Aboriginal Theatre in Canada: An Overview

The National Arts Centre English Theatre
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This Overview features an article by Yvette Nolan, Artistic Director of Native Earth Performing Arts (Toronto), and a play, Still September, by playwright and poet Daniel David Moses. Research and additional writing contributed by Laurie Fyffe for the National Arts Centre English Theatre, November 2008.

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Introduction

This Overview is intended as a guide and reference tool to help teachers and students explore the rich depths of Aboriginal Theatre in Canada.

We begin with an essential article by Yvette Nolan, Artistic Director of Native Earth Performing Arts, a Toronto-based not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating, developing and producing of professional artistic expression of the Aboriginal experience in Canada. Yvette defines Aboriginal theatre in Canada, gives us a concise overview of its history, and highlights the remarkable growth of theatrical writing and production that has taken place across Canada since the premiere of two landmark plays: George Ryga’s The Ecstasy of Rita Joe (1967) and Tomson Highway’s The Rez Sisters (1986).

Today the work of Aboriginal playwrights is produced in theatres across Canada. Well-established companies like Native Earth Performing Arts and De-ba-jeh-muh-jig Theatre Group¹ on Manitoulin Island are celebrating decades of theatre creation sparked by a generation of Aboriginal artists dedicated to telling their history, speaking their politics, and articulating their vision of their community, this country, and the world.

In addition, Peter Hinton, Artistic Director of the National Arts Centre English Theatre, has made an unprecedented contribution to the development and production of the work of Aboriginal theatre artists for a national stage.

Welcome to one of the most compelling, vital, and artistically diverse theatrical adventures happening in Canada today.

¹ “De-ba-jeh-mu-jig” means “storytellers” in Cree & Ojibway. Located in Wikwemikong, Ontario, Debaj, as it is also known, “is dedicated to the vitalization of the Anishnaabeg culture, language and heritage, through education and the sharing of original creative expression with Native and non-Native people”. The company sees its role as providing an alternative pathway for full participation in the arts sector by Aboriginal people.

Native Performance on Turtle Island
Before Canada, before the idea of Canada, long before Vikings set foot on the island now known as Newfoundland, long before the Basques’ fished off what is now called Labrador, long before John Cabot claimed what is referred to as Cape Breton for an English king, Aboriginal people lived on this land, Turtle Island. For perhaps 15,000 years, the Aboriginal people lived and hunted and fished and harvested. Throughout that history, performance—singing, dancing, storytelling, drumming, masks and costumes—was a part of their daily lives.

That is not what we are talking about here.

Contemporary Aboriginal Theatre
In his keynote address at the 1998 Canadian Theatre Conference in Saskatoon, Robert Wallace, author of the seminal collection of essays Producing Marginality, identified the beginning of a true Canadian theatre as the 1967 Vancouver Playhouse production of The Ecstasy of Rita Joe. If that is the case, and it seems as good a beginning as any, then what does that say about Canadian theatre, and what does it say about Native theatre in Canada?

What has happened in the 40 years since George Ryga, the son of Ukrainian immigrants, turned his incisive gaze on the relations between Canada and its first people? The door opened at that moment for an indigenous theatre, through which writers like George F. Walker, David French, and Sharon Pollack walked; but it would be another 15 years before First Nations playwrights began to appear on Canadian stages, telling their own stories.

In the same way that The Ecstasy of Rita Joe marked the emergence of a growing national voice that took the stage as contemporary Canadian work, in 1982 there were two events that marked the beginning of a contemporary Aboriginal theatre.

In Toronto, a group of artists came together to create a place where Native writers, actors, directors, designers, and technicians could work together to create theatre that expressed the Aboriginal experience in Canada. Native Earth Performing Arts was launched with a collectively created piece called Native Images in Transition.

At the same time, in Saskatoon, Métis playwright Maria Campbell was working with actor and playwright Linda Griffiths and director Paul Thompson to produce the play Jessica. Their creative journey was documented in The Book of Jessica, which served as a textbook on the challenges of Western theatre practice meeting Aboriginal experience in this country.

2 Fishermen and sailors who arrived with the Portuguese on Newfoundland’s Grand Banks around 1525 from the Bay of Biscay.
Whereas the creators of *Native Images in Transition* shared an experience they wanted to translate to the stage, Maria Campbell found herself in a constant negotiation about how to express her experience through a non-Native performer (Griffiths) guided by a maverick theatre practitioner (Thompson) practised in drawing out experiences from his performers. Like the original company of *Rita Joe*, the creators were empathetic, but at the core not Native.

In 1984, Shirley Cheechoo founded De-ba-jeh-muh-jig Theatre on Manitoulin Island, effectively doubling the number of Native theatre companies in the country. Early plays at Debaj included *Respect the Voice of the Child* by Shirley Cheechoo and Billy Merasty, *Shadow People* by Shirley Cheechoo, and *A Ridiculous Spectacle in One Act* by Tomson Highway.

Then in 1986, Aboriginal theatre arrived in the consciousness of the Canadian public with the Native Earth production of *The Rez Sisters*, written by Tomson Highway, the company’s artistic director. Directed by the late Larry Lewis, Tomson’s story of seven Aboriginal women on the Wasaychigan Hill Indian Reserve (“Wasy” to its residents) who decide to travel to the World’s Biggest Bingo achieved breathtaking success. After its premiere in Toronto, *The Rez Sisters* went on to national and international tours.

However, the success of *The Rez Sisters* was a double-edged sword: while it proved to the mainstream theatre community that Aboriginal artists could tell their own stories in their own way and captivate an audience, the play became the benchmark, and perhaps the only success story the mainstream deigned to acknowledge.

To this day, Aboriginal theatre practitioners sit on panels and committees with non-Native colleagues whose entire experience of Aboriginal theatre in this country is *The Rez Sisters*.

**Who Writes the Plays?**

In 1997, Valerie Shantz, a Master’s student at the University of Alberta, struggled to find enough female First Nations playwrights about whom to write. Of those she did interview, many were no longer writing for the stage.

Male playwrights have been more successful at sustaining their theatrical careers. Tomson Highway, Daniel David Moses and Drew Hayden Taylor have all written a number of plays for the stage, and in recent years have been joined by Darrell Dennis and Kenneth T. Williams.

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Fewer women have emerged in the intervening years, though Marie Clements, Penny Gummerson, Monique Mojica and Turtle Gals have all written and been produced more than once in the past decade.

More often, writers who show promise or achieve some success on the stage have been tempted away from theatre to write for film and television\(^4\) by the promise of the production of their work and adequate remuneration.

