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# Aesthetics of Native American Theater: Hanay Geiogamah's *Body Indian*

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*The aesthetics of Native American theater is very different when compared to other theaters. This is mainly due to the perspectives of Native Americans and their world view being different. Though the mainstream Americans wished to give Native American culture an honorable burial, the Native Americans were not willing to vanish, but had actually begun to assert and articulate their own modalities. The Native American dramatists like Hanay Geiogamah reflect this authentic voice caught between assertion and erasure. The Native American theater includes their medicine men, oral traditions, powwows and many other tribal traditions. These plays grew out of the authors' desire to present Native Americans to Native Americans and to the rest of the Americans and the world in ways that are vivid and compelling, and free from the pernicious Euro-American stereotypes of Red Indians. The idea of alienation and humor is looked at differently by the Native Americans when compared to the perspectives of the majority of mainstream Americans.*

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**N**ative American literature is not similar to Western literature, because the basic assumptions about the universe and the reality experienced by tribal people and that by a majority of Westerners are not the same. Native Americans acknowledge the essential harmony of all things i.e., they see all the things as of equal value in the scheme of the universe. Besides, in Native American theater there are strong cultural underpinnings of a religious and philosophical nature that have permeated and continue to permeate its development. The origins of Native American theater lie in the traditional ritual (sand paintings created by Navajo medicine men), public ceremony and storytelling. Native performances include great tribal ceremonies, such as dances, masked performances, the blessing ceremonies, the ghost dance, and the sacred clown ceremony of the Sioux. In the past, tribal communication had been person-to-person, group-to-group, and through storytelling, dance and ceremony in a familial setting. Winter was for tales, summer for dances, and early fall for feasting. Life wheeled around regularly ordained ceremonies. But these classical modalities began to disappear with the suppression of Native American Indian religions, enforced separation of family members, the drift of

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the land to the cities, and a fall in the speaking of the Native languages. Though the mainstream Americans wished to give Native American culture an honorable burial, the Native Americans were not willing to vanish, but had actually begun to adapt to change and evolve new modalities. They took a majority of the old and mixed it with the new, thus redefining themselves. Everything traditional did not have to be discarded but new forms could emerge from tradition, thus preserving the Native American flavor.

Drama is a branch of literature, and Native American theater is given an intellectual marginalization, just as the Native American Indians have been marginalized in white America. White American culture certainly does not include indigenous cultures like Native Americans. However, theater performance cannot be stripped of its historical connections by paying heed to only the histrionic or dramatic representations. The Native Indian performance, broadly defined, includes the work and guidance of spiritual leaders, shamans and medicine men and women. It includes the oral tradition of storytelling by tribal elders—rich in spiritual legacy, in mythology and in transcendent values. Their ceremonies are a mark of getting together for social and spiritual renewal (D'Aponte, 1999, p. 11). This is a powwow ceremony (or a formal social gathering of Native people for thanksgiving), where they speak of old differences and settle them among themselves. Their sense of tribal consciousness is high. Another tribal member is not to be treated as a traitor by a kinsman. Native Americans have turned drama as a literary form because of their inclination to theatricality, performance and participation in a shared event to be endured in religious practices and powwows. Hanay Geogamah's (Kiowa, Native American) interest is not only to rebuild the romantic past or to speak only of white man's exploitation, but also to preserve the living Native American Indian traditions and the facts of their life in America today. However, in the course of his depictions, he reveals the differences between the Native American conceptualization and the western mode.

In most instances, Native American Indian performance offers strong cultural awareness of gathering, of the circle, of the four directions, of the search for vision, of time and space as earthly connectors to other worlds. These elements are rich both in secular and sacred meaning. The Native American plays employ popular personae who appear prominently and continuously in various manifestations of their cultures, both literary and performative. The stories are about communicating the courage and nobility of the defeated 'other'; the image of the noble savage and the icon of the gentle Pocahontas have remained the favorite subjects of the American imagination.

Native American theatricality does not mean only entertaining non-Indians. Indian dances and historical pageants are for preserving the culture and are a part of the ceremony. Traditional tales are dramatized on stage. A series of

realistic American Indian plays are written by American Indians, addressing American Indian issues, for an American Indian audience. Indians who are not conversant with their tradition would get a better grounding through Native Indian theatricality. It would also strengthen the badly weakened sense of the tribe. False images of the "red skin" had surfaced on the American stage. They were mere stereotypes of the boisterous masquerade, melancholic or the noble savage. When the authors are Native Indians they reflect the authentic voice caught between assertion and erasure. Their aim is to examine the Indians' sense of alienation and search for personal identity. It certainly does appeal to uninformed audiences.

