

**The Land Called Morning:
 Three Plays**
 Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1986.

I can't help but think of the scream/cry of Tantoo Cardinal at the end of Theatre Passe Maraille's production of "Jessica: A Transformation" in the fall of 1986. The play concludes on Jessica's anguished scream of frustration, rage of despair, a scream that she takes inside of herself, a scream that pulls together the fragments of Jessica's lives, a scream that emerges as a cry of self-renewal and self-determination. Somewhere, halfway between scream and cry, caught in the guts and the throat and embodying both the frustration and renewal, lie the three plays in *The Land Called Morning* and perhaps the state of Native theatre and Native culture itself in Canada at the present.

Native theatre seems to be in the midst of a revival of sorts. As in the case of most artistic movements, it seems to sneak up on us, our realization that it exists usually coinciding with its immanent demise. We can only hope that in this case we are naming a youthful artistic presence: both its promise and its necessity are profound. Revival is an apt metaphor since, as we are reminded in Caroline Heath's preface to *The Land Called Morning*, "Sadie Wornstaff of Spirit Song Native Indian Theatre Company in Vancouver, points out that dramatic expression is not new among Native people. Storytelling and pow wows have a strong dramatic element, and the masks and the screens used in potlaches are undeniable evidence of powerful staged events." In the last few years a series of important Native dramas have been staged, and not just in the theatre centres as in the case of "Jessica" in Toronto, but also in places more accessible to Native audiences, as in the production of "Mattonobee" at the Northern Heritage centre in Yellowknife, or the plays included in *The Land Called Morning*.

The publication of three Native plays in *The Land Called Morning* can only be commended. The silencing and marginalization of Native culture has been and continues to be a crucial feature of multicultural Canada. It is, after all, a cultural policy that strips Native culture of its specificity by reducing it to one among many cultural forms that exist in Canada. That these three plays have been published, then, is in itself a noteworthy event and deserves credit. That substantively they are provocative, compassionate, humorous and challenging adds to our pleasure.

"Teach Me the Ways of the Sacred Circle" was written by Valerie Dudoward and has been performed by the Spirit Song Native Theatre Company. It is set in Vancouver and deals with the inner conflict of its protagonist, Matt, who was raised in the city and wants "to have my own office, someday, maybe in False Creek. And a condominium within walking distance. And I'll be a top business consultant to major corporations." Matt is forced to face his Native heritage when he must decide whether or not to accede to his grandmother's wish to have him return with her for the summer to Port Simpson.

"Gabrielle" was created by the Upisasik (little) Theatre of Rossignol School, Ile-à-la-Croix, Saskatchewan for the centenary of the 1885 Batoche uprising. It is an attempt to rewrite the Riel Rebellion in an updated context, with a woman as leader. The action takes place around Ile-à-la-Croix: Gulf Oil has decided to initiate a major oil drilling project in the middle of the Metis community's fur block. Gabrielle is drafted by the local Metis to lead the struggle against this project and is forced by an irresponsible southern government to adopt ever more drastic measures.

Finally, "The Land Called Morning," written by John Selkirk with Gordon Selkirk, takes place on a reserve, Montreal Lake, in northern Saskatchewan. The play deals with the struggles of four Cree teenagers to build meaningful lives for themselves on an isolated reservation. One of the characters, Robin, uses his boxing as a ticket to "success" and escape while two of the others, Peter and Anne, are trapped in futility and despair on the reserve.

If we can speak of Native theatre as a genre, a number of interesting strategies and focusses emerge. As in the case of George Ryga's "The Ecstasy of Rita Joe" and Linda Griffiths' "Jessica," there is an extensive use of dreams and memories that serve to bring the past--historical/personal/cultural--into the life of a protagonist. Each of the plays in *The Land Called Morning* uses place in a very careful way to express crucial ideas. Finally, there is a fairly consistent attempt to use elements of traditional Native culture, particularly language and legends but also music, as strategically important to the setting and narration.

The use of dreams is one of the most powerful and most consistent elements in Native theatre. Two of the scenes in "Teach Me the Ways..." are dream sequences. Both of them involve Matt in dialogue with an elder, in the first case his grandfather in the second his grandmother. Similarly, a good deal of "Gabrielle" involves her dialogues with Louis Riel in what may or may not be taken to be dream sequences. In "The Land Called Morning" dreams are less a part of the overall narration, though what is perhaps the central scene of the play is taken up in large part with Anne's description of a dream. Dreams are important in these plays because they allow for a direct expression of the spiritual component of Native culture. They also allow for the past--in the guise of elders or leaders or mythical figures--to speak directly to the present. Significantly in "Gabrielle," as in "Jessica," the status of the dream figure is uncertain. Riel seems to exist, like the mythical figures in "Jessica," simply on another spiritual plane. What we should not lose sight of is the way in which these dreams or spirits are used to bring Native tradition, culture and history to life and give them a voice with which to guide Native people today.

The setting or, rather, the use of place in each of these plays also deserves our attention. "Teach Me the Ways..." takes place in a city, "Gabrielle" in a metis community and "The Land Called Morning" in a reserve. This already speaks to the separate concerns of each: the first to the question of maintaining Native identity in the modern world, the second to the struggle against economic imperialism, the third to the personal struggle against despair. Of at least equal significance, though, is the particular use of place within each story. For example, the story Granny tells in "Teach Me the Ways..." ends as follows: "then the great man tore off half of the tree trunk and placed Granny inside, and then sealed up the tree again. And that tree, that ancient tree, is still standing in our oldest village site." What distinguishes the Native concern for place from regionalism is precisely the way in which the world is inscribed with this kind of historical/mythical meaning. The dramatic tension in this play stems from Matt's indecision over whether to return to Port Simpson with Granny or not: place and identity are firmly intertwined. In "Gabrielle" there is a discussion of blockade as political activity:

3rd Citizen: That's it! We'll block the highway right at the forks...
2nd Citizen: Right at Rosser Bay! That way their trucks can't go around the road block. There's no ditches to worry about.
1st Citizen: No!
3rd Citizen: We'd have to dig up the old Buffalo road, though, in case they tried to go around...