In spite of—or perhaps because of—The Rez Sisters, the Aboriginal theatre scene began to thrive, although this growth went largely unnoticed by the broader theatre community.

In 1985, Yves Sioui Durand founded Ondinnok Theatre in Montreal. In 1991, Melvin and Rosa John founded Keewatin Native Performance in Alberta, while Margo Kane, whose play Moonlodge had premiered at the Women In View Festival the year before, founded Full Circle in Vancouver.

Tomson Highway has said that when Native Earth was founded, you could count the number of Native theatre artists working in this country on your fingers. In his effort to increase that number, he encouraged several young writers, including Drew Hayden Taylor. Tomson invited Drew, who was then working in journalism, to be Writer in Residence at Native Earth. The result was a script that Drew “took out back and put a bullet through its cover page”.

Regardless, Drew now had an appetite for writing for the stage, and his next five plays—Education Is Our Right, Toronto at Dreamer’s Rock, The Bootlegger Blues, Pictures on the Wall, and Someday—were all developed and produced at De-bah-jeh-mu-jig Theatre, before Drew moved over to Native Earth as Artistic Director.\(^5\)

**Who Produces the Plays?**

The Aboriginal theatre scene was growing, but few mainstream or non-Native theatres seemed interested in participating in that growth. Over the decades there have been a few theatres that were not intimidated by programming Native work. 25th Street Theatre in Saskatoon was one of the earliest producers of Native work, premiering works by Maria Campbell and

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\(^4\) For such shows as CBC TV’s *North of 60*, released in September 1992, written by William Flaherty and starring Tina Keeper, Tom Jackson and Dakota House; and CBC Radio One’s *Dead Dog Café Comedy Hour*, written by Tom King and narrated by Floyd Favel and Edna Rain.

\(^5\) Drew Hayden Taylor was artistic director of Native Earth Performing Arts from 1994 to 1997.
Greg Daniels,6 as was Theatre Passe Muraille in Toronto, which produced or co-produced *Jessica, The Rez Sisters, Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots* (by Monique Mojica), *The Tommy Prince Story* (by Alanis King), and *Trickster’s Cabaret* (a Native Earth Performing Arts collective creation).

Perhaps recognizing that they serve a different audience from the mainstream, popular theatre and theatre for young audiences were also early producers of Native penned work.

Two playwrights who have fared well at non-Native theatres are **Drew Hayden Taylor** and **Daniel David Moses**. Drew’s plays are accessible to a mainstream audience, largely because of his use of humour and because his plays often feature non-Native characters who act as a foil for the Native characters, informing audiences in a non-threatening way about what it is to be Native in the 20th century.

In his early play *Someday*, although all the characters are Native, the character Janice has been adopted and raised by a white urban family, and brings that perspective with her on her return to the reservation from which she was scooped.7

Drew’s *AlterNatives, The Buz’gem Blues, The Berlin Blues, In a World Created by a Drunken God, and Heat Lightning* all feature white characters who throw the Native experience into relief. Drew’s work has been translated into several languages and produced all over North America and as far away as Venice, Italy, making him Canada’s most produced Aboriginal playwright.

**Daniel David Moses** is a published poet whose work as a playwright was first produced in 1988 at Native Earth. Like all of Daniel’s stage work, *Coyote City* explores the devastation visited upon Native people by contact.8 In this case, a phone call from a ghost lures a woman to the city to search for her missing lover. In *Coyote City*, traditional Native values are swallowed by contemporary urban existence.

Although Daniel’s work first appeared at Native Earth, his next three plays premiered at non-Native theatres. *Big Buck City*, the second of his “city plays”, was workshopped as part of Native Earth’s inaugural Weesageechak Begins to Dance,9 a festival dedicated to the

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6 Between 1981 and 1998, 25th Street House premiered *Four Horses, Percy’s Edge, and Blind Girl Last Night* by Greg Daniels, *One More Time* by Maria Campbell and Harry W. Daniels, and the original production of *Jessica* by Maria Campbell and Linda Griffiths.  

7 Scoop: A reference to the high number of Aboriginal children who were adopted by non-Native families during the 1960s. Most of these adoptions took place without parental or community consent. In the eyes of their community, these children were literally “scooped up” and taken away.  

8 Contact: The point of interaction between traditional Aboriginal cultural practices and values and those of urban North America and Europe.

9 Taking its name from the Cree word for “trickster,” Weesageechak Begins to Dance is the title of Native Earth Performing Arts’ annual new play development festival.
development of new work; it received a full production by Cahoots Theatre Projects\textsuperscript{10} at Tarragon Theatre’s Extra Space in 1991.\textsuperscript{11} At the same time, \textit{La Belle Fille de l’Aurore (The Dreaming Beauty)} was being produced and presented at festivals in Montreal and Norway.

Daniel’s third and arguably best-known play, \textit{Almighty Voice and His Wife},\textsuperscript{12} was produced in 1991 by the Great Canadian Theatre Company, Ottawa’s oldest professional theatre company, whose mandate is to produce theatre that “provokes examination of Canadian life and our place in the world”\textsuperscript{13}

### What Makes Native Theatre Native?

#### Form, Content & Style

As Native theatre gained recognition in Canada, it naturally became an area of study and analysis. Academics began to write about what made Native theatre Native.

Some suggested that it had a circularity rarely found in the Western theatrical tradition.\textsuperscript{14} Others asserted that Native theatre always had a Trickster character, or at least a spirituality that was more evident than in the plays of the world theatre canon.

Native artists themselves struggled with these expectations, fighting for the very right to practise, and to incorporate elements of Western theatre while maintaining connections to a number of disciplines including dance, song, mask, ritual, myth, movement, and storytelling.

Native theatre in Canada is a theatre that exists in spite of the dominant culture, and so the stories have naturally been stories of survival in a world that seeks to assimilate the tellers.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{10} Founded in 1986 by Beverly Yhap, Cahoots Theatre Projects is dedicated to the creation, development and production of new Canadian plays that reflect cultural diversity.


\textsuperscript{11} Founded in 1973 by Bill and Jane Glassco, Toronto’s Tarragon Theatre is devoted to the creation, development and production of new Canadian plays.


\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Almighty Voice and His Wife} tells the story of the 19\textsuperscript{th}-century Cree hunter Almighty Voice, whose killing of a stray cow sparked an 18-month manhunt and led to the death of seven people, including Almighty Voice. The first act is a fairly naturalistic representation of the life of the title character and his wife, White Girl, leading up to his death. In the second act, however, all expectations are challenged. Our hero is a Ghost, his wife an Interlocutor. In white face, on the stage of the abandoned school at Duck Lake, they deliver a vaudevillian performance that mocks the white audience’s assumptions about what they think they know about Native history and Native existence in Canada.

