

**WORKING PAPERS
IN
AUSTRALIAN STUDIES**

WORKING PAPER NO: 60

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1990

*Swimming in the Mainstream:
Australian Aboriginal and Canadian Indian Drama*



Sir Robert Menzies Centre for Australian Studies
Institute of Commonwealth Studies
University of London

Series Editor: Richard Nile
ISBN: 1 85507 0227

UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

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Abstract

Throughout the 1980s, one of the most significant developments in postcolonial literatures was the speed with which the writings of minority groups began to influence the literary and political agenda. From a position of waiting in the wings and often in the shadows, the works of groups such as the Maori of New Zealand, the Indians and Inuit of Canada and Australian Aborigines has - at least occasionally - taken centre-stage. It is no accident that the level of native political protest has also increased in all three nations - and that writers have been at the centre of that political struggle. To continue the theatrical metaphor, the spotlight now seems to have shifted to encompass groups which have always been storytellers but only recently have been given - or have seized - the opportunity to tell their tales. Campfires may now be stage-lights but the songs of resistance remain the same.

The theatrical imagery is especially appropriate in the case of Canada and Australia since, in both cases, it is indigenous dramatists who have attained the highest profile both domestically and internationally. If there is such a thing as a cultural mainstream - and the term itself is problematic in the extreme - Black Australian and Canadian Indian playwrights have been thrust into it without reservation. Bearing in mind the shortcomings of any term which implies that culture flows in a single direction (or at all) and that any culture is monolithic enough to permit the identification of its theoretical centre, it is undeniable that dramatists from these two groups have received institutional support, critical kudos and public attention as never before.

This working paper examines this fascinating process from a number of perspectives and applies various theories of communication to it. It maintains that the various forms of literary criticism which have been applied to indigenous literature in Canada and Australia fail to take adequate account of the special characteristics of aboriginal plays. Preoccupation with English as the language of the conqueror has taken critics away from an understanding of traditional oral cultures and the liberating force of theatre as performed. The published versions of plays by the Black Australian author, Jack Davis, and the Canadian Indian writer, Tomson Highway, are - theoretically and actually - vastly different from their performed versions. The concept of theatre-in-action (rather than theatre-as-read) is crucial in terms of the dramatic concerns and goals of these post-colonial minorities.

The specific focus here is upon four plays: Davis' No Sugar and Barungin - Smell the Wind and Highways' The Rez Sisters and Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing. By analysing the 'liberation theatre' of Aboriginal and Indian dramatists comparatively, the paper hopes to point the way to a fuller understanding of the shared qualities of 'Fourth World' protest and resistance in a postcolonial context. In addition, the paper plans to illustrate the shortcomings of considering these works solely on the basis of their published texts as 'works of literature'.

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May 1990

I grew up in Central Ontario and recall very clearly my first contact with native Indian people. My family was fortunate enough to have a summer cottage in Georgian Bay on Lake Huron, in a place called Pointe-au-Baril. It was a wealthy area for the transient holiday-makers: for nine months of the year the area was more or less static and then it exploded with visitors from the cities in June, July and August - only to be deserted on the first Tuesday of September, the traditional end of the Canadian summer. The summertime migrants were invariably white, many of them from Toronto and environs, and fully 40% of them were from the United States. The workers - those doing the boat repairing and marina work, those doing the domestic work in the cottages - were frequently university students earning money for their studies. But those who actually lived in the area and ran these businesses were often Indians from the the Ojibwah tribe.

These people fascinated me: I still remember the carefully embroidered placemats which the Indian woman Irene made for my grandmother; there was the Ojibwah family patriarch, Albert, who ran the Boathouse and often guided my grandfather to the best fishing spots; there were the Indian women who came to collect the bedding and sometimes did the laundry for our family; there was the old Ojibwah man called 'Nap' - short for Napoleon Bonaparte - who met a horrible end: he was found drowned by a friend and work-mate of mine, floating under the marina where we both worked. What I did not realise at the time and what took me many years to understand is that I really did not know any Indian people at all in my youth. The contact was entirely commercial, distanced by strangeness and apprehension on both sides.

