our way native theatre will become an integral part of Canadian culture. I'm hoping for the day when we have world-class drama that speaks in Cree, that comes to us from 7000 years ago and mines my history as Shakespeare mined English... when that proud days arrives, we'll have our own home-grown Stratford (Knelman).

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