\textit{Source:} Yvette Nolan, essay on \textit{Aboriginal Theatre in Canada}.

\textsuperscript{13} The Great Canadian Theatre Company (GCTC) was founded in 1973 by professors and students of Ottawa’s Carleton University.


\textsuperscript{14} The “‘traditional’ play structure is that of the ‘well-made play,’” characterized by the perfectly logical arrangement of its action resulting in a continuous tight and gradual unfolding of the motifs of action and the building of suspense.


\textsuperscript{15} Assimilate: To absorb, causing the minority culture to acquire the characteristics of the majority culture.

What makes theatre “Native”? Is it themes of colonization, healing, connection to the land, or the reinterpretation of ancient stories we have been telling here for 15,000 years? Is it drumming, the heartbeat of our Mother Earth, or singing, the expression of our humanity? Is it our languages, even as they bleed away and are replaced with English? Is it a question of form? (In their work for the stage, Aboriginal storytellers often incorporate an awareness of the connectedness of past, present and future, reminding audiences that as we live on this land now, the people who lived here first are, for us, still here.)

Time is exploded and rearranged in so much work by Native artists, from Tomson Highway’s Nanabush in The Rez Sisters and Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing to Marie Clements’ The Unnatural and Accidental Women, from Drew Hayden Taylor’s Toronto at Dreamer’s Rock to Turtle Gals’ The Only Good Indian…, from Yvette Nolan’s Annie Mae’s Movement to Melanie J. Murray’s A Very Polite Genocide. Native Earth’s Death of a Chief takes the audience from the birth of the people out of the land some 15,000 years ago to a moment just slightly into the future, when we have achieved some kind of self-governance. Marie Clements’ Copper Thunderbird splits and rearranges time to show the painter Norval Morrisseau at three different ages simultaneously, as his artworks come to life in a coexisting theatricality.

Themes, Devices & Topics

Not Vanishing

Many of the plays that emerged in the 1990s told stories of survival and reclamation of history. Like Almighty Voice, Monique Mojica’s Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots (1990) challenges the white gaze by offering up stereotypes about Native people, and subverting them.

In other plays, such as Margo Kane’s Moonlodge (1990) and Shirley Cheechoo’s Path With No Moccasins (1991), Native women must find their way back to a culture that is lost to them.

In Drew Hayden Taylor’s Toronto at Dreamer’s Rock (1992), a contemporary Native boy seeking guidance meets two young men, one from the past and one from a time yet to come, in this way both reclaiming history and offering hope for the future.

16 A view of the world relating to, or characteristic of, white-skinned people or their culture.

"Weesageechak, the trickster figure, stands at the very centre of Cree mythology... is as important to Cree culture as Christ to Western culture, still hangs round... the lakes and forest of northern Manitoba... but also takes strolls down Yonge Street, drinks beer... and goes shopping at the Eaton Centre." – **Tomson Highway**

**The Trickster**

The Trickster, who goes by many names—Nanabush, Weesageechak, Raven, Coyote—caught the imagination of artists and academics alike. As Native artists started to find new ways to tell old stories, they found a willing facilitator in the Trickster. *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* both feature Nanabush, who Tomson says “can assume any guise he chooses”.

Essentially a comic, clownish sort of character, the Trickster teaches us about the nature and meaning of existence on planet Earth; he straddles the consciousness of man and God, the Great Spirit. In Darrell Dennis’ *Trickster of 3rd Avenue East*, the Trickster character J.C. plays a big role in forcing the warring partners to make hard decisions about their lives and their futures.

There is a danger, however, in seeing Tricksters everywhere in Native works. Drew Hayden Taylor tells a story about being astonished to read an academic essay that identified the Trickster throughout his body of work. While there is the element of the Trickster in some of Drew’s work, just because it is a work by a Native writer does not mean there must be a Trickster.

**Self-Governance**

In 1997, Winnipeg’s second largest and oldest professional theatre, Prairie Theatre Exchange, produced *fareWel* by Métis playwright **Ian Ross**. *fareWel* meets the white gaze head on, examining the dysfunctions in our Native communities created by the clash of cultures and the infantilization of Native Canadians by the government, the Indian Act, and the reserve system.

One of the most successful plays by an Aboriginal writer, *fareWel* won the Governor General’s Literary Award for Drama in 1997, and went on to productions at Factory Theatre in Toronto, the Firehall Arts Centre in Vancouver, and the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

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18 The title is a transposition of the two syllables in “welfare,” the colloquialism for social assistance in Canada.

In 2008, Native Earth Performing Arts and the National Arts Centre in Ottawa co-produced *Death of a Chief*, a Native adaptation of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*.

The result of three years of workshops to develop skills and adapt the text, *Death of a Chief* incorporated singing, drumming, dance, a number of Native languages, and ceremony into the Shakespearean text to examine the current struggle to achieve a functional form of self-government in Aboriginal communities after 500 years of contact.

Once again the white gaze played a part in the reception of the play, with reviewers seemingly offended that an Aboriginal adaptation would maintain the Shakespearean language rather than using Aboriginal colloquialisms and reducing the language to "rez-speak" (the way the mainstream perceives Aboriginal people speak).

**Pan-Indianism**

One of the effects of contact and colonialism on Canada’s First Nations has been a growing pan-Indianism. The move to urban centres for work, education and opportunity, the scoops of the 1960s, the residential school system, the influence of the Church—all these things have broken the first peoples’ connection to their own particular lands.

The urban Aboriginal communities where most theatre is created are made up of artists who are removed from their histories and communities. As a result, the theatre that is created draws on a number of histories and traditions and depends largely on the memory and storytelling of the particular artists. Practices that were particular to certain groups of Native peoples become generalized. Questions arise about who can drum (in some traditions, women do not drum), what medicines can be used, whether smudging is sacred or mundane, and how to represent ceremony onstage.

The use of language becomes an issue: if, for example, a company includes Native artists from all over North America, is it logical to have them all sing in Cree?