The Ojibwah tribe was to me something exotic and unknown - it was an emblem of native Canada. It was clearly this to many other Islanders, as the cottagers of the area were called, because a grand turn-of-the-century, six-storey wooden hotel had been built on one of the central islands and had been christened 'The Ojibway'. The Ojibway hotel could not have been farther from the Ojibwah tribe, restricted as they were to their reservation on the mainland, merely menial visitors to the resort which bore their name in an ironic, iconic fashion.

I consider the Ojibway-Ojibwah relationship to be an appropriate metaphor for indigenous-white race relations in many commonwealth countries, most particularly in Canada and Australia. There has for many decades been a tendency in both nations to make use of indigenous culture in an emblematic way. For example, the fascination with native words as the inspiration for place and street names is as common in Canberra, as it is in Kamloops - even if no native people may live on the particular streets of either city. Of course, this reduces a complex race relations issue far too much, but it is legitimate to claim - as many studies have done - that the majority of non-indigenous Canadians and Australians have very little direct contact with the native people of their

countries. Yet, in both cases, nearly everyone has an opinion on native issues, whether they relate to land rights, or relations with the police, or the drinking or working habits of indigenous groups.

It is fascinating to compare the stereotypes to which White Australians and White Canadians subscribe when they are discussing Aborigines or Indians. The negative characteristics which are listed include an inability to hold liquor, allegedly on genetic grounds, a dislike for hard work, a tendency to live off the system and a propensity for tearing down their own homes to build fires. I have heard these same negative traits described in Vancouver and in Brisbane, in Edmonton and in Perth, as if they were culturally determined and inescapable. The other common feature was that in all of these cases the people confiding this folk foolishness had little or no contact with the groups they were denouncing. This is what social theorists call marginalisation and what anyone might term bigotry.

It is against this background that Black Australian and Canadian Indian activists and spokespeople labour to change attitudes. Over the past twenty years in particular, a highly articulate group has emerged in both nations to advance the native message. What is especially important in the context of this paper is that many of the spokespeople - among them Harold Cardinal and Duke Redbird in Canada; Roberta Sykes and Kevin Gilbert in Australia - are as well known as authors as they are as political mouthpieces. Indigenous literature has frequently been fashioned as a tool of political advancement; it has come to be seen as another way of communicating a socio-political message of utmost importance to the native community.

This paper argues that it is indigenous dramatic works which are doing the most to further this process. The plays of dramatists such as the Cree Indian, Tomson Highway and the Nyoongah, Jack Davis, have in the 1980s broken through to the world stage. Highway's *The Rez Sisters* was performed on centre stage at the 1988 Edinburgh Festival after a national tour in which it was mounted in all of Canada's major cities. Davis's *The Dreamers* was presented in Portsmouth, in 1987 and his *No Sugar* was performed at the World Theatre Festival in Vancouver in 1986 and again in London two years later. Both playwrights have won major prizes: *The Rez Sisters* was awarded the top Canadian drama accolade in 1986 - the Dora Mavor Moore Award for Best New Play. In 1988 Jack Davis received the prestigious Australian BHP Bicentennial Award for Excellence in Literature and the Arts. Critics have lauded both playwrights wherever their works have been presented and many performances have been sell-outs. In short, both have entered the international theatrical mainstream rapidly and successfully.

It is a function of our cultural expectations and assumptions that such information tends to impress us. A person reading this paper who had never seen a Highway or a Davis

play might immediately assume that they were highly skilled artists and might even go so far as to venture this opinion if asked for an opinion in future conversation. This is based upon the presumption that mainstreaming and international exposure are *good* things - both for the individual playwrights and the native groups they represent. This may or may not be the case, depending upon a variety of factors: whether or not mainstream opinion downplays the independent political nature of the plays, how closely the dramatist is involved in the direction of the works in performance, and so on. Mainstreaming has the potential to silence or at least to mute dissenting voices just as much as it is able to advance the causes of dissent. This observation is as relevant to a critical discussion of the music of Sting or the films of Martin Scorsese as it is to the plays of two native playwrights. The question raised here is: How do Highway and Davis keep their heads metaphorically above water in this situation?. Even more to the point, do they negotiate the situation so successfully that they swim in the current of mainstream acceptance without sacrificing their own distinctiveness?

