



SUBVERSIVE HUMOUR

.....
Canadian **NATIVE Playwrights' WINNING**
Weapon of **RESISTANCE**
.....

{ MIRJAM HIRCH }

NORTH AMERICA'S indigenous peoples have been using humour for centuries. Native humour has remained unnoticed by most settlers until very recently, however. It escaped most historical and literary accounts because the recorders did not perceive the gesture as humorous or did not appreciate the humour. For much of Canadian history, a stern, unyielding profile of the Indian dominated the popular imagination. Indians, it was believed, never laughed.

Even Stephen Leacock, who succeeded Mark Twain as the foremost literary humorist in North America, missed seeing the particular Native sense of humour. In the introductory paragraph of his book on humour, Leacock wrote about Indians:

On its first settlement from Europe, the outlook for humour in America, and chiefly in New England, looked rather grim. Here on the spot was the Indian, probably the least humorous

character recorded in history. He took his pleasure seriously with a tomahawk. Scientists tell us that humour and laughter had their beginnings in the dawn of history in the exultation of the savage over his fallen foe. The North American Indian apparently never got beyond the start. To crack his enemies' skull with a hatchet was about the limit of the sense of fun of a Seneca or a Pottawottomie. The dawning humour of such races turned off sideways and developed into the mockery and the malice which are its degenerated forms.¹

The common public failure to perceive Native humour prevailed despite early testimony to the contrary by Washington Irving. Writing about his 1832 trip to the Prairies, Irving declared Indians to be by no means the stoics of the stereotype:

When Indians are among themselves... there cannot be greater gossips... They are great mimics and buffoons, also, and entertain themselves excessively at the expense of the whites... reserving all comments until they are alone. Then they give full scope to criticism, satire, mimicry, and mirth.²

In 1990, Margaret Atwood wrote the following about white ignorance of Native humour:

There were a lot of adjectives attributed to Native people. Lacking among them was *funny*. Savage irony and morbid humour did sometimes enter the picture as a kind of self-flagellation device for whites, but on the whole Natives were treated by almost everyone with the utmost gravity, as if they were either too awe-inspiring as blood-curdling savages or too sacrosanct in their status of holy victim to allow of any comic reactions either to them or by them. Furthermore, nobody ever seems to have asked them what if anything *they* found funny. The Native as presented in non-Native writing was singularly lacking in a sense of humour; sort of like the

“good” woman of Victorian fiction, who acquired at the hands of male writers the same kind of tragic-eyed, long-suffering solemnity.³

It was not until the 1960s, notably with George Ryga’s *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, that Aboriginals and their problems began to be recognized in theatre. Ryga’s play makes significant non-Native observations on the life of poverty-stricken inner-city Native people. The stereotyping in *Rita Joe* is bothersome, though, because to be a Native woman in the city is not synonymous with a fate of rape and death. There is no humour in the play, because even the ridiculous scenes that evoke laughter in the audience produce only terror in Rita Joe, or further accentuate her “differentness.” The play, like much of Native literature and drama prior to the late 1960s, was about Natives but not written by a Native; it thus imposed a Western world view on Native peoples and cultures and communicated the perspective of a cultural observer rather than that of a participant. This situation changed radically with the social and political upheavals of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The resulting process of decolonization and renewed drive for self-determination sparked the production of literature, the defining characteristic of which is humour, and stimulated the development of a number of Native theatre groups throughout North America.⁴ In 1989, author Tomson Highway explained the importance of this development:

Until we have a generation of Indian people out there who have been inundated with Nanabush stories and incredible literature written by our own people, we won’t really have our words as a people, as a distinct culture. Because until that day arrives we are going to continue to be colonised. There are artists who are beginning to speak up now and this colonisation is precisely what the artists growing up today are beginning to change.⁵

The new work being produced by Native writers caused consternation, disbelief and even outrage among non-Natives. As Margaret Atwood notes:

The comfortable thing about a people who do not have a literary voice, or at least not one you can hear or understand, is that you never have to listen to what they are saying about *you*. Men found it very disconcerting when women started writing the truth about the kinds of things women say about them behind their backs. In particular they did not appreciate having the more trivial of their human foibles revealed, nor did they appreciate being laughed at. Nobody does really.⁶