Some artists have begun to acknowledge the pan-Indianism of their lives and to incorporate it into the work. **Turtle Gals Performance Ensemble**, founded by Monique Mojica, Jani Lauzon and Michelle St. John, addressed their diverse histories, including their hybridity, in their inaugural production. *The Scrubbing Project* started by exploring their common experience as children of wanting to scrub the colour off their brown skins. In subsequent work such as *The Triple Truth* and *The Only Good Indian...*, Turtle Gals drew from the histories of many nations to explore the role of Aboriginal people in North America since contact. The characters in *The Triple Truth* are Mi'qmak fishers, Mohawk ironworkers, Métis students,

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20 The prefix *pan-* before the name of a culture refers to that culture’s national or global reach.
21 Smudging is a cleansing ceremony performed with herbs such as sage, cedar, and sweetgrass. See [www.aboriginal-culture.com](http://www.aboriginal-culture.com) and [www.nativedrums.ca](http://www.nativedrums.ca).
22 The Cree Nation has lived for thousands of years in an area contained by the lakes and rivers that drain into eastern James Bay and southeastern Hudson Bay. See [www.creeculture.ca](http://www.creeculture.ca).
Chipewyan guides, Snare mothers, and Okanagan translators—Native people who contributed, willingly or unwillingly, to the development of Canada.

In *The Only Good Indian...*, Turtle Gals invoke the spirits of performing Indians from the Wild West shows to Euro-Disney, illuminating the lost histories of Native performers such as Gertrude Simmons Bonnin, Tsianina Redfeather, and Molly Spotted Elk.

All performance traditions are brought into play in the work of Turtle Gals: drumming, singing, violin, vaudeville, video, opera, jazz, honour songs, dance—all are tools to support the telling of the story. One of the most oft-cited moments in their first show *The Scrubbing Project* is the final song, a powwow version of *Somewhere Over the Rainbow* from *The Wizard of Oz*.

Métis playwright *Marie Clements* also blends First Nations history with world events, and Western performance traditions with Native practice in her plays. Her early one-woman show, *Urban Tattoo* (1999), uses jazz rhythms and multimedia to accompany the story of a young Native woman who assumes the identity of Hollywood actress Jane Russell as she flees the North for the big city.

*The Unnatural and Accidental Women* (2001) tells the story of several Native women killed by a man who hunts them in the streets and alleys of a major urban centre. Their deaths ruled “unnatural and accidental” from alcohol poisoning, these women are reanimated through Native song, dance, and language, and their stories are played out against a backdrop of slides and video.

**Native Humour**

Like the Trickster character, Native humour has been cited as an identifying characteristic of Aboriginal work. As with the Trickster character, we must be cautious not to assume a homogeneous humour common to all Aboriginal plays. Both Tomson Highway and Drew Hayden Taylor have written and spoken at length on the Native sense of humour in life and in art.

Drew’s plays have a strong streak of humour in them, because, as he says, “I’d rather celebrate the things that have allowed us to survive the darker times, like our sense of humour”.

Indeed, much of the humour in Native plays springs from the darkest places: Drew’s Rodney in *Someday* keeps the audience laughing in the face of the legacy of the 1960s scoop; Tara Beagan’s Izzy in *Dreary and Izzy* is an innocent childlike creature because of FASD; the second act of Daniel David Moses’ *Almighty Voice and His Wife* is vaudeville, performed by ghosts.

**Into the Future**

As Native theatre moves into the 21st century, a new wave of young artists is acquiring professional skills while maintaining strong connections to their roots and histories. Native

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23 FASD (fetal alcohol spectrum disorder): Birth defects caused by alcohol consumption by the mother during pregnancy, including facial abnormalities and impaired mental and physical development. *Source:* Native Earth Performing Arts study guide to *Dreary & Izzy*, play by Tara Beagan, study guide by Dori Skye.
training initiatives such as the Centre for Indigenous Theatre in Toronto and Saskatchewan Native Theatre Company in Saskatoon, culturally sensitive mainstream schools like Humber College (Toronto), and emerging Aboriginal academics like Michael Greyeyes and Jill Carter offer a way for Native performers to acquire tools while not losing their connection to their roots.

Not content to wait to work within the structure of the few overextended Native theatre companies that have managed to survive (with the exception of Native Earth and De-ba-jeh-mu-jig, few new theatres have lasted beyond a couple of years or a single production), emerging Native artists are creating their own companies to produce their stories: Red Sky Performance, Cheyikwe Performance Ensemble, Turtle Gals Performance Ensemble. It is no accident that these companies call themselves performance ensembles rather than theatre companies: the moniker reflects the desire and intention to incorporate a multiplicity of practices for the stage.

Nearly three decades after its first appearance, Native theatre survives in Canada, much like Native people themselves: tenacious, often invisible, poor, diverse.

But survive it does, and it insists on telling the stories of this land.

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Darrell Dennis
photo used by permission of Playwrights Canada Press

Michaela Washburn and Leslie Faulkner in the Native Earth Performing Arts production of Tara Beagan’s Dreary and Izzy
photo: Nir Bareket
**On Becoming a Playwright**

by Drew Hayden Taylor

When Tomson Highway asked me to be Writer in Residence for Native Earth Performing Arts in 1988, I had never written a play or even seen many plays. My complete writing resumé consisted of one episode of the CBC Television series *The Beachcombers*. That’s how desperate Tomson was to fill the position!

So I went in to the job having no idea what I was doing. I had wonderful guidance from Tomson and director Larry Lewis, but I was a fish out of water, and my play *The Island/Up the Road* reflected that. Its loss was no tragedy for the Canadian theatre community.

Then, Larry Lewis became Artistic Director of De-ba-jeh-mu-jig Theatre. He had workshopped that first play and asked me if I would write him another.

I said, “No, I’m not very good at it.”

“I’ll pay you,” said Larry.

“When do you want it?” I said.

*Toronto at Dreamer’s Rock* went on to great success, winning a Floyd S. Chalmers award and enjoying many subsequent productions.

After a performance of *Dreamers*, a friend who had seen all my other literary adventures hugged me and said, “Drew, I think you finally found your medium.”
Aboriginal Theatre at the National Arts Centre

The work of Canada’s Aboriginal playwrights first appeared on the National Arts Centre stage in 1991, with Tomson Highway’s *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*. A successful national tour, *Dry Lips* was a coproduction between the NAC and Mirvish Productions, Toronto. The success of *Dry Lips* was followed by Theatre Direct’s production of Drew Hayden Taylor’s *Toronto at Dreamer’s Rock* in 1992.

Between 1993 and 2003 the NAC presented *Changes* by Tunooniq Theatre from the Northwest Territories; *Generic Warrior and No Name Indians* by Ben Cardinal, produced by the NAC; *How a Promise Made the Buffalo Jump* by Michael Greyeyes, with Soundstreams Canada; *Noah and the Woolly Mammoth*, an adaptation by H. Norman, produced by Mermaid Theatre of Nova Scotia; *Governor of the Dew and The Velvet Devil* by Floyd Favel and Andrea Menard, co-produced by the NAC and the Globe Theatre, Regina; *Burning Vision* by Marie Clements, a Rumble Theatre/Urban Ink production presented by the Magnetic North Theatre Festival; *Métis Mutt* by Sheldon Elter, a One Little Indian Production presented by Magnetic North; and *Caribou Song* by Tomson Highway and *Raven Stole the Sun* by Drew Hayden Taylor, produced by Red Sky Performance Theatre.