It can be maintained that both dramatists have succeeded in doing this. This paper advances a number of arguments to explain how this occurs. In so doing it focuses especially on two plays: Highway's *The Rez Sisters* and Davis's *The Dreamers*. There are four main areas in which these two dramatists have made their distinctive mark:

- a) First, these two plays by Highway and Davis skillfully incorporate aspects of non-native culture *within* a native framework as they develop. This enables both dramatists to break through externally-imposed stereotypes into the realm of Aboriginality, thus crossing the Ojibway-Ojibwah gulf of understanding mentioned at the outset.
- b) Second, although it is desirable to evaluate all plays as *performed* rather than just as *read* this becomes essential in the case of native dramatic works of this type. These works rely so heavily upon elements of non-verbal communication such as tribal dance, and instrumental and percussion music that these become crucial determinants of their distinctiveness.
- c) Third, the vibrant school of drama of Highway and Davis is one of the most accessible and influential means of increasing non-indigenous understanding. In both cases the playwrights rely upon humour, dialogue and the invocation of the supernatural to establish an independent paradigm. These religious and/or supernatural elements of the plays are as central to their structure as they are to the cultures which they interpret.
- d) Finally, the orality of the plays under discussion - meaning not just the employment of dialogue but also the incorporation of tribal languages and speech

patterns - accentuates the plays' independence and autonomy. Along with the other characteristics mentioned, this enables both playwrights to avoid being suffocated by the weight of the English language read as the language of the conqueror.

An essential preliminary issue which many commentators have raised is whether or not non-native critics should analyse and pronounce judgements on the work of native writers. For, according to this stance, if one subscribes to the belief that the structural constraints of the English language are inescapably imperialistic, the ultimate choice for any non-indigenous critic must surely be either to reinforce that imperialism or else to retreat into silence. The second choice leads to a sort of linguistic paralysis which, if accepted, robs the Euro-Canadian or Australian critic of any right to comment upon indigenous works. In other words, and again I am speaking hypothetically, if one is a critic who espouses this belief, one contributes to the process of linguistic enslavement and exploitation just by writing about it in English.

If this distancing theory is accepted, it means that the reader's focus strays farther and farther away from the works themselves to become refocused on the critic. The critic, in turn, who desperately wants to engage an Aboriginal work often goes through logical contortions trying to explain and justify why she or he has chosen to write about native literature in the first place. A clear example of this dilemma was expressed by Simon During in his recent review of Mudrooroo Narogin's *Writing From the Fringe*, the first Black Australian critical study of Aboriginal literature. During writes:

As a professional critic and theorist, I entertain profound doubts about Narogin's thesis. As a white living in Australia, conscious that my relation to individual blacks and their writing is mediated by systematic oppression, past and present, of which such doubts may well be an expression, I have equally strong reservations about the appropriateness of articulating my views.¹

The temptation at this point is to say to critics like During: Then, why do you continue? But, this apology turns out to be only a preface to the major themes of the review which he proceeds to engage, on the basis that since Narogin has written within the 'conventions of academic literary/cultural theory and criticism' it is fair game to evaluate his work. It may be more appropriate to turn the issue around and pose the question: If Narogin had *not* written within such conventions, would it then mean that his study would have been off-limits to non-Aboriginal reviewers?

My own view is that it is an absurdity to disenfranchise critical comment on the grounds that one is writing in the alleged language of the oppressor. The meaning, even if it is an

1. Simon During, 'How Aboriginal Is It?', *Australian Book Review*, Feb.-Mar. 1990, pp. 21-22.

exploitative one, does not inhere in the words themselves but in the way they are understood and applied by those who receive them. Second, if one buys into this argument it also leads logically to a disenfranchisement of Aboriginal authors who write in English, which is far more serious. However, even if one accepts that others may subscribe to this belief, it is even more disingenuous for white critics to pay lip-service to the concept and then to go ahead and write reviews anyway.

The problem is that post-colonial groups just keep on writing in English; and, many of them seem largely oblivious to the critical debates which seem to hamstring so many non-Aboriginal theorists. Unfortunately, Canadian Indian and Black Australian authors just do not fit the convenient mould of liberation writers who reject every vestige of the foreign language and culture which surrounds them. Furthermore, especially in the case of drama, one is confronted with the dilemma of native audiences who thrive on mimesis. Therefore, to the extent that an Indian or Aboriginal playwright is producing a community work - especially in the case of a workshopped play - it will be judged by the indigenous audience largely on the basis of its fealty to their jointly perceived reality. This is not to say that it cannot be fictional, inventive and totally original but that this resides in a culture which has managed to vault the European theoretical chasm without necessarily being aware of its existence. In a real sense, for many indigenous writers it does not.

It may be that the solution for the non-Aboriginal reader or viewer lies along the lines which Henry Louis Gates Jr. proposes in his eloquent introduction to a collection of essays entitled *Black Literature and Literary Theory*. Although he is writing about Afro-American and to a lesser extent Caribbean literature his observations are largely valid for both Canadian Indian and Australian Aboriginal authors. Gates postulates a duality of structure in indigenous writing; as he puts it:

The 'heritage' of each black text written in a Western language is, then, a double heritage, two-toned, as it were. Its visual tones are white and black, and its aural tones are standard and vernacular.²

He goes on to claim, following the African writer Ngugi, that the two traditions can blend together *within* an indigenous framework:

Black oral literary forms, in other words, can merge with received (European) 'literary' forms to create new (and distinctively black) genres of literature.³

2. Henry Louis Gates Jr., 'Criticism in the Jungle', in *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, (New York, 1984), p. 4.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

If one accepts the principle that the oral vernacular of a native people can coalesce with that group's distinctive cultural patterns and beliefs it is tenable that they can effectively transform English into a 'new' language unique to themselves. This is especially the case since the meaning ascribed to, for example, religious customs, does not inhere in the words themselves but in the minds, hearts and voices of the people who carry out these practices. Therefore, if a non-native critic dislikes what appears to be a slavish fascination for English amongst Aboriginal groups, it can be argued that this is only a superficial, external analysis - which misunderstands the underlying independence of the views being articulated.

If, then, one comes to a position of accepting that there can be other possibilities of form and ideology, what are these? One conclusion which can be drawn is that genre does matter. What writers like Highway and Davis do with drama is qualitatively, theoretically and actually different from what they would do as novelists. Indigenous plays are in a further, special position in that they rely so heavily upon non-verbal communication to convey their meaning. If, as nearly all theorists agree, the majority of interpersonal communication is nonverbal, dramatists are, along with screen and scriptwriters, those writers who can fully explore these potentialities. Then, there is the all-important dimension of *theatre-as-performed*. Theatre-as-read and even theatre-as-videotaped are all dramatically different experiences.

The ongoing relationship between the dramatist and his or her constituency is also crucial. In this case, the works of Highway and Davis were all written and workshopped in a native environment long before they were performed for external audiences, domestically and internationally. The introduction to *The Rez Sisters* relates that Highways' first plays:

were performed to mostly Native audiences on reserves and in urban community centres. In addition to his writing, Tomson has worked with other Native theatre companies - notably in Sioux Lookout, Ontario, West Bay, Manitoulin Island - in various capacities (actor, musical director, director), touring Indian reserves far and wide.⁴

Workshopping enables and empowers the sort of community involvement - and to some extent control - which native writers deem so vital. Narogin elucidates the concept as follows:

Aboriginal literature does not exist in an aesthetic vacuum, but within the context of Aboriginal affairs. It must be seen holistically within a cultural, historical and social context. To try and approach Aboriginal writers and their literature as things existing apart from their communities would be a falsity....In calling for community control, Bruce McGuinness believes that

4. Thomson Highway, *The Rez Sisters*, (Saskatoon, 1988), p. viii. All further quotations will be taken from this edition of the play.

he is striking against a censorship which is often covert, rather than overt, that because the Aboriginal writer must make his or her works amenable in style (and often in content) to the standards of publishers who have their eyes on the marketplace, this censors out Aboriginality of style and content.⁵

Many of us might find it 'foreign' to consider a playwright as other than a creative individual expounding his or her own personal, social, or creative concerns. Drama can work just as well in other contexts in which, for example, a dramatist acts as the creative interpreter of a tribe or collective of native people and their jointly-held beliefs and concerns; and once again this illustrates the independence of Aboriginal drama within an English language milieu.

But this is far more than a standard 'theatre in performance' argument which applies to all plays when their stage versions are compared with their written or 'enscripted' versions. Both Davis and Highway come from cultures which for tens of thousands of years have been oral storytellers, marking the seasons, rituals, rites of passage and tribal events in oral resonances which have reverberated around centuries of campfires. This is the stuff of which their drama is made; as Davis has said:

You see, we've always been acting. Aboriginal people are the greatest actors in the world...We've acted up before magistrates, we've acted up before the the police, we've acted up before social workers; we've always done our own mime...Like the man who burns his feet and he doesn't even know his feet are alight. He's standing on the fire and he says [*imitating voice*] 'By Crikey, I can smell somethin' burnin' there! You fellas burn an old bag there somewhere? Or you burnin' kangaroo skin?' [*New voice*] 'Uncle! You're standing in the fire. Get out of the fire there!' He never wore boots for forty years and he's got callouses on his feet that thick, and he was standing in the fire. His feet were burning and he didn't even know it! And laughed - you know that, [*claps*]...that went around the camp for a week. Well, little incidents like that, you know, that carry on all the time - it's not very hard to put 'em down on paper. I'm sure the Aboriginal playwrights have seen that.⁶

It is also noteworthy that tribal languages are a major component of both *The Rez Sisters* and *The Dreamers*, so much so that the non-Aboriginal reader or viewer would find certain sections unintelligible without the benefit of live performance or an intertextual translation. For example, in the first act of *The Rez Sisters*, Marie-Adele Starblanket, one of the central characters of the play, says to the mythic character Nanabush:

Awus! Wee-chee-gis. Ka-tha p-g'wun-ta oo-ta pee-wee-sta-ta-gu-mik-si.
Awus! Nee. U-wik-nuk oo-ma kee-tha ee-tec-thi-mi-soo-yin holy spirit

5. Mudrooroo Narogin, *Writing From the Fringe*, (Melbourne, 1990), pp. 3, 25-26.

6. Quoted in Adam Shoemaker, 'An Interview with Jack Davis', *Westerly*, Dec., 1982, pp. 114-115.

chee? Awus! Hey, maw ma-a oop-mee tay-si-thow u-wu seagull bird. I-goo-ta poo-goo ta-poo. Nu-gu-na-wa-pa-mik. Nu-gu-na-wa-pa-mik.

For those who do not understand Cree, this means:

Go away! You stinking thing. Don't coming messing around here for nothing. Go away! Nee [Oh you]. Who the hell do you think you are, the Holy Spirit? Go away! Hey, but he won't fly away, this seagull bird. He just sits there. And watches me. Watches me).⁷

Similarly, in *The Dreamers*, the central character Worru, the Aboriginal patriarch of the Millimurra clan addresses the tribal dancer in his traditional language of *Nyoongah*:

Allewah! Tjenna guppi nyinanliny,
A nyinanliny, a nyinanliny, nyinanliny,
Mundika nyinaliny
Mundika nyinaliny,
Ngunyinniny kaka woorminy,
A kaka woorminy,
Tjenna guppi nyinanliny,
Tjenna guppi,
Tjenna guppi,
Tjenna guppi,
Woolah!

In English, this is:

Watch out, featherfoot there
There, there, there
There in the bushes
There in the bushes
I'm laughing
Laughing
Featherfoot there
Featherfoot
Featherfoot
Featherfoot
Hooray!⁸

What is salient about both of these extracts is that both really come alive for an anglophone only in performance; in such cases, it is not so much the imperialism of English which is the issue as the *inadequacy* of English to convey the playwrights' message. Just as important, these examples exemplify the traditional orality of the Indian and Aboriginal cultures and their invocation of the supernatural. In both plays, an individual dancer symbolises a link with the past, with traditional customs and

7. *op cit* p 19

8. Jack Davis, *The Dreamers*, in *Plays From Black Australia*, (Sydney, 1989), p. 62. All further quotations will be taken from this edition of the play.

beliefs and with both creation and mortality. Both of the quoted characters who speak directly to the spirit world die at the close of the plays; both Marie-Adele and Worru are sensitised to the 'other world' of their beliefs and its significance for all native people.