In contemporary Native Canadian literature, theatre is of particular importance. For writers like Tomson Highway, Margo Kane, Marie Clements, Daniel David Moses, Darrell Dennis and Drew Hayden Taylor, drama has become the predominant expressive vehicle and major site of resistance. Theatre provides the possibility of direct confrontation, brings people together, introduces thought-provoking ideas and fosters an openness to dialogue and change. In a 2001 interview, Margo Kane also explained that Native writers prefer drama “because drama is most akin to storytelling.”⁷

Contemporary Native theatre stands on a unique historical foundation: a strong tradition of skilled storytelling, the preservation of ritual practices and a new-found literate form of expression.⁸ By the time Europeans arrived in North America, every Aboriginal group on the continent had created rituals as part of cultural life. The origins of many contemporary oral comic narratives may be found in religious ceremonies involving sacred clowns and shamans. Ritual clowns, as an integral part of most early Western Native cultures, were privileged to ridicule, burlesque and defile even the most sacred religious festivals. Much of their humour was sexual. In addition, for centuries before European arrival, teasing was used as a method

of social control by Native people. Rather than embarrass members of the group publicly, people would tease individuals they considered out of step with the consensus of tribal opinion. Gradually people learned to anticipate teasing and began to tease themselves, as a means both of showing humility and of advocating a course of action they deeply believed in. Like the rituals of the ancient Greeks and Romans, much of what was presented could well be described as theatrical: dance, incantation (plainsong) and the telling and performing of legend and history.⁹

With the arrival of the Europeans, humour became even more important for North America's indigenous peoples. They used it to "make faces" at their colonizers without the latter being able to retaliate. Mohawk actor Gary Farmer explains:

Because Native communities have gone through probably the worst situations in North America that any peoples have gone through, they had to have the ability to laugh. If they didn't, they wouldn't be existing today. So humour has been a means of survival, the only means . . . For the last two hundred years they've had everything taken away from them, their ability to think, practically. Everything: what language they could speak, what religion they could do, and the things they couldn't do. It was all set out for them. They couldn't even make money in order to create a decent living for themselves. All those decisions were taken away from them. The only thing they had was their ability to continue to laugh their way through life because if they didn't . . . they would vanish.¹⁰

Native writer Vine Deloria asserts that humour permeates virtually every area of Indian life—"Nothing in Indian national affairs is possible without it," he says—and that people are frequently educated and "made militant by biting, activist humour."¹¹

Contemporary Native authors skilfully employ subversive humour as an artistic strategy both to heal from and to understand historical and personal trauma and to fight the adversity they face. Humour is a means of drawing attention to a range of serious issues, from the perpetuation of stereotypes to land claims, residential schools, forced integration, foster parenthood, benighted government policy, environmental destruction and attempted annihilation. With the help of the strong forces of humour, Native writers challenge given power systems, lay open the relativity of all positions, subvert the processes of domination, inspire social change and promote a new consciousness.

In the foreword to his play *The Baby Blues*, Drew Hayden Taylor explains:

After many decades of seeing the media highlight the image of the “tragic” or “stoic” Indian, I felt Native people, and consequently non-Native people, were being given a raw deal. I know far more laughing First Nations people than depressed ones. I felt this disproportionate representation had to be addressed. Thus, *The Blues Quartet* is a series of plays that have their roots in the belly laughs of the communities. And in our history.¹²

Taylor, who has occasionally been referred to as the Neil Simon of Native theatre, says elsewhere that he got “tired of being oppressed and seeing Native women raped on stage.”¹³ In a newspaper interview, Taylor commented:

I think the way I write is a result of my upbringing—growing up on the reserve, I was surrounded by this marvellous sense of humour. I have a reputation as a humorist but I am no match to some of my uncles and aunts. Even in the darkest moments there were always sparks of humour. I think

that's how we survived 500 years of oppression. It was our humour that kept us sane. That does not mean that I am using humour to whitewash the problems of Native communities. You can have humour and explore serious issues.”¹⁴