Hanay Geiogamah's plays represent a newly emerging theatrical impulse of a group of Americans who have already found moving artistic expression in song, poetry, prose, painting and sculpture. These plays grew out of their author's desire to present Native Americans to Native Americans in ways that are vivid and compelling and free from the more pernicious Euro-American stereotypes of Red Indians. Geiogamah writes about them with the understanding of an intimate Native Indian. Geiogamah's Amerindians are neither the noble savages nor the vicious sub-humans; nor are they caricatures patronized by contemporary cinema.

Hanay Geiogamah turned to an European literary form that was new to Native Indian artists. But the essential theatrical impulse is an ancient one. Jefferey Huntsman says, "Literature, in its broadest and most profound sense, includes all purposeful and perennial art in language" (*Introduction to New Native American Drama*, p. 9). Today traditional Native Indian Literature is badly presented to an English audience. It is stripped of its dramatic contexts, dance, music and the very essence, that it is unappealing and unmoving. On the other hand, while the outward trappings of Hanay Geiogamah's plays are western, the essence is indigenous. Thus he alters but redefines.

The contemporary era of Native American playwriting begins with the groundbreaking work of Geiogamah during the 1970s. Although a Kiowa, he writes for all Native Indians. Hanay Geiogamah translates the essence of tribal solidarity in Native community through the appeal to the younger members by the oldest elder of the tribe. *Body Indian* was first performed at the New York La MaMa Experimental Theater Club in 1972. The setting of the play is Howard's one-room apartment. There are many empty liquor bottles strewn around. It concerns Bobby Lee, a crippled alcoholic in his mid-thirties. He has a wooden leg and hopes to use the lease money from his reservation land allotment for alcohol rehabilitation. Drunk and passed out, he is searched for by his friends for more money for drinking. There is a lot of drinking and merriment that goes on, and when Bobby Lee is knocked out by booze, he is searched for by the other characters. Hanay Geiogamah reiterates what would happen if Native Indians do not stand together as a group.

Howard: (now certain that Bobby is thoroughly passed out) This boy always pass out pretty fast. When he got his leg cut off and start wearin' that other leg, he start drinkin' pretty heavy. (pause) He was passed out on those tracks when he got hurt. (pause) I know he got money on him. He always hide it in that leg (*New Native American Drama*, p. 14).

In the last scene of the play, desperate for money to buy themselves a drink, Howard and Thomson remove Bobby Lee's artificial leg and rearrange his body back on the bed. Howard calls out to James "Sonny I want you to take us to whiteman bootleggers on Washington Street. He'll give us what we need for this (indicating artificial leg). He'll let Bobby have it back when Bobby can get it out" (*New Native American Drama*, p. 43). Hanay Geiogamah's writing reflects how a desperate need can make one forget the ethics. The body of this wounded antihero is often cited as an apt and telling metaphor for the horrific ramifications of Native American oppression in the US. On the surface, the play is about the devastating effects of alcohol and the stresses of modern society. The people in *Body Indian* are members of several different tribes, and the play shows how Indians themselves degrade and cripple each other. The entire play focuses on the same scene of drunks and their conversation and how they pass out. Each scene ends with the passing of a train that heightens the actions. We see how when Bobby Lee reaches out for salvation and sanity, his people evade him. Geiogamah's message is that against all odds, Native Indian people should stick together.

Today's Native American theater movement is made up of Native people creating plays that are expressions of their lives. All along, the mainstream was representing the first Americans as primitives or exotic. But today many unique voices are writing not about captives or cavalry men. Their plays are written from the inside—about their wounds, their families, about healing, laughing, making fun, and caring for their communities. They are attempting to "get off the cultural reservation" and affecting a change in people's minds. They are warnings that they are not just romantic subject matter to be written about, but in turn wish to write and produce plays side-by-side with the mainstream theater, voicing the unvoiced Indian consciousness.

