

FLOYD FAVEL: "THEY THOUGHT AHEAD SEVEN GENERATIONS"

SCL/ÉLC Interview by Greg Doran

Floyd Favel is a Native Canadian actor, director, playwright, and current Artistic Director of Native Earth Performing Arts (NEPA), the country's most prominent Native theatre company. Favel has brought an extensive résumé to the position. Trained at Denmark's Tukaq Theatre and at Centro per la Sperimentazione e la Ricerca Teatrale in Italy, he recently served as director of the Native Theatre School and has numerous directing credits.

I first became aware of Floyd Favel while doing research for my M.A. Thesis. I was struck by the clarity and style of his article "A Plains Nomad —Over the Ocean," in Canadian Theatre Review 68. I saw his name again when the Toronto Star announced Favel had become the Artistic Director at NEPA. Looking to supplement my research, I phoned him and was given a time when he could meet with me.

We met in the NEPA office. Its size, or rather lack of size, was indeed striking, the cramped quarters making the group's accomplishments all the more impressive. Every spare corner was used for storage; posters and reviews chronicling the recent history of Native drama hung on every wall.

GD What are your views on the voice appropriation issue? How do you view this controversy? Is it real or artificial?

FF I don't think it is a real controversy because basically I'm of the opinion that has been quite firm for the last few years, that you can do anything you want. I appropriate from French plays, English plays, you know. It is basically up to our own discretion as Native people what information we want to be let out, what information we would like to be shared. So therefore, if we

complain about appropriation we should also *consider what role* we have in that controversy—which I feel is not a controversy.

GD Along the same line, a lot has been made of W.P. Kinsella's "native stories," such as *The Fencepost Chronicles*. How do you see this particular controversy? I have read some of them and I find them simple, like a situation comedy. Do you see it as problem? Many Native writers have been very outspoken on this point.

FF The only problem I see with that is that you always have to consider the purpose of your art. You always have to be careful if it verges on continuing bad feelings between people or if it verges on malicious slandering; using the real names, real people, real places. You have to be careful because you will offend those people. That is the only problem I see; he has directly offended people by using real names and real places—real recognizable places—and by no means are the characters representative of those real people. I realize it is a work of fiction, and I look at it as fiction, but you have to be careful when you use real places.

GD So you see it as a specific controversy and not a larger one.

FF It is specific in that you recognize Hobbema, you recognize Hobbema names, and so people from Hobbema recognize names of their respected people who are being slandered and made to look comically foolish by a writer of fiction. If you are going to be a writer of fiction, then create fiction.

GD Do you feel that the co-opting of Native customs by non-Natives, weakens the significance of the ceremonies and traditions?

FF Of course, that is what I mean by saying that we play our own part in appropriation and being co-opted. We should therefore realize what is sacred to us and what is allowed to be revealed, because revealing naturally weakens the sacred things, but it can also strengthen white culture in terms of the different cultural aspects that we have which can contribute to Canadian culture as a whole. Mind you, I mean there is a difference between what is ceremonial and what is social. There are some

social elements of our culture that can help strengthen and identify a distinct Native culture.

GD Then what you are saying is that if someone were to take a specific sacred ceremony, he would somehow be detracting from it by trying to secularize it.

FF Yes, that's very disrespectful to a living culture.

GD Then should non-Native professors teach, at the university level, Native writings or writers . . .

FF If they're capable.

GD What would make them capable? I ask this because there is a movement, in some English departments, to include Native writers in the Canadian literary canon because they are being recognized as serious writers.

FF Well, there's that old saying, "a fool says what he knows and a wise man knows what he says." So you can talk about those Native writers and their mythology, their traditions, their world, but it's not based on direct knowledge. Taking that into consideration, a white professor has the obligation to be well-versed and knowledgeable; this is very difficult because even as Native people it takes us a whole lifetime to become well-versed and knowledgeable. Consider also that it is literature; so look at it as a piece of literature. I think it's very fine and dandy to teach it in universities because first and foremost it is literature.