Native plays are often rooted in reality, and many of the stories they tell come from real incidents. Tomson Highway explains:

It's real life. And so when you laugh you know exactly well that you're laughing at death. Real death. So there is this tradition of humour, of an awful lot of funniness, and then there is this history of death. And when the two combine you get a power in the work; that is, it moves into another dimension. It makes it transformational. It creates a metamorphosis in the reader, if the reader can understand what's said and what's not being said.¹⁵

In Highway's *The Rez Sisters*, a play about the collective quest of seven Native women to attend the “biggest bingo in the world,” the character Zhaboonigan describes the incident of an awful rape to the trickster Nanabush, who appears in the form of a seagull:

Are you gentle? I was not little. Maybe. Same size as now. Long ago it must be? You think I am funny? Shhh. I know who you are. There, there. Boys. White boys. Two. Ever nice white wings, you. I was walking down the road to the store. They ask me if I want a ride in car. Oh, I was happy I said, “Yup.” Took me far away. Ever nice ride. Dizzy. They took all my clothes off me. Put something up something up inside me here. *Pointing to her crotch, underneath her dress.* Many, many times. Remember. Don't fly away. Don't fly away. Don't go. I saw you before. There, there. It was a. Screwdriver. They put the screwdriver inside me. Here. Remember. Ever

lots of blood. The two white boys. Left me in the bush. Alone. It was cold. And then. Remember. Zhaboonigan. Everybody calls me Zhaboonigan. Why? It means needle. Zhaboonigan. Going-through-thing. Needle Peterson. That's me. It was the screwdriver.¹⁶

This episode reflects the gang rape and murder of nineteen-year-old Helen Betty Osborne in The Pas, Manitoba, by four young white men. In *The Rez Sisters*, humour is often used in the women's conversation to deal with the pain that inevitably accompanies poverty and marginalization:

PELAJIA: Philomena. Park your tongue. My old man has to go the hundred miles to Espanola just to get the job. My boys. Gone to Toronto. Only place educated Indian boys can find decent jobs these days. And here I sit all broken hearted.

PHILOMENA: Paid a dime and only farted.¹⁷

— HUMOUR AS A WEAPON —

IT IS NOT EASY to define exactly what characterizes Native humour. This is not surprising if one takes into account that at contact fifty-three Native languages were spoken. All nations have different ways of looking at reality, and these are reflected in different ways of expressing humour.¹⁸ The Iroquois and the Haida, for example, are known for aggressive humour, and the humour of the Cree and the Anishinabe is so sly that “you often only realize that it was a joke when they start laughing themselves.”¹⁹ However, there are two universal factors in Native humour. One is the strong tradition of teasing. The other is the self-deprecatory joke told at one's own expense. Drew Hayden Taylor, for instance, labels himself a *NAIFNI* (“Native/Aboriginal/Indigenous/First Nations/Indian”)²⁰ and jokes about the need to found his own nation:

This is a declaration of independence, my declaration of independence. I've spent too many years explaining who and what I am repeatedly, so as of this moment, I officially secede from both races. I plan to start my own separate nation. Because I am half Ojibway, and half Caucasian, we will be called the Occasions. And I, of course, since I'm founding the new nation, will be a Special Occasion.²¹

Some Native writers working with humour incorporate the auditory quality of Native languages and interchange Native languages and English in their texts. In Cree, Tomson Highway explains, humour is embedded in the language itself:

Humour is not understandably present in the words; it can only strongly be sensed in the melody of the Cree language. For a non-Native reader/audience, the hearing of the Cree language is a defamiliarizing experience that causes a heightened awareness of word independent currents, the atmosphere created by sounds and voice... The Cree culture is hilarious. The language that grew out of that mythology is hilarious. When you speak Cree you laugh constantly.²²

Laughter as a human reflex is unique in that it has no apparent biological purpose. Some scientists have called it a "luxury reflex."²³ On the physiological level, laughter does not require the intervention of the higher mental functions. Emotions and sensations can often generate the bodily movement of laughter before thinking takes place. This separation between thought and emotion creates room for self-reflection and can upset preconceived notions. It is here the "dangerous" power of humour lies.