Hanay Geiogamah focuses the spotlight on the poverty of the Native Indians. He highlights that alcoholism is increasing among the Native Indians. While he was working for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, he observed that the Native Indians are their own enemies. The play shows this. But Hanay Geiogamah also reveals how in some cases Native Indians act as though they were drunk so that they could be jailed, propelled by the prospects of a warm meal. That was the pathetic plight of many Native Indians. Speaking to Kenneth Lincoln, he says, "So these Indi'ns are standin' there actin' like they're drunk. They have enough wine in their little bottle to dab themselves and smell drunk. Ad' they

see a cop car comin', so they start staggering—in order to get into jail” (Lincoln, p. 69). Geiogamah says that the Native American theater did not know much of the Western theories of literature. Geiogamah cites from Martin Esslin's book on Brecht, the Brechtian idea of alienation devices and applications. He has attended Brecht Theater. He says, “We weren't really equipped to have the kind of dialogue or exchange that we could now. If that happened now, I certainly would be more versed in Brecht. But I knew some of him” (Lincoln, p. 70). For the West, alienation may be a concept of isolation, pain and sheer desperation. But for Native Indians, this kind of individualism does not exist. They possess a tribal consciousness, which makes them assert their sense of community more strongly than that of individuality. But this idea is funny to a Native Indian. Geiogamah says, “Everything that constitutes that alienation thing seemed corny to me” (Lincoln, p. 71). The Kiowas enjoy humor. When *Body Indian* was staged, it heightened the humor. The humor is spontaneous, useful and instructive. It is accepted as a humorous play, which is an inverted kind of humor that talks back.

According to Native Indians, especially the Kiowas, there is no existence for a member of a tribe apart from his tribal community. If he does diverge to the western way, then he becomes a traitor or a half-breed. So feeling alienated from one's tribe does not exist for Native Americans. It is only when one has vested interests that one rejects one's tribe and seeks to ape the West. This is how individualism is understood in the traditional, conservative terms of Native American ideologies or belief systems. Speaking to Kenneth Lincoln, Geiogamah says:

From the humor point of view, the Kiowas have a very, very rich sense of humor, very incomplete, very scatological, very screwball, loony, and yet all somehow controlled. You go around Kiowas, like you go to our fair, and you get around a bunch of Kiowas, and they're always laughing, always laughing (p. 71).

*Body Indian* is a humorous play up to a certain point. But it is written with seriousness. Native Indians ending up drunk and their graphic drunken antics may appear funny to many, but it is written with a didactic element to it, to represent a slice of Native Indian life after encounter with the mainstream whites. “I realized that there were just real problems, real things with Indi'ns that needed to be brought to their attention” (Lincoln, p. 73). The Indian may appear like the clown, as Geiogamah puts it: “The clown is a figure of humor and mirth, but you look at the clown and you see that it's just something that is there (Lincoln, p. 74). Indians never overdo it. “Indi'ns are very, very good at intuitively sensing when they're nearing that breaking point. So there's an eternal dignity to it, eternal, that attaches itself to the tribal identity. That force keeps you from going over. At the same time you can watch stuff like that and people love it. You can take the humor and use it as something purposeful and

useful and instructive and helpful, but you have to learn how to do it" (Lincoln, pp. 77-78).

To be humorous is a great blessing and an admirable capability. The Native Indian life is a saga of untold suffering and injustice. It is a very positive force that maintains the balance in their lives. This force is like religion to them for it has been brought forward like their memories, traditions, stories, religion, and helped to keep them sane. Geiogamah says:

So in that sense humor is definitely a part of religion. I truly believe that the older Indians laughed, and laughed. I remember my dad's maternal grandfather had a big, bellowing Kiowa laugh—so I know that they laughed. However, hard their lives were, there always had to be something funny. You've always got to try to balance everything, know where that factor fits into the way that you conduct your life (Lincoln p. 80).

Native Indians have a tremendous capacity to understand life. And survival is a way of life and a religion for them. God is not up there but he pervades all life. He is another link in the chain of life. Native Indians may laugh at everyday incidents, but at the same time they know the seriousness of things. They know how to love and respect things, maintaining their dignity.

There is no real origin one can trace Native American theater to. This is an art form both ancient and modern. Native American theater is a repository of their people's beliefs, traditions, societies and culture. This is represented in the enactments on the stage. Native Indian plays by Native Indians call attention to the wrongs done to Native Indians and are basically a polemic addressed to the mainstream. Neither the drama nor the polemic has proved effective as a means to inspire and stir up dialogue among Indians themselves. This leaves the theater to accomplish the task. The Native American dramatist is writing for his Amerindian and non-Indian audiences. His non-Indian setting and education expose him to the ways of both the mainstream and the tribal world. ❁

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