In addition, the NAC has held workshops and staged readings of works in progress by Marie Clements, Darrell Dennis, Tomson Highway, Daniel David Moses, Armand Garnet Ruffo, and Drew Hayden Taylor.

In 2007, NAC English Theatre Artistic Director Peter Hinton directed the world premiere coproduction of Marie Clements’ *Copper Thunderbird*, about the life and work of Aboriginal artist Norval Morrisseau, and in 2008 Yvette Nolan and Kennedy C. Mackinnon co-directed the world premiere of *Death of a Chief*, a Native-inspired adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*. The 2008/09 NAC English Theatre season includes a coproduction of George Ryga’s *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, and Kevin Loring’s play *Where the Blood Mixes* is slated for 2009/10.

Each season, the NAC English Theatre invites two playwrights of Aboriginal and culturally diverse background to join the English Theatre company as Playwrights in Residence. The featured artists for the 2008/09 season are Carol Cece Anderson, an African Canadian playwright and director based in Toronto, and Joseph A. Dandurand, a member of Kwantlen First Nation located on the Fraser River about 20 minutes east of Vancouver.

For details concerning these and other National Arts Centre productions and activities, including study guides, and audio interviews with Artistic Director Peter Hinton, visit:

- National Arts Centre English Theatre: [www.nac-cna.ca](http://www.nac-cna.ca)
- National Arts Centre ArtsAlive (arts education): [www.artsalive.ca](http://www.artsalive.ca)
Billy Merasty, who plays the Old Man in Marie Clements' *Copper Thunderbird*, stands in front of Norval Morrisseau's painting *Observations of the Astral World.*

photo: Laird Mackintosh

Monique Mojica portrays the title character in *Death of a Chief*, an adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* by Yvette Nolan and Kennedy C. MacKinnon.

photo: Andrée Lanthier
Introduction to *Still September* by Daniel David Moses

The name Ojistoh means “white star,” I think, “white star,” and is probably Mohawk. It came into the modern world through a poem by E. Pauline Johnson, known in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as “the Mohawk poetess”.

Ojistoh was also used to name the Senior Citizens’ Social Club founded probably by my grandmother, Ethel Winnifred Styres Moses, a Mohawk lady married to a Delaware gentleman. This play takes place in the same Six Nations of the Grand River Iroquoian community.

The Iroquois Confederacy was imagined as a towering pine Tree of Peace. The old man who dies in the play—it pleases me to tell you—was interred behind the Anglican Church under an old pine.

Despite centuries of adapting to European fashions and adopting many material and social techniques, we still have women, family, community, the cycles of the natural world and connected spirituality at the centre of our imaginations.

Other First Nations communities, of course, might mix things differently, depending on their geographies and histories.

| I am Ojistoh, his white star, and he  |
| Island, and lake, and sky—and soul to me. |
| – Emily Pauline Johnson (Tehkionwake) |

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24 Emily Pauline Johnson (1861–1914), also known as Tekahionwake. Daughter of a Mohawk Native Canadian father and an English mother, she gave popular recitals of her poetry and comedy routines from Halifax to Vancouver. Information on Johnson may be found at [www.humanities.mcmaster.ca](http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca). The full text of *Ojistoh* may be found at [www.poemhunter.com](http://www.poemhunter.com).
STILL SEPTEMBER

A short play

by

Daniel David Moses

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A circle of light falls centre stage. In the darkness around it, at the four directions—for the moment—indistinguishable figures.

A drum begins a slow, distant heart-beat rhythm—the circle pulses slightly in time. Then the figures move and three of them go off. The figure in the north, though, only steps through the dark to pick up a waiting-room chair, and then walks, carrying it, in a spiral path into the circle of light, which reveals him to be a young orderly or male nurse, dressed in white.

This is DAVY. He puts the chair down. The light stops pulsing. DAVY takes a moment to carefully place the chair at the edge of the circle, facing inward, as if putting the chair between himself and the dark. DAVY steps back and, after a moment, sits down on the floor beside the chair.

DAVY: (To us) It’s the middle of an afternoon in the middle of September. I’m halfway down the west hallway in the Ojistoh Nursing Home—and the old man in that room is dying.

Enter from the east a second figure into the circle. It’s the activities coordinator, a middle-aged woman dressed in yellow. Call her TREECE. She has her purse.

TREECE: What’s with the chair?

DAVY: I’m blocking the door.

TREECE: Oh — kay. But she’s in there?

DAVY: She’s in there.

TREECE: (To us) We’re talking about the old man’s wife now.

DAVY: Where were you?

TREECE: (To us) Took her all of ten minutes to get here.
DAVY: From the time she made the phone call. (To Treece) What’s with the purse?

TREECE: I went to sign out. Is she okay?

DAVY: You went to sign out?

TREECE: I’m leaving. I’m going off duty. (To herself) My whole life’s in this purse.

DAVY: But she’s your aunt.

TREECE: That’s why I’m going off.

DAVY: What…?

TREECE: You’ll be fine.

DAVY: I will be fine.

TREECE: (Listening over the chair) I can’t hear anything.

DAVY: She knew. She knew it was time right away.

TREECE: She knew it was time. Yeah.

DAVY: Yeah?

TREECE: She used to be a nurse’s aide too. She’d know.

DAVY: Oh.

TREECE: The voice of experience.

DAVY: His eyes were fixed.

TREECE: His eyes?

DAVY: That’s what she said. But when she said his name…

TREECE: Did you think she was talking to you, ‘cause it’s your name too?

DAVY: When she first came into the room—

TREECE: Before she asked you to leave?
DAVY: When she said his name, I was sure—I was sure his eyes moved.

TREECE: Yeah?

DAVY: I was sure.

TREECE: It’s the hearing that goes last.

DAVY: I thought it was hope…

A moment of silence in which the drum heart-beat obviously fades and stops.

TREECE: My mother…

DAVY: Your mother?

TREECE: She volunteered a lot here. Died of brain cancer. Eleven years back.

DAVY: I— the one in that picture in the lounge?

TREECE: She used to own this toaster.

DAVY: What toaster?

TREECE: An old one. I tried to get her a new one but she said she didn’t want me wasting money. Anyway, the mechanism got stuck all the time and burned the bread. Or, or—and this was priceless—it would just pop the slice up into the air and if you weren’t standing right there waiting to catch, it would end up down on the dusty floor behind the stove.

