American Indian Theatre and Performance

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Despite centuries of political obstacles, restrictive policies, and United States cultural imperialism, a robust and vibrant American Indian theatre exists today. There are multiple definitions of what comprises American Indian theatre, drama and performance, stemming from multiple historical, political and traditional perspectives; contemporary dramatists and performers grapple with these ranging definitions and perspectives through their plays and productions. Some of the current cultural, political and artistic issues associated with American Indian theatre include topics such as representation, authenticity, cultural empowerment, and practical production concerns.

Defining the Genre

There are multiple issues surrounding the genre of American Indian theatre and its history; the boundaries and limits of the form are instable and often contested by Indian and non-Indian theatre specialists alike. Some theatre historians include plays by non-Native writers that represent Indians, while others define the genre as plays written by American Indian playwrights, performed by American Indian actors, for American Indian audiences. There are similar debates over periodization. Some scholars feel that traditional performance practices that were indispensible to Native cultural life and predate European contact should be included in, or even, define the genre; others mainly focus on plays derived partially

through hybrid cultural experience, placing American Indian Theatre within the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Such debates link to larger cultural, political and artistic concerns over identity, ethnicity, representation, and cultural sovereignty. American Indian dramatists and performers often negotiate these debates and concerns through their art.

A Brief Historical Background:

Although experts continue to debate the exact numbers, there is evidence that more than 15 million American Indians and several hundred tribal societies lived in the land that now constitutes the United States at the time of the European invasion. There was a great deal of cultural diversity in pre-conquest America; most of these societies had distinct religious beliefs and practices, moiety systems, political structures, art and performance, influenced by centuries of oral cultural transmission, inter-societal negotiations, and relationships with the specific climate, geography, animal and plant life of their traditional homelands. Jeffery Huntsman, who has published widely in the field discusses traditional American Indian drama. He writes: "The first difficulty, then, in approaching the drama of the Native Americans is that there are many dramas, conceivably as many as there are cultures."[1]

[1] Jeffery F. Huntsman, "Native American Theatre," in *American Indian Theatre in Performance: A Reader*, ed. Hanay Geiogamah et al. (Los Angeles: UCLA American Indian Studies Center, 1999), 82.

Performance was integrated into many aspects of Native cultural life well before Europeans invaded the Americas. American Indians performed ceremonies for well-being and protection and to celebrate, revere and mourn life cycles. These ceremonies included the theatrical elements of storytelling, song, dance, costume and sometimes even lighting techniques were used to create emotional and spiritual impact. Despite the great cultural diversity in pre-conquest America, all American Indian societies transmitted knowledge, history and culture orally. Storytelling, along with song, dance and drumming remain significant aspects of traditional Native life.

As multiple entries in this book explain, European contact and United States expansionist policies had devastating impact on the region's indigenous peoples. The colonial and U.S. imperial project employed martial and biological warfare, bribery, religious and political coercion, erroneous and misleading treaties, rape and assault in order to ensure European and then American political, cultural and economic control over the land and its original inhabitants. In the four centuries following European contact until the turn of the twentieth century, American Indian populations steadily declined.[2] Between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries, Native societies often fought and died to remain on their ancestral homelands. Others were forced to migrate to areas that were deemed unattractive by the United States government. Many of these territories, later named reservations, were

[2] Duane Champagne, "Setting the Stage: An Historical Overview," in *American Indian Theatre in Performance: A Reader*, ed. Hanay Geiogamah et al. (Los Angeles: UCLA American Indian Studies Center, 1999), 12.

located in the Plains region in climates considered too extreme for industrial or agricultural production.

By the beginning of the 1800s, U.S. Indian policy focused on assimilation as a means of handling the "Indian Problem."[3] The United States government enacted policies that were aimed to Americanize and Christianize native populations. Politicians and bureaucrats believed that Natives would be more willing to give up their lands without resistance if they were taught Western modes of farming and were converted to Christianity. To this end, Congress allocated funds to hire missionaries to convert native communities and to educate the children according to European-American standards.[4] The U.S. Government enacted policies that removed children from their families, most often by force or coercion, and enrolled them in Indian boarding schools where they were forbidden to speak their tribal languages or practice traditional religious ceremonies, dancing, music and storytelling. These schools and policies were commonplace from the late 1800s through the early to mid twentieth century. Government policies forced Indians to abandon their traditions or practice them in secrecy. However, due to the spiritual and cultural endurance of the American Indian peoples, many traditions, ceremonial practices

[3] The phrase "Indian problