

## MICHELLE LA FLAMME

### SPEAKING UP, SPEAKING OUT, OR SPEAKING BACK: THE SIGNPOSTS ARE IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

This collection of essays offers critical discussions that illuminate some of the power behind playwright Marie Clements's vision. There are many ways to associate her work with different debates and questions that have animated Canadian literary criticism. Whether her work is linked to larger postcolonial concerns regarding the "coming to voice" of Aboriginal writers, framed within the rising interest and acceptance of Aboriginal theatre that has rocked the country since Highway's seminal work *Rez Sisters*, or understood within a larger discourse around feminist writing, these essays suggest there is much interest in both the medium and the message in her work. Clements is also one of many Aboriginal (and postcolonial Canadian) playwrights whose work offers a revision of Canadian narratives predicated on the notion that Canada was "won" by the colonial imperative. Much fruitful discussion can come from understanding Clements's repeated thematic interest in this contentious Canadian history. Whether we understand her artistry as a playwright speaking up, speaking back, or speaking within, her work has the power to engage many scholars using diverse approaches to examine her plays.

I'd like to offer another way of appreciating Clements's work by placing it within Aboriginal theatre history in Canada. Like the work of Margo Kane, Tomson Highway, and Drew Hayden Taylor, Clements's body of work has been an important part of a theatre movement that has given voice to Aboriginal writers in Canada. By also being Artistic Directors of their own companies, these playwrights have played a foundational role in the development of Aboriginal theatre in Canada. This larger theatrical movement has included the organization of Canada's first IPAA (Indigenous Performing Artists Alliance) to create a space for Aboriginal artists to network and support each other's work through collaborations and tours. Their plays, serious engagements, and pivotal roles within theatre companies map a new way of bringing Aboriginal paradigms and worldviews into the context of Canadian theatre.

In short, I believe Marie Clements's presence in contemporary theatre can be fruitfully appreciated and deeply understood by centering her work within the milieu of many other Aboriginal

playwrights in Canada. These playwrights possess power over the word, the direction, and the very building blocks of Aboriginal theatre companies. These playwrights have been shaping the current renaissance in Aboriginal theatre and bringing these stories to Canadian audiences.

Then there is the somewhat confounding issue of Aboriginal women writers' approaches to questions of gender. Who is Clements as a female playwright within the context of Aboriginal theatre history? Although many Aboriginal people debate the existence of "Aboriginal feminism," which many see as an oxymoron, I would still hazard to suggest that another way of appreciating Clements's work is to look at it in the national context of Aboriginal women playwrights. Margo Kane's Full Circle: First Nations Performance Company, Clements's former company urban ink, Monique Mojica's involvement with Turtle Gals Performance Ensemble, and Yvette Nolan's artistic vision for Native Earth Performing Arts suggest that members of this generation of Aboriginal women playwrights have clearly established their roles in creating progressive theatre through their involvement in community theatre companies. Like Highway and Taylor, two of Canada's most produced and celebrated Aboriginal playwrights who cut their teeth while involved as Artistic Directors for Canada's oldest Aboriginal theatre company, Native Earth, these women playwrights also have refined their vision and skills by working collaboratively with other Aboriginal artists across Canada. Clements may be seen as one of these women who has honoured the importance of (Aboriginal) theatre practice by inspiring a whole new generation.

In closing, I must say that I am thrilled to have had the opportunity to offer my voice to this burgeoning criticism that addresses an Aboriginal playwright in Canada. So, I offer a few words about myself as a preface to my essay on Clements's theatrical *Medicine*. I had the great honour of coordinating the Indigenous Performing Arts Alliance in its infancy, and bearing witness to this transformative moment was critical for my understanding of Aboriginal theatre communities. Years later, I was inspired to teach UBC's first History of Native Theatre course (2005). At that time the students were thirsty for critical work on the plays that we addressed in the course, including Clements's phenomenal play *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*. I am pleased to say that a few years later, volumes such as this will provide hearty negotiations with Clements's plays.

For me, the larger Aboriginal context deserves to be recog-

nized as a preface to understanding the kind of power that Clements's body of work has for Aboriginal theatre practitioners and Aboriginal audiences in Canada. However, the essays in this volume are, in many ways, writing from outside an Aboriginal context. Instead, these writers view Clements's work through other lenses, and from other theoretical positions. The writers in this collection of essays try to understand Clements's work by way of English literature, its conventions, paradigms, and praxis. Their essays suggest how Clements's work "speaks back to" other theatrical and literary forms and conventions. In sum, these essays contribute to the growing awareness of, and critical engagement with, a woman whose plays certainly offer one of Canada's most powerfully layered, unique, and deeply moving contemporary theatrical experiences. Whether Clements's artistry is approached through English literary conventions (speaking up), framed within postcolonial theory (speaking back), placed within Aboriginal theatre practice (speaking within), or read as part of feminist empowerment—on the question of her artistry, most critics agree. ❖