As John Morrreall argues, a person with a sense of humour can never be fully dominated, even when imprisoned, for with the ability to laugh comes a measure of freedom—if not of movement, at least of thought.²⁴ And Margaret Atwood writes that

“humour is more than a mere tool but becomes an effective subversive weapon, when used by people who find themselves in a tight place without other, more physical weapons.”²⁵

The subversive humour used by Native playwrights works subtly to communicate an important message and to change beliefs. As Atwood says, plays such as these “ambush the reader. They get the knife in, not by whacking you over the head with their own moral righteousness, but by being funny.”²⁶

— TRICKSTER HUMOUR —

AT THE CENTRE of much Native mythology stands the Trickster, sometimes described as the “Native version of Jesus,”²⁷ a being for whom human existence is not a struggle for redemption but a joyous celebration.²⁸

Among many First Nations, Trickster stories “were used to teach cultural truths.”²⁹ Depicted as an unrealistic, expressionistic and supernatural figure, half hero, half fool, the Trickster (also called Raven, Bluebird, Nanabush, Napi, Glooscap, Wisakedjak, Hare, Coyote and other names) exhibits a range of contradictory characteristics and qualities: good and evil, male and female, human and animal, creative and destructive, sacred and profane. He/she is the creator and the destroyer, the humorous rogue, the clown, as well as the cynical, malicious swindler and impostor who, with no concept of moral or social values, follows his/her passions and appetites.³⁰

In an article by Mac Linscott Ricketts for the journal *History and Religions*, Andrew Wiget summarizes Trickster humour:

The trickster is the embodiment of humour—all kinds of humour. He plays trickster on others. He ridicules sacred customs, he breaks taboos, he boasts when he should blush, he is the world’s greatest clown, and he can laugh at himself. For the religious viewpoint which the trickster represents,

laughter has a religious value and function. In laughing at the incredible antics of the trickster, the people laugh at themselves. The myths of the trickster enabled the Indians to laugh off their failures in hunting, in fighting, in romance, and in combatting the limitations imposed upon them by their environment.³¹

Christian missionaries censored the Trickster as paganistic. Native writers like Tomson Highway, contrary to those who say the Trickster left the continent when the whites came, believe that Canada's Native people have abandoned the Trickster "to drift in the alien, commercialized society around them." Highway considers it the responsibility of the artist to breathe new life into the Trickster, "[who is] passed out under some bar table at Queen and Bathurst, drunk out of his mind, to pitch him off the floor, make him stand up, back on his own two feet—so we can laugh and dance again."³²

The humour contained within Trickster mythology is complex and culturally distinct. It often evades analysis when removed from its cultural and community context. Although contemporary scholars are aware of this enigma, many early scholars, imposing a Western perspective, contended that the humour in the Trickster myths was "obscene," "crude" or "primitive."³³ The most explicit aspects of Trickster humour can indeed be classified broadly as libidinous and visceral, yet its purpose and function embody a high degree of complexity. Native writer Gerald Vizenor proposes that the Trickster is a semiotic sign and that, as such, Trickster humour represents comic liberation:

Freedom is a sign and the trickster is chance and freedom in a comic sign; comic freedom is a "doing," not an essence, not a museum being, or an aesthetic presence. The trickster, as a semiotic sign, is imagined in narrative voices, a communal rein to the unconscious, which is comic liberation, however,

the trickster is outside comic structure, “making it” comic rather than “inside comedy, being it.” The trickster is agnostic imagination and aggressive liberation, a “doing” in narrative points of view, and outside the imposed structures.³⁴

The use of the Trickster by Native writers indicates that Native humour is associated with more than the comic. As Sheila Rabillard explains, the audience laughs at the appearance or the funny behaviour of the Trickster, including sight gags or comic fart effects, and at the way the story is told. Yet the story itself is not funny. Only at a second glance does it become clear that the situation is more complex than initially believed, often involving distressing subject matter like rape, suicide or alcoholism.³⁵