DAVY: Funny.

TREECE: Yeah. She really loved that stupid thing. Sometimes even now, I’m sure she’s around. Yeah, yeah, I know, it’s crazy. Out of nowhere, I can smell burnt toast—(Whispering) I smell burnt toast!

DAVY: And she’s here now?

TREECE: No. No, sorry, I just meant—

DAVY: Why were you whispering?
TREECE: Oh, Auntie thinks it’s all superstition. I don’t want to upset her.

DAVY: So — that’s why you’re leaving?

TREECE: Look. She needs to be alone with him.

DAVY: Those were her instructions.

TREECE: If I stay, I know I’ll go barge in there. But if I go off duty, I don’t have to only do what she says. Soon as I step out that door, I’m going to call all three of her sisters.

DAVY: Shouldn’t you call the doctor first?

TREECE: You’re the one on duty. Oh, you’ll do fine. And Reverend Roger’s expected anyways.

DAVY: Reverend Roger?

TREECE: It’s Wednesday.

RUTH, an elderly woman dressed in red, enters from the south and steps into the circle of light by shifting the chair out of her way.

RUTH: Teresa?

TREECE: Oh, Auntie.

The women embrace.

TREECE: Is Uncle…?

RUTH: (Sits down in the chair) It’s over. It’s over and done with.

TREECE: I’ll make the calls, Auntie. I’ll call the kids, too. It won’t take any time at all.

She exits.

RUTH: It’s David? You, you should get the doctor now.

DAVY: Okay. The head nurse will know where he’s at.
RUTH: Thank you.

DAVY: You’re welcome.

He exits.

RUTH: (To us) Still the middle of the afternoon. Still September. My husband of sixty-three years, he didn’t much like it, being here. Being told what to do. When to eat, sleep, even when to go to the john. Wasn’t all that much fun. And me, I couldn’t take care of him at home, not with my heart. No lifting. Maybe if he’d been in some trouble when he was younger, maybe if he’d been in jail, you think he might have been prepared? (She gets back up) Still, he did get away on them a few times.

She exits back the way she came.

A moment of silence in which the drum heat-beat obviously begins again.

Enter from the west, ROGER, a middle-aged minister dressed in black, carrying a briefcase, and DAVY.

DAVY: It’s right there, Father.

ROGER: I know, I know. What a day.

DAVY: Can I do anything?

ROGER: Let me think.

He puts his briefcase on the chair, takes his topcoat off and drapes it over the chair back.

ROGER: And Davy, I’m a “Reverend”, not a “Father”. Anglican.

DAVY: Sorry.

ROGER: Just call me Roger. Everybody does. Are you Longhouse?

DAVY: No.

ROGER takes a stole out of the briefcase and puts it on, then digs around and finds his prayer book.
DAVY: I should go see if Treece needs any help.

ROGER: Yes, I think I’m— Oh, is that kitchen open?

DAVY: Not for another forty minutes.

ROGER: Funny.

DAVY: If you’re hungry, I can find you something.

ROGER: No, I’m fine. Just for a moment there, though, I was sure I could smell—

DAVY: Burnt toast.

ROGER: (To us) Yeah. (He exits around the chair off into the shadows) Hello, Missus.

After a moment, DAVY shifts the chair aside so it’s beside the door. He steps back and then, as the circle of light turns golden as late afternoon and the heart-beat beats, he exits, perhaps walking to the rhythm.

THE END

About the Playwright

Daniel David Moses is a Delaware from the Six Nations community along the Grand River, Ontario.

Daniel is a playwright, poet, dramaturge, editor and teacher. His plays include Coyote City, Almighty Voice and His Wife, City of Shadows, Big Buck City, and The Indian Medicine Shows.

Published poetry collections include Delicate Bodies and Sixteen Jesuses. Honours include a James Buller Memorial Award for Excellence in Aboriginal Theatre, the Harbourfront Festival Prize, and a Chalmers Fellowship.

For more information on Daniel, including lists of all publications, production photos, and a complete list of awards, visit his website at www.danieldavidmoses.com.
Selected Playwright Biographies

Tara Beagan: Of Ntlaka’pamux (Thompson River Salish) and Irish Canadian heritage, Tara was born and raised in Alberta. Her first play, *Thy Neighbour’s Wife*, won the 2005 Dora Mavor Moore Award for Outstanding New Play. Other plays include *Dreamy and Izzy*, *TransCanada, Here, boy!, Mom’s Birthday*, and *Bad As I Am*. Collective creations include *Ever Sick, Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump, Suck and Blow*, and the multi-disciplinary *Fort York*. Tara also wrote *133 Skyway*, a short film for Big Soul Productions, and *Home Time* for CBC Radio One. Tara Beagan was a member of the 2006 Tarragon Playwrights’ Unit (Toronto).


Maria Campbell: Maria Campbell is a storyteller, playwright and filmmaker of Cree, French and Scottish descent. Her plays include *Flight, Jessica* (written with Linda Griffiths), *Uptown Circles*, and *One More Time*. Maria is the recipient of the 1986 Chalmers Award for Best New Play and the Canada Council for the Arts Molson Prize. In 2008, she was named an Officer of the Order of Canada. Maria Campbell holds honorary doctorates from Athabasca University, York University and the University of Regina. She assists in the operation of Gabriel Crossings Foundation, a First Nations arts school.


Shirley Cheechoo: Born in Eastman, Quebec, Shirley Cheechoo is a member of the Cree tribe and the founding Artistic Director of De-bajeh-mujig Theatre (Wikwemikong, ON). A painter, illustrator, actress, writer, producer, and director, Shirley is the author of the play *Path With No Moccasins* and the short film *Silent Tears*, screened at the 1998 Sundance Film Festival. She holds an honorary doctorate of letters from Laurentian University, Sudbury, and is the recipient of the 2008 National Aboriginal Achievement Award. She runs a film school on Manitoulin Island, the Weengushk Film Institute.


Marie Clements: Award-winning performer, playwright, screenwriter, director, and producer whose plays include *Copper Thunderbird*, *Burning Vision*, *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*, *Suitcase Chronicles*, and *Urban Tattoo*. Marie’s work has appeared on the stages of the Festival de Théâtre des Amériques in Montreal and the Magnetic North Theatre Festival in Ottawa, and has garnered awards including the 2004 Canada-Japan Award, a Jessie Richardson Award, and a Jack Webster Journalism nomination. In 2001, Marie Clements founded Urban Ink Productions (Vancouver), as co-Artistic Director with Diane Roberts. Marie’s play *Copper Thunderbird* premiered in May 2007 as a coproduction between the NAC English Theatre and Urban Ink Productions, and was presented at the 2007 Magnetic North Theatre Festival.