GD So we can study it as literature, but not on a sociological level.

FF Sociologically, oh yes, you can . . .

GD But we are not going to get into the heart of the . . .

FF I am just talking more about the mythological themes and spiritual motifs which are present in the plays. There is a severe limitation to what a non-Native teacher could teach.

GD Drew Taylor has said, that, when discussing non-Natives writing on or about Natives, "You should learn to walk with my people, live with them before you write about them. The story will be more authentic."¹ Do you agree with his statement?

FF If you want to be authentic, yes, or you can choose to write a fiction and just take the consequences.

GD So you are saying that realism isn't an absolute.

FF Yes, realism isn't, but at the same time anything you write about, you should be a bit familiar with; that's research, that's thinking about the subject.

GD Do you see the preservation of the aboriginal languages as a priority or are there other more pressing issues within the Native communities?

FF That is my individual priority, but lately I've come to the conclusion that our aboriginal languages will not survive after fifty or sixty years. Everybody says that culture is important but I don't see anybody who is really, sincerely, making it a real priority in their daily lives. There are many great words, great speeches, great ideas that people talk about, but if we consider our ancestors, who always looked ahead seven generations, we find we are not looking ahead seven generations, and given our actions, there will be no seventh generation by how we are living today. Maintaining our culture is dependent on how you live your daily life in its strength, in its foresight as our ancestors did, in its commitment, its discipline, in its joy and its study and in all the things they did. They thought ahead seven generations; what they ate, what they thought, who they married, who they lived with, who they slept with, even those decisions have repercussions in our seventh generation. Basically, I guess I'm a bit cynical. I am cynical in that I don't really believe there will be a seventh generation. I can do what I can for my children and my grandchildren, but I don't know what everybody else is going to do. I really don't know.

GD This is an issue Billy Merasty raised in an interview with Monique Mojica. He said, "One of the reasons that we write is to make sure our culture comes through, to have our culture, the way we feel because it is very different recorded, since we don't come from a recorded culture."² Since the Native culture is not a written one, do you feel turning it into one is somehow weakening it?

FF No, it is not weakening it. It can only benefit, but if I

write a play in my first language, Cree, nobody's going to understand it here. Nobody's going to understand it in large parts of Saskatchewan where they use Cree, and it is difficult to learn. I know very few cases of Natives who didn't speak their Native language and learned a Native language in their adulthood, learned their aboriginal language in their adulthood. One of our primary motives is to preserve our language, but it is kind of difficult to do a play all in your aboriginal language, it is very difficult.

GD Do you think that there will ever be aboriginal self-government?

FF There can't be any aboriginal self-government if you don't have any cultural or artistic mandate, and at present our aboriginal governments have no cultural or artistic mandate. So, how can they speak of having a distinct society? What, a society of politicians? Every society has at its core its art and culture and they are not making that a priority because their practice in their daily lives, their practice in their politics is assimilation. They are assimilists, all of them. Just look at how they live and how they conduct their politics. They are assimilists and I would not throw in my lot, right now, with the aboriginal governments because I do not believe in their actions.

GD What type of mandate would you draft up, if given the opportunity?

FF You put first and foremost art and culture because without art and culture you are not a distinct society. You are not a people if you don't have the art and culture. In art and culture everything is taken into consideration: language, concepts, world concepts, concepts of time, everything. So my mandate would be that right beside the politician is the cultural and artistic minister, and all the decisions are made in collaboration with the cultural and artistic minister. So that's my feeling about aboriginal self-government and sovereignty. Can't have it. It's not possible if you are an assimilist and that's how all our leaders are right now.

GD You have mentioned that you felt seven generations down the line your culture will probably not exist; what do you feel will be there instead?

FF Probably the homogenized melting pot idea of America. There will be traces of us. As I said before, I'm being pessimistic because that is where I am today, this morning. There can be seven generations ahead if we start today about ensuring that survival; which means you are obligated to learn your language, learn your culture, be careful making choices of whom you marry because it is through your children that you pass on your culture, through your grandchildren, or you can subscribe to the melting pot idea and come up with some homogenous whole of different shades of colours and different mixtures of culture, but you won't have distinctness.

GD Do you find that overcoming the residence schools and all the government intervention will be the greatest task in preserving your culture because they have always . . .

FF No, now they've opened the fences and we've been let out of residential schools and reserves, but now our greatest task is not to be swallowed by the world that we have been let into because we have to keep our identity. I know that's a well-worn cliché but you have to really think about what it means: What is your task?

GD Here in Toronto there are pockets all over the city that have maintained their European identities. So it seems like a reasonable assumption that it should be able to happen for the Natives; but would this, because of the way the government has acted in the past, be more difficult for Natives to achieve than, for example, Italian immigrants?

FF Yes. Well, it's more difficult because through the long years of repression what I feel has happened in some Natives is a belief in themselves as a whole person, as a loving human being who can be loved and does love, has been shattered because of the harsh measures that were meted out . So I think that is the difference, because there were systematic policies.

GD What do you feel is the largest myth that Native people still have to overcome?

FF The largest myth?

GD Yes.

FF The largest myth? Give me an example.

GD For example, at one time many non-Natives thought that Natives talked like Tonto, on *The Lone Ranger*. In the white culture there are these preconceived ideas of what a Native person is like. Is there one central myth that we in the white society carry that should be destroyed? One preconception that is getting in the way of the development of an understanding? A preconceived idea the white society has about Natives that must be overcome if we are going to understand the Native culture and people?

FF The biggest myth I find right now, and it all depends where you are in your own life and what you see and what you think about right now—the biggest myth I see, which I'm getting kind of disappointed and disgusted in, is everybody sees us as "wise Indians" and that we ourselves as Indians believe that we are wise. I don't think so. We have so, so much to learn. We have our lives to clean up before we can talk about cleaning up Mother Earth. We have to clean up our own lives. We have to clean up how we think, how we treat each other, how we treat our relatives, how we treat our friends, how we treat our lovers. We have to really consider, if there is any talk about revolution, that the revolution starts in the bed.

GD Do you think that there is a fractionalization within the Native culture?

FF I feel that it is being very misinterpreted. Its values are being sold. They are being mouthed with no content. I feel we are destroying our own culture by easy talk, by easy selling, by easy access. I think we are going to destroy it because the only reason there is culture and religious beliefs is that they must directly reflect your daily actions. ACTION! Never mind big spiritual concepts like love and the divine blessings and healing Mother Earth. You have to fix yourself. Get realistic. Do you wake up early, do you work hard, do you feed your relatives? Are you able to be generous? Do you have the resources to be generous, instead of being a parasite?

GD How do you see the change in Native representation from the sixties to now in Canadian drama? George Ryga, with

The Ecstasy Of Rita Joe and *Indian*, was really the first playwright in Canada to put the Native on stage in any meaningful context . . .

FF The tragic Indian.

GD How do you see the change, then, because it appears that there has been a change in the portrayal. Do you see a marked change in thirty years?

FF There is a marked change. The biggest change is that Native people are the ones who are putting Natives on the stage. As for the non-Natives putting Natives on the stage, they are still stuck in portraying us as tragic or as noble. They are still stuck in that. One crucial indication of this is to look at the films that are being put out by Americans. If you look at those films, there is no difference between those representations and what was represented of us in the 1940s. The biggest change is that we are putting our own images, our own representations on the stage.

GD I have noticed that Native playwrights tend not to create non-Native characters. For example, there are no non-Natives in Tomson Highway's plays. Why do you think this is?

FF I don't think that it is done consciously. I just think that is how the playwright structured his or her work. I think that it was just what happened. I have seen a lot of plays, not published productions, amateur productions where they do put white people on the stage and usually they are portrayed as villains: the villain as welfare officer, the villain as priest, the villain as doctor, the villain as cop. So there are a lot of shows that portray white people, but they are not published.

GD Native playwrights, such as Billy Merasty with his play *Fireweed*, do not seem to shy away from tough issues. They seem to go straight at difficult issues and serious concerns. Conversely, white culture tends to skirt around serious issues and sweep them under the rug.

FF I think any playwright should tackle a real concern because that is often the heart, the core of the play and one's own connection to his or her play. That creates the heart and the ferocity of your message and of the drama; it shows if you are connected to your theme. So I don't think it is just specifically Na-

tives who tackle the difficult issues, I think it is one's obligation as a playwright to do something which is connected to you.

GD As a director, staging a difficult production, what role do you see the staging playing in delivering the message? Are you heavy-handed? Do you stage the message or do you make it more subtle?

FF Basically my belief is that there is no difficult play. The only difficult play is where the writer has no clear understanding of what he or she really wants to say, that is the only play that is difficult to do. So, as for subtleties, there is always the age-old maxim, "Don't show everything." Part of the mystery and the strength of drama is that you don't reveal and show everything.

GD I have noticed that Native writers seem to have a very strong similarity to classical Greek mythology. You have described your own theatre training as an "odyssey," and various Native writers have used classical themes in their works. How do you see this relationship?

FF The relationship, I think, is still ambiguous. I think as Natives we are under the impression and we are always told in our theatre training that theatre descended from Greek ritual and drama and Christian ritual and therefore in our search to connect with our own experience we connect with the ancient Greek drama or the Middle Ages' passion plays. In a way it is looking for our own roots, but my feeling now at this point, at this stage, is, rather than doing that, why not look directly at your own myths, at your own history, at your own dramatic and performative elements, as opposed to using something outside to look inside. So my feeling is that it is a stage in searching for our own roots, our own connections. It's a stage, but I think we can by-pass that stage. It's just a way station.

GD Tomson Highway said, "Legend has it that the shamans, who predicted the arrival of the white man and the near destruction of the Indian people, also foretold the resurgence of the native people seven lifetimes after Columbus. We are at that seventh generation."³ Why do you think there has been a huge increase in the Native performing arts or Native arts in general?

FF First of all I think that it is very complicated. First of all

we were not citizens until the sixties. We were not in integrated schools until the late sixties, early seventies, and a lot of us grew up in the aboriginal language. The generation before me was not able to articulate, in the English language, their dreams and wishes. And, by law, they couldn't use their Native language; yet they were not able to master the English language. I think why we are more articulate and why there is an explosion has to do with the lessening of laws and direct repression, and also with the mastery of the English language, literature and books. We are the first generation who became educated. There were people who were educated before us, but they were not educated on a grand scale where they were able to create a vital impact. Now most of us are educated to the point where a lot of Natives don't even speak their aboriginal language. That's the downside. I think that's why you hear more of our voices due to the lessening of laws and due to education and our ability to articulate in English.

GD Do you find that people try to stigmatize Native authors, like Tomson Highway, by saying that he is a Native playwright, whereas George Ryga is not referred to as a Ukrainian immigrant playwright, but rather as a Canadian playwright—do you find this a stigma? Is it somehow detracting from the accomplishment of the author?

FF It is, but I understand why they would say that, because if you look at most of us one can only think and say, "Oh, they must be a Native," because people's eyes tend to see in colours. Our eyes tend to see what is recognizable. So for us and others, like Black people and Oriental people, that is what is often said, because we are recognizable. So I find it kind of detracts, yes. As a director, I am also called a "Native" director. Therefore I insisted on doing a non-Native show in a non-Native venue with non-Native actresses just to get the point across that first and foremost I am just a director. My cultural and social upbringing is a little different, so it is kind of stigmatic, but at the same time it is nothing to be ashamed of because it is true. We don't call Leonard Cohen a Jewish troubadour. Nobody calls Bob Dylan a Jewish folk-singer. He is by background a Jew, but nobody says he's a Jewish folk-singer. Nobody calls Bruce Cockburn an Anglo-Saxon Canadian folk singer.