In Tomson Highway’s *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, for example, Dickie Bird pulls the trigger of his gun to put an end to his suffering. The gun is not loaded, and Dickie Bird rests immobile facing his father. The trickster Nanabush cuts the complete silence. The production notes direct: “Marilyn Monroe farts, courtesy of Ms. Nanabush: a little flag reading ‘poot’ pops up out of Ms. Monroe’s derriere, as on a play gun. We hear a cute little ‘poot’ sound.”³⁶

Highway’s play is structured in such a way that the audience laughs at what seem to be the most inappropriate moments. The Nanabush character dances, teases, revels and challenges through exaggerated male and female forms of beauty, grotesqueness and grace, to reorient the audience to a different way of thinking. Other Native playwrights employ similar techniques. Pathetic as some scenes are, the characters and the playwright find a way to live with things by joking. Vine Deloria describes the technique well: “The more desperate the problem, the more humour is directed to describe it.”³⁷ Through burlesque or through wild or obscene humour, the audience can face some of the play’s horror with a bravery that otherwise

would not be possible. The comic give us the necessary strength to bear the tragedy.

With the help of the Trickster, Canadian Native playwrights “have become particularly skilled at representing cultural stereotypes in a humorous and ironic fashion to reveal not only their ideological underpinnings but also the way in which historical misconceptions have hindered cross-cultural understanding and interaction.”³⁸ The Trickster is very important in the genre of resistance literature. With puckish, pointed humour, Native writers explore border zones between Native and European cultures and invite their audiences to see the world in a new way. The Trickster in *Dry Lips* plays hockey. Nanabush in *The Rez Sisters* is both a seagull and a bingo master. According to Sheila Rabillard, “the deliberate flouting of decorum, [the] blending of images from high and low white culture also serves to create a hybrid. In *Dry Lips*, Highway combines mystic jukeboxes, country-and-western hit songs and an amateur hockey league with evocations of Greek drama and Shakespearean comedy. The strategies and forms of opera are juxtaposed in *The Rez Sisters* with the low excitements of a monster bingo. Such conjunctions of popular and elite can subtly derail the schooled responses of a mainstream audience,”³⁹ causing them to critically reflect on their own values. “This is an estranging use that refuses to accept the cultural products of the dominant society according to that society’s estimations.”⁴⁰

A corporeal Trickster, however, does not appear in all Native texts. Drew Hayden Taylor states about his plays:

I cannot tell you how many times I have been asked and answered questions about Trickster influences in my (very little) and other Native writers’ (it varies) works. And I can safely say that in these eight stories there was not one single Trickster image, element or appearance made. It seems the future bodes much sadness for non-Native academics.⁴¹

It is important not to play the game of “Spot the Trickster,” which Taylor and fellow playwright Daniel David Moses playfully accuse academics of doing.⁴¹ “What *is* important is to recognize the Tricksterish spirit ‘permeat[ing] almost all work presented as Native theatre.’”⁴² In the foreword to his play *The Baby Blues*, Taylor defines his understanding of the Trickster:

This wondrous character is a glorious celebration of the mischievous, the joke, the play, and I guess in the end the art of the storyteller. I try to keep true to the Trickster spirit, for I wrote what some have called a Native version of a British sex farce, as a celebration of the aboriginal sense of humour.⁴³

The tricksterish spirit in *The Baby Blues* lies in the contradictory take on the relations between white and Native cultures.⁴⁴ Taylor’s prior concern in the play is to counter the image of the “authentic Indian.” *The Baby Blues* makes great fun of whites in search of “authentic Indianness,” confronting the white search for the “true” (that is, the vanishing) Indian with thoroughly hybrid real Indians instead.⁴⁵ One-sided positive preconceptions, Taylor says, “are as racist as the opposite stereotype of the cruel Indian.”⁴⁶