As Thomson Highway points out, the character which incarnates the supernatural, Nanabush, is central to the maintenance of contemporary Canadian Indian culture. He writes:

The dream world of North American Indian mythology is inhabited by the most fantastic creatures, beings and events. Foremost among these beings is the "Trickster", as pivotal and important a figure in the Native world as Christ is in the realm of Christian mythology. 'Weesageechak' in Cree, 'Nanabush' in Ojibway, 'Raven' in others, 'Coyote' in still others, this Trickster goes by many names and many guises. In fact, he can assume any guise he chooses. Essentially a comic, clownish sort of character, he teaches us about the nature and the meaning of existence on the planet Earth; he straddles the consciousness of man and that of God, the Great Spirit.

Some say that "Nanabush" left this continent when the whiteman came. We believe he is still here among us - albeit a little the worse for wear and tear - having assumed other guises. Without him - and without the spiritual health of this figure - the core of Indian culture would be gone forever.⁹

Throughout *The Rez Sisters* Nanabush continually reappears with what seems like a Puckish sense of mischief, as a seagull and a nighthawk. But in the climax of the play at the end of what is billed as the 'Biggest Bingo Game in the World' he becomes both Bingo Master and Grim Reaper. Marie-Adele wins the game and loses her life all in the same breath, in which a waltz with the Bingo Master becomes a dance of death with Nanabush. Of course, these fascinating and complex metamorphoses are characteristic of native mythology, as is the close identification with nature, when Nanabush transforms himself from man to bird.

In Davis's *The Dreamers*, the Dancer remains in human form but changes also from tribal youth at the beginning to Kurdaitcha Man or Featherfoot - the traditional bringer of death - who calls the old man Worru to him at the close of the play. Again, the supernatural is present throughout the entire work: the figure of the Dancer and the digeridoo music with which he is associated repeatedly establish the tribal heritage of these urbanised Black Australians. Worru is the pivotal character in all of this. He truly lives in two worlds simultaneously and, in his sleep, lapses back into the *Nyoongah* dialect. The play's title refers not only to his prescient dreams but to the religious concept of the Dreaming which underpins traditional Aboriginal beliefs - and, finally, to the contrast between the aspirations of the family members, who live on the poverty line but hope for better things.

The trickster, which is so crucial to Canadian Indian beliefs, is a key figure in the tribal culture of many Black Australians also, and therefore to their literature. In Eva Johnson's play, *Murras*, he is the sprightly Mimi character, the 'caretaker of the dead spirit', who again can be 'sometimes friendly, sometimes hostile'.¹⁰ Mudrooroo Narogin incorporated the character into his 1979 novel *Long Live Sandawara* saying:

I wrote in an element of mysticism in that Sandawara is seen as a mapan, magician or trickster. The *mapan*...also appears in many of the stories of Paddy Roe and may be seen as a traditional character of Aboriginal narrative.¹¹

In both the Indian and Aboriginal cultures, music, percussion and certain creatures are repeatedly associated with the supernatural in a remarkably similar fashion. Moreover, it is the matter-of-fact acceptance of this spiritual element and its particular manifestations (malevolent, benevolent, tricksterish) which mark these dramas as being heavily influenced by traditional native culture. Thus, the integral presence of tribal language and, above all, the distinctive indigenous religious beliefs which are mirrored by these dramas, give both plays an independence, an autonomy and a fascination which is immune to erosion by the fact that the majority of the dialogue is spoken in English. In a true sense, both *The Rez Sisters* and *The Dreamers* are bilingual and bicultural works - and this helps to ensure their distinctiveness.