This use of local place names is important. For a moment, in this play, Ile-à-la-Crosse is its own center. It is not marginal. For a moment its place names--and not just the names but the specific features of each place (the fact that there are ditches at the forks!)--are important, are the stuff of history, of mythology. It represents the struggle of the margin to reinscribe itself, reinsert its specificity, against the totalizing force of the center.

One of the most interesting features of these plays is their use of Native language. In the best of these plays we can hear the grain of a collective Native voice that speaks its experience. "Gabrielle" marks a significant advance in this regard. Much of the play is written in Cree (translations are provided in the published text). As important are those passages that bring phrases, expressions, small bits of the Native subversions of English to us: as in the use of that particular all encompassing "Aha!" that bring northern Manitoba back to me. Much of the written text of these plays is stilted and does not convey the sense, but where it does--and "Gabrielle" is a particularly good example--we are afforded a rare pleasure not to be taken lightly.

The other way these plays express a specific Native voice is through their use of Native culture, particularly music. Both "Teach Me the Ways..." and "The Land Called Morning" end with traditional drumming. "Gabrielle" ends with a song, and unlike "The Ecstasy of Rita Joe" it is one which serves to affirm the play's political message. "Teach Me the Ways..." is a particularly interesting example. The first conflict between Native and non-Native culture in this play is expressed musically when Sam plays a traditional drum song for Matt:

*The drum is a circle
The circle is life
Life begins, life ends,
Then it begins again
Like the drum
It begins again.*

*The drum is the heartbeat
Heartbeat of our Nations
The drum is ancient
The drum is the heartbeat
The heartbeat is living
And it's me and it's you...*

This is as good an articulation of the "meaning" of the drum song/dance as one could find. The play uses music, dance, legends and clothes to convey Native culture. Along with the bits of Native language these form a whole that we can call the Native voice. Native theatre, then, can be seen as the dramatic expression of Native voice.

For this reason the play "The Land Called Morning" needs to be called into question. Unlike the other plays in the volume and other Native plays it does not deal with the specifically Native experience. The characters in the play are strongly drawn, probably more so than those in "Gabrielle" and "Teach Me the Ways..." However, it makes little use of Cree culture: the most significant cultural referent in the play is Emily Dickenson, whose poems are read by Anne. A more serious problem is the fact that "success" in the play's terms is equated with Robin's boxing career and trip to the Korean Olympics while failure is associated with staying in Montreal Lake. Success is therefore tied to escape and a non-Native career and lifestyle. While as a message of hope and despair the play makes a powerful statement and one that is important to Native people (as it is to all of us), the characters could easily be non-Natives, the setting any small, isolated community. That may be the intent, to illustrate to Natives and to non-Natives how their lives are not so different as they might assume. In a climate where assimilation is one of the profoundest forces Native people struggle against, such an approach is misguided.

That a Native theatre is emerging/reviving with its own characteristics is a cultural development of profound significance for Canada. The identity and integrity of the country as a whole rests in large part upon the place of Native people and Native culture in it; rest, that is, on the place of the most marginalized, disadvantaged and discriminated against amongst us. The plays in *The Land Called Morning* are not without their weaknesses but inasmuch as they bring the Native voice to us they should not be ignored. The scream of Rita Joe will turn to the cry of Jessica, of Gabrielle, of Matt: "The drum is a circle/the circle is life..."

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The Mother Machine
by Gena Corea
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If Freud had been a woman, chances are the words "creation envy" would have replaced "penis envy" in the annals of psychoanalysis. Since the earliest known times men have attempted to compensate for their inability to give birth in some weird and wonderful ways. From ancient times right into the twentieth century, men on almost all continents have practiced *couvade* (from the French word to hatch) when their women gave birth. The custom involved the father simulating symptoms of labour and childbirth. In its extreme forms, the mother returned to her work as soon as possible after giving birth--often the same day, and waited on the father, who remained in bed. In Medieval times, alchemists tried to create life independent of women by combining such ingredients such as boy's urine, blood and sperm. And early scientists and philosophers believed that the sperm itself contained a tiny man, or homunculus, and that the woman's womb was merely a vessel in which that life grew.

But alas, these ideas proved to be merely wishful thinking. Men learned that they contribute 23 chromosomes to the creation of life and little else. Faced with this discovery men might have despaired, but modern science came to the rescue, and offered them new hope for fulfilling their creation envy. First came medicine and the male takeover of childbirth, and more recently came the new reproductive technologies. Through procedures like artificial insemination, In Vitro Fertilization (IVF), and embryo transfer, male technicians have been able to usurp women's procreative powers more fully than ever before. And future breakthroughs which are now in the research stages, such as artificial wombs, cloning, and yes--even male pregnancy, promise to extend this control still further.

In her hard-hitting book, *The Mother Machine*, Gena Corea documents the awesome consequences for women of this takeover. She explodes the myth, widely promulgated by the mass media, that the technologies offer new hope for the infertile. While this myth is extremely seductive for couples who have suffered years of infertility, Corea argues that for the majority of women, the technologies actually bring new despair. At the best IVF clinics, only three out of ten women become pregnant, and of those, close to one third miscarry. Commercial embryo transfer clinics have recently opened in the United States on the basis of only two experimental successes. Nevertheless, the low success rates of these procedures are played down, and the hope is played up.