The Baby Blues mocks romantic popular-culture notions of the “authentic Indian” in the person of Summer.⁴⁷ Summer has lines such as “He’s one with Mother Earth and Father Sky.”⁴⁸ She vehemently denies her whiteness—“Creator forbid, I certainly am not one of them”⁴⁹—instead proudly announcing, “I do consider myself a part of the great aboriginal collective.”⁵⁰ And she has every reason to do so because she is “part Indian.”⁵¹ The exact percentage of her aboriginal heritage is “one sixty-fourth Native.”⁵² About realizing her dream, she says, “Oh, I hope I have the honesty and spirit to open myself up to these people and show them my purity of heart so they will accept me into their fold... but... but... I must not appear too eager.”⁵³

White discourse concerning the “authentic Indian” is mimicked by the Native characters themselves.⁵⁴ In the first scene of *The Baby Blues*, Summer and the Native Skunk talk together:

SUMMER: Excuse me, but, if you don't mind me asking,
where are you going with the towel. A sweatlodge maybe?

SKUNK: A swim.

SUMMER: Oh. *SUMMER looks disappointed and SKUNK catches this. His attitude changes.*

SKUNK: Ah yes... I'm going for my... morning purification...
cleansing swim, in the lake... Mother Earth's lake... the
tears of Mother Earth.

SUMMER: Really?!

SKUNK: Yes, I do it every morning... to greet our brother
the sun. Right around that bend is a secluded bay where
I... reveal myself to the world, pay homage to the land,
the water and the sun. And wash...⁵⁵

Throughout the play, humour is used to underline deeply serious matters of tradition and cultural assertion. The thoroughly hybrid real Indians are signified by the character Amos's famous “Fortune Scones”:⁵⁶

NOBLE: Making some bannock?

AMOS: Kinda. It's a special kind of bannock. I call it Fortune
Scones.

NOBLE: Fortune Scones?

AMOS: Got the idea in a Chinese restaurant. I fry them with
little philosophical Indian sayings in the middle. People
love them.

NOBLE: You're kidding?!

AMOS: No, it sells. White people will buy anything.⁵⁷

Summer's search for authentic Indians is driven by her sense of sharing white guilt for the destruction of the pure

Indian culture of the timeless past, and her desire to do her bit to atone. This combination of white guilt and white ownership of the criteria for authenticity is held up to mockery in the play's opening lines:⁵⁸

Oh, listen to the children of nature playing, being one with the lake. Oh, it is bliss, sheer bliss. The harmony I feel in this place. Here I am surrounded by trees, flowers, grass, squirrels, and Native people. Tree to tree. First Nations. Aboriginal people in their natural environment.⁵⁹

A few lines later, Summer becomes more explicitly direct:

No, I admit it, I was raised as a member of the oppressive white majority that is responsible for the unfortunate economic and social conditions your people live in. But really, deep, deep down inside, I'm a good person. Really I am! That's why I took this Native Studies class. Don't blame me for what they have done. I want to atone for their sins.⁶⁰

Summer's behaviour encourages the members of the audience to laugh at themselves in a "comic shock of recognition." Indeed, this is precisely what the Trickster figure does in many Native plays, as Dietmar Kügler asserts: "He holds a mirror up to humanity and has us look at ourselves."⁶¹

— CONCLUSION —

HUMOUR, always present in Aboriginal oral narratives, has taken on even more important dimensions in the ongoing Native American literary renaissance.⁶² Whether confronting annihilation in the physical or in the spiritual sense, the comic tenacity of Native playwrights suggests that the most deeply liberating function of humour is to free others to hope for the impossible. Interviewed at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa, where he was in rehearsal for the role of Zachary Keechigeesik in *Dry Lips*, Gary Farmer expressed:

I love to make people laugh so that I can turn around and make them think. If they laugh, they're going in. They're going deeper. They're falling for the bait. It's like you bait it. It's like bait and you put it out there like a little snare, and they laugh and they laugh, and they're having a good time, and they're really laughing and all of that information is getting in there. You're laying all the groundwork for all that information and then you come across with what you're really [saying]... I mean... the bottom. I mean we're talking about the bottom. It bottoms out and when it bottoms out... it stings there. It burns an image in your brain. It just sits there and it will sit there for a long time. I've seen people come to [this] play and they just can't figure it out. They're moved. Something is different about them from the time they came in [to] when they leave. There's something that burns there, an image that burns there, good or bad, it sits there and it makes them ponder about and think about the condition of these people [on the reserve]... [Still] it's actually, I think, a story of hope... As a human race we've all hit the bottom, and now it's time to move up to where there is hope in the world. We can turn all this around. It doesn't have to be like that.⁶³