There are other important similarities between the two works as well. In both the extended family becomes the community and the focus of the dramatic action. In *The Rez Sisters*, seven individual but related Indian women from the Wasychigan Hill Reserve on Manitoulin Island bicker, tussle and collectively dream of the riches they could win at bingo. The dreaming motif - the desire for a one-way ticket out of the boredom and poverty of the reserve - galvanises them into action, and they raise enough money for a pilgrimage down Highway 69 for the world's biggest bingo game in Toronto. Davis illustrates the same sorts of false hopes and foibles, as the Wallitch family and its various uncles, aunts and cousins live through the seasons in Perth. Despite the drinking and the arguments, there is a strong sense of togetherness, the atmosphere of a closely-knit community struggling to make ends meet for the sake of the younger generation.

Finally there is laughter. One of the distinctive hallmarks of both Canadian Indian and Australian Aboriginal drama is a vibrant and irrepressible sense of humour. Whatever the pessimism of the situation, or the sorrow and death at the close of the respective plays, both *The Rez Sisters* and *The Dreamers* are endearing and often hilarious works.

10. Eva Johnson *Murras*, in *Plays From Black Australia*, (Sydney, 1989), p. 84.

11. *op cit*, p. 175.

Highway's Indian women are totally irreverent, particularly about each other; as Veronique St. Pierre says:

These Frenchmen are forever selling us their used cars. And I'm sure that's why Black Lady Halked has been baring those big yellow teeth of hers, smiling all over the reserve recently. She looks like a hound about to pounce on a mouse, she smiles so hard when she smiles. I'd like to see her smile after plastic surgery. Anyway. At the bingo last night she was hinting that it wouldn't be too long before she would be able to go to the bingo in Espanola more frequently. Unfortunately, a new game started and you know how Black Lady Halked has to concentrate when she plays bingo - her forehead looks like corduroy, she concentrates so hard - so I didn't get a chance to ask her what she meant. So Fire Minklater has a used car. Imagine! Maybe I can make friends with her again. NO! I wouldn't be caught dead inside her car. Not even if she had a brand-new Cadillac. How are your children? All 14 of them.¹²

Davis's dialogue is equally ironic. Uncle Eli, who specialises in wearing a false eye patch while he is panhandling, describes his day's exploits begging at the local shopping centre:

ELI: Yeah, we were doin' all right...today, yeah, gettin' fifty cents a bite. One *wetjala* bloke, hippy, he give me two dollars...Anyways, some of them Nyoogahs spotted me. There they was: 'Give me fifty cents, brother', 'Give me a dollar nephew', 'Give me fifty cents, uncle'; and you know none of them black bastards are related to me. That's true. Pop, I never seen blackfellas like 'em, they real bloody dinkum out and out bludgers. Can't stand the bastards).¹³

So, in both style and content, the two plays are as closely related as are members of the Wallitch family. Through their use of humour, poetry and song both playwrights inject a vibrancy - and, again a singular atmosphere of Aboriginality into their works.

But what exactly does the term 'Aboriginality' mean? Involving as it does an admixture of identity, cultural practices, religious beliefs, linguistic patterns and attitudinal commitments, it is not a concept which can be simply or neatly defined. Nor, perhaps, should it be. A concrete definition runs counter to the idea of something which is organic, which is continually evolving as a result of the ever changing balance between the past memories and present experiences of native people, both in Canada and in Australia. What can be said is that Aboriginality is a quality which gives the plays of Highway and Davis independence and autonomy from non-native drama. It also enables us as non-Aboriginal readers and viewers of the plays to escape from a stereotypical Ojibwah-Ojibway entrapment which for so long has limited our understanding. Ultimately, it is a quality which is so strong and vibrant in these works that they run no risk of being drowned in the mainstream of critical and popular acclaim.

12. *op cit* pp 20-21

13. *op cit* p 37

The irony is that the plays were written at almost the same time, half a world away from each other. Until this year, Jack Davis had never seen or read any of Thomson Highway's works and, when I recently spoke with Highway, he had only just heard of the presence of Black Australian drama. In an odd sense, through my exposure to both, I am now to be the trans-Pacific bridge between the two dramatists, having introduced one to the writings of the other. It is fascinating to observe the extensive parallels which the two plays present in spite of this totally independent development; even more intriguing to speculate about what future links in the post-colonial Commonwealth will be forged on and off the stage.