Joseph A. Dandurand, a member and resident with his family of Kwakw’ala First Nation (Fraser River) has been the Heritage/Lands Officer for his people for 14 years, tasked with protecting their heritage from development in the Kwakw’ala territory.

Joseph loves to fish.
He loves to write plays.
He loves to write books of poetry.
He also loves to watch his
daughter Danessa play soccer and hockey.

Joseph is also deeply in love with and follows his rich culture.
It is his and his family’s medicine
and it carries them thru the winters
and into the spring time
when the fish start
to come back into the river.

Joseph loves to fish.

Source: Joseph A. Dandurand. For a complete list of his work, see http://www.nativewiki.org/Joseph_Dandurand.

Darrell Dennis: Dennis is a First Nations writer from the Shuswap Nation. His short stories have been published in periodicals across the country, and his work has been broadcast nationally on CBC Radio. Moccasin Flats was an official selection at the 2003 Sundance Film Festival and was adapted into a series for the Showcase Network. His one-man show, Tales of an Urban Indian, produced by Native Earth Performing Arts (Toronto), was nominated for two Dora Mavor Moore Awards for Outstanding New Play. Darrell is a student at the University of Toronto on a National Scholarship working towards an Honours degree in English and Aboriginal Studies.


Dawn Dumont: Born and raised on the Okanagan First Nation, of Cree and Métis descent, Dawn has written for television, radio, and the stage. She is a comedian who has appeared on CBC’s The Debaters and toured in both Canada and the United States. Three of her plays—The Red Moon (Love Medicine), an indigenous adaptation of Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream; Visiting Elliot; and The Trickster vs. Jesus Christ—have been produced by CBC Radio. In June 2007, her play Fancy Dancer was workshopped at the Los Angeles theatre Native Voices at the Autry. Dawn Dumont was the 2004 Playwright in Residence at Native Earth Performing Arts (Toronto).

Floyd Favel (Starr): A theatre director, writer and performer who has travelled to Siberia, Australia and northern Canada in his investigations and development of indigenous performance methodologies, Floyd Favel studied with Butoh dance and movement master N. Nakjima in Japan. He is the author of Lady of Silences (produced by Native Earth Performing Arts (Toronto)), Sleeping Land, and Governor of the Dew (coproduced by the Globe Theatre (Regina) and the NAC English Theatre), and a former Artistic Director of Native Earth. 

Penny Gummerson: Métis, born and raised in Flin Flon, Manitoba, Penny Gummerson has worked as a newspaper journalist, magazine writer, documentary filmmaker, playwright and screenwriter. Her play Wawatay received the 2002 Jessie Richardson Theatre Award (Vancouver) for Outstanding Original Play and the People’s Choice Award at the Vancouver New Play Festival. Other plays include Crossing Boundaries and Is There Bingo in Heaven?. Penny was Head Writer and Story Editor on the dramatic television series Moccasin Flats.

Tomson Highway: Born Cree on his father’s trap-line, Tomson Highway led a nomadic life in remote northwestern Manitoba until the age of six. In his teenage years he studied piano, and by the mid-1970s he had completed both a Bachelor of Music and a Bachelor of Arts at the University of Western Ontario. Tomson founded Native Earth Performing Arts (Toronto) and was its first Artistic Director (1986–1992). In 1986, his play The Rez Sisters premiered at Native Earth to great acclaim, and went on to win the 1987–88 Dora Mavor Moore Award for best new play. In 1989 Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing won four Dora Awards and the Floyd S. Chalmers Award for Outstanding Canadian Play. His first novel, The Kiss of the Fur Queen, was published by Doubleday Canada in 1998, followed by three children’s books: Caribou Song, Dragonfly Kites and Fox On Ice, all published by Harper Collins. Tomson is the recipient of numerous academic awards, including an honorary Doctor of Letters (LL.D.) from Brandon University, Manitoba. He has twice been shortlisted for the Governor General’s Literary Award, and is a Member of the Order of Canada.

Margo Gwendolyn Kane: Widely considered the “mother of Canadian Native performance arts”, Margo Gwendolyn Kane is an actor, singer, and dancer of mixed Cree/Salteaux/Blackfoot ancestry. The founding Artistic Director of Full Circle: First Nations Performance (Vancouver), Margo is best known for her one-woman show Moonlodge, which premiered at Native Earth Performing Arts (Toronto) in 1990, then toured Australia in 1997. Other performance art installations include The River-Home (Vancouver, 1996); Memories Springing/Waters Singing (Banff Centre, 1992); Princess Minnehaha at the Tikki-Tikki Lounge (Vancouver, 1992); and Reflections in the Medicine Wheel (Festival du Théâtre des Amériques, Montreal, 1987). Margo Kane won a Canadian Achievement Award from the National Capital Commission, Ottawa, in 1991.
**Alanis King:** The first Aboriginal woman to graduate from the National Theatre School of Canada, Alanis King is the author of several plays, including *The Daphne Odjig Art Show*, *Odeh Gamig Kwewak* (a.k.a. *The Heart Dwellers*), *If Jesus Met Nanabush*, *The Tommy Prince Story*, and *The Manitoulin Incident*. She is the former Artistic Director of De-ba-jeh-mu-jig Theatre and the Three Fires Music Festival in her home community of Wikwemikong on Manitoulin Island, Ontario. She was Artistic Director of Native Earth Performing Arts (Toronto) in 2000-2001.


**Jani Lauzon:** Of Métis and Scandanavian heritage, Jani Lauzon grew up in British Columbia’s East Kootenays. She is an accomplished writer, composer, Dora-nominated actress, and three-time Juno-nominated singer/songwriter. Jani is a co-founder of Turtle Gals Performance Ensemble and the creator of several children’s television puppet characters. Her theatre performance credits include *Diva Ojibway, Son of Avash, Almighty Voice and His Wife*, and the 2007 world premiere NAC English Theatre / Native Earth Performing Arts (Toronto) coproduction of *Death of a Chief*.


**Michael Lawrenchuk:** Michael Lawrenchuk is a Cree from the Fox Lake First Nation. He has worked in theatre, film and television across Canada as a producer, writer, actor and director. He is the Artistic Director (since 2000) of Red Roots Theatre (Winnipeg), and teaches and helps with the Aboriginal component of theatre and drama at the University of Winnipeg. Previously he was the Chief of the Fox Lake First Nation, and was very active in national and regional politics. Michael is a founding member of Shakespeare In The Red, a Native theatre company dedicated to the works of Shakespeare, and has taught many workshops on acting and drama.