Canadian Native playwrights are well aware that their audiences will include both Native people and Euro-Canadians. As Tomson Highway explains: "I like to write in such a way that it moves all people, moves rocks. Then I think my job has been done."⁶⁴

How a play is received, however, is subjective, and each audience member's response depends on his or her way of seeing. According to playwright Yvette Nolan, "[The] element of trickster in much Native work... seems to speak to Native audiences in ways that escape or elude white audiences. The knowledge of the trickster and his/her ways creates a common knowledge that is conducive to laughter."⁶⁵ Nolan further explains:

What makes it difficult for a non-Native audience to grasp what a Native play really is about is the white gaze. The biggest cultural difference is our history of oppression versus their history as oppressors. And an unwillingness or inability to grasp that concept may make it difficult to truly understand the play. There are other things, of course, cultural differences around humour and structure, but none of these are as insurmountable as a history shared from opposite sides.⁶⁶

Thus the meanings a non-Native audience member derives from Native works may be entirely different from what a Native person finds in them. As one literary critic discovered in analyzing Tomson Highway's work, "non-Natives need to experience these plays in the company of Native audiences to fully appreciate the humour."⁶⁷

Yet as Tomson Highway reminds us, "It is a very basic impulse, the need to communicate, to make people laugh, to make people enjoy and celebrate life."⁶⁸ Although everyone might not understand all of the allusions, humorous passages and in jokes in a play, the communal basic idea is still evident. It is a message we should all take to heart, Highway says, because Native writers admonish us: "Please be joyful! Celebrate life, celebrate your families, your friends and your lovers, celebrate the sunlight, the water, the wind, the laughter of strangers, celebrate the very earth you walk on."⁶⁹ As Kate Vangen explains: "Making fun—laughing with rather than at—then becomes a way of living with difference."⁷⁰

Subverting the claim to universality made by the dominant cultures, Native playwrights employ this mysteriously powerful weapon, the cross-cultural language of humour. Humour may be nothing new to Native culture. But this use of it surely is. As contemporary Native playwrights demonstrate, humour can bridge two worlds on one stage.

— NOTES —

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4. Diane Debenharn, "Native People in Contemporary Native Drama." *Canadian Drama* 14-2 (1988), p. 137.
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7. Ginny Ratsoy, "Life and Art in the Creation and Production of Marie Clements' *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*." In *Playing the Pacific Province: An Anthology of British Columbia Plays, 1967–2000*, eds. Ginny Ratsoy and James Hoffman. Toronto: Playwrights Canada, 2001, p. 413.
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10. Gary Farmer, quoted in Allan J. Ryan, *The Trickster Shift: Humour and Irony in Contemporary Native Art*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999, p. 72, fn 50.
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14. Jill Lawless, "Humour Is Drew Hayden Taylor's Release." *Now*, April 10, 1996.
15. Gitta Honegger, "Native Playwright: Tomson Highway." *Theater* 23-1 (December 1992), p. 90.
16. Tomson Highway, *The Rez Sisters*. Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1988, pp. 47–48.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
18. Likewise, the body language of humour and the physical expression of laughter vary from nation to nation. Members of some nations have the ability to laugh with their whole bodies, whereas others express laughter in the chest region or primarily in facial movements.
19. Drew Hayden Taylor, personal interview, May 14, 2002.
20. Drew Hayden Taylor, "The First Annual Aboriginal Trivia Contest," *Further Adventures of a Blue-Eyed Ojibway: Funny, You Don't Look Like One Two*. Penticton: Theytus, 1999, p. 44.
21. Drew Hayden Taylor, "Pretty Like a White Boy: The Adventures of a Blue-Eyed Ojibway." In *An Anthology of Canadian Native Literature in English*, eds. Daniel David Moses and Terry Goldie. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 439.
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