GD Do you find that people tend to turn away because it's a Native writer as opposed to a Canadian writer? We were talking about how this has maybe stigmatized writers, or yourself as a Native director. Do you find that people shut down when they hear the word Native?

FF Depends, depends. It can be a novelty to have a Native director directing a non-Native production and it can attract people or it can be detrimental. I don't think that it is detrimental and I don't think people shut down. It's just another way of trying to bracket you, I guess.

GD There are many people who maintain that, when Tomson Highway agreed to have *Dry Lips* put on at the Royal Alex, this somehow weakened the message of the play, or detracted from the power or strength of the play. Do you agree with that?

FF I don't see how. No, I don't agree.

GD I attended a performance at the Royal Alex and people were walking out in droves. You don't see that as a problem? You don't see a problem with the play being performed on one of Canada's "big" stages if that's the reaction?

FF No, no. If we want to perform on Canada's "big" stage we should perform on Canada's "big" stage. It's up to your own choice. Our choice shouldn't be dictated by the chorus of voices and critics that are out there. What we feel we should do is what we should do.

GD Then you feel that the play reached even the people who left?

FF Yes, that's why they left.

GD Do you see theatre as a tool for learning or as a mode of communication? Can you really educate through theatre or can you just put the ideas out there and the education has to come elsewhere?

FF Well, if your aim is to educate through theatre, then you have the danger of falling into polemics or didacticism. So, I think my feeling is that you are educating yourselves in each play. With each work that you do as a director or writer, you are in a process

that is tied to where you are sometimes and what you are thinking about. So the result is that it can shed some light or educate viewers who see the play and also yourself as the participant directly within that drama, within that work. But I don't feel that you should make it a goal, because then you run into the pitfall that popular theatre and other didactic people run into.

GD Agreed, but there seems to be in all drama, especially agitprop, this inherently political statement trying to be made.

FF You should really concentrate more on the drama of the play. What is inherent in the play, as opposed to the big stink. If you are a real artist, you are concerned with your real wounds, your real obsessions, your real thoughts, and they recur in different plays. If you are a real artist, that is what you are concerned about. That is what you work through, live through, and very often the plays reflect the time and era of your childhood or your adulthood or the future.

GD Having trained in Europe, as well as in Canada, do you feel that the Native Theatre School is the proper tool in developing your own people's talents? Creating a Native learning environment for Natives?

FF Well, you can go to school any place; any school is valid, valuable. So the Native Theatre School, which operates outside the auspices of NEPA, is something else. Through the Native Theatre School [there] exists a specific research project that I am undertaking which is developing a distinct training based on our aboriginal cultural, use of body and voice. We have different points of reference in the use of our body and voice than do Europeans, so therefore that must show itself in our performances. Right now it's not really showing itself, so my goal is that maybe it can, if we develop a training of body and voice and theatre improvisation based on aboriginal concepts of time, space, humour, position of body, placement of voice and breath, etc.

GD As the current Artistic Director for Native Earth Performing Arts, in what role do you see NEPA at the moment? What do you see as the most beneficial thing the NEPA can accomplish now?

FF We are the only venue right now that develops and nur-

tures our dramatic and creative voice, whose sole mandate is to do that. Probably the only venue in North America, and so our role is to continue searching for—hunting for—that talent, those voices that want to speak, and to develop them and put them on the stage and hope that through the nurturing process they can develop their skills as playwrights, as dramatists or as directors or as actors or as technicians. We are the only place that is a nurturing ground for Native theatre.

NOTES

- ¹ Wendy Dudley. "A Heritage Of Pride," *Calgary Herald* (13 March 1990): F6.
- ² Monique Mojica. "In The Mother Tongue," *Canadian Theatre Review* 68 (1991): 39-43.
- ³ Nancy Wigson. "Nanabush In The City," *Books In Canada* 18.2 (1989): 7-9.

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