*Source: www.northernstars.ca, accessed December 10, 2008.*

**Larry Lewis:** Larry Lewis was born in 1954 in Toronto and died in 1995 on the Wikwemikong Unceded Reserve, Manitoulin Island. As an actor he performed with Theatre Plus and Buddies in Bad Times (both Toronto), and in films with Kevin Costner and Margot Kidder; he also directed Tomson Highway’s *Aria* and the original productions of *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*. Larry Lewis was Artistic Director of De-ba-jeh-mu-jig Theatre (Wikwemikong, ON) in the late 1980s.


**Kevin Loring:** a member of the N’lakap’mux First Nation (Thompson Indians, Lytton, BC), Kevin Loring has acted frequently across Canada (Marie Clements’ *Burning Vision* and *Copper Thunderbird*) and starred in the feature film *Pathfinder*. He received the Vancouver Arts Award for Emerging Theatre Artist (2005) and was Artist in Residence (2006) at The Playhouse Theatre Company (Vancouver). His play *Where the Blood Mixes* (runner-up, Herman Voaden National Playwriting Competition) premiered at Toronto’s Luminato Festival (2008), played at Magnetic North (2008), and is set for the NAC English Theatre 2009/10 season. Kevin co-produced, co-wrote and co-hosted a recent documentary, *The Canyon War* (between the N’lakap’mux Nation and incoming Fraser River Canyon gold seekers in 1858). He is a graduate of Studio 58, and the Full Circle First Nations Performance: Ensemble Training Program.

*Source: Kevin Loring.*

**Monique Mojica**: Monique Mojica is a Kuna and Rappahannock playwright and actor. Her play *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots* was produced in 1990 by Nightwood Theatre (Toronto) and subsequently by CBC Radio, as was *Birdwoman and the Suffragettes*. A founding member of Turtle Gals Performance Ensemble, working with co-creators Jani Lauzon and Michelle St. John, Monique created *The Scrubbing Project*, which premiered in 2002 at Native Earth Performing Arts (Toronto). In addition to an extensive performing career on stage and in film, she is the co-editor (with Ric Knowles) of *Staging Coyote’s Dream: An Anthology of First Nations Drama in English* (Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2003). Sources: National Arts Centre website, www.nac-cna.ca, accessed December 10, 2008; National Arts Centre ArtsAlive arts education website, www.artsalive.ca, accessed December 10, 2008.

**Yvette Nolan**: Born in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan to an Algonquin mother and an Irish immigrant father, playwright, director and dramaturge Yvette Nolan is the current Artistic Director of Native Earth Performing Arts (Toronto). Her plays include *Annie Mae’s Movement*, *Blade, Job’s Wife, Video, A Marginal Man*, the libretto for *Hilda Blake*, and the radio play *Owen*. In 2007 she directed the NAC English Theatre / Native Earth Performing Arts world premiere coproduction of *Death of a Chief*, and in the spring of 2009 will direct the NAC English Theatre / Western Canada Theatre (Kamloops, BC) coproduction of *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* by George Ryga. Yvette was the President of Playwrights Union of Canada in 1998 through 2001, and of Playwrights Canada Press in 2003 through 2005. Source: Playwrights Canada Press website, www.playwrightscanada.com, accessed December 10, 2008.

**Ian Ross**: A Métis/Ojibway playwright and author, Ian Ross was born in McCreary, Manitoba, and has written for theatre, film, television, and radio. His play *fareWEl*, premiered at Prairie Theatre Exchange (PTE) (Winnipeg) in 1996, is a dark comedy about Native life on the fictional Partridge Crop Reserve. A national tour included productions at the Great Canadian Theatre Company in Ottawa and Factory Theatre in Toronto. The PTE production of *fareWEl* was invited to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2001. Ian has been awarded the John Hirsch Award for Most Promising Manitoba Writer (1996), the Governor-General’s Literary Award for Drama (1997) for *fareWEl*, and the James Buller Award (1999). Source: Canadian Theatre Encyclopedia (online), www.canadiantheatre.com, accessed December 10, 2008.
George Ryga: George Ryga was born of Ukrainian heritage in Deep Creek, Alberta in 1932 and died in Summerland, British Columbia in 1987. He achieved national fame with The Ecstasy of Rita Joe, first produced by the Vancouver Playhouse in 1967. Regarded by many critics and theatre historians as the first distinctively English-Canadian play, The Ecstasy of Rita Joe was also made into a ballet by the Royal Winnipeg Ballet. Other plays by George Ryga include Grass and Wild Strawberries (1969), Captives of a Faceless Drummer (1971), Sunrise on Sarah (1972), Beyond the Crimson Morning (1979), and Two Plays: Paracelsus and Prometheus (1982).


Drew Hayden Taylor: Drew is originally from Curve Lake First Nations in central Ontario. His plays include Toronto at Dreamer’s Rock (winner of the 1992 Chalmers Award for Best Play for Young Audiences), The Bootlegger Blues (winner of the 1992 Canadian Authors' Association Award), Someday, The Baby Blues, Girl Who Loved Horses, alterNATIVES, The Buz’Gem Blues, Raven Stole the Sun, and In a World Created by a Drunken God (nominated for the 2006 Governor General’s Literary Award for Drama). Drew has published numerous books, among them Me Funny, published by Douglas & MacIntyre, and is a contributor and columnist for a broad spectrum of Canadian newspapers and magazines.


Kenneth T. Williams: Award-winning Cree playwright, journalist and screenwriter. Kenneth T. Williams’ plays include Thunderstick, Suicide Notes and AWOL: Aboriginals Without Official Leave. He co-wrote adaptations of Are We There Yet and Baby Daddy, both plays for young audiences. Kenneth’s recent works include the play My Bestest Friend Ever and two feature-length screenplays, Café Daughter and The Red Majesty. His play Three Little Birds premiered at Workshop West (Edmonton) in November 2008.

Companies of Interest

The following addresses and websites provide links to established and emerging theatre companies and performance ensembles created by and producing the work of Aboriginal theatre artists and artists of diverse cultures.

De-ba-jeh-mu-jig Theatre: www.debaj.ca
Kehewin Native Performance: www.kehewinnativeperformance.com
Native Earth Performing Arts: www.nativeearth.ca
Ondinnok Native Mythological Theatre: www.ondinnok.org
Red Sky Performance Ensemble: www.redskyperformance.com
Turtle Gals Performance Ensemble: PO Box 463, Station P, Toronto, ON, M5S 2S9
Urban Ink Productions: www.urbanink.com

Additional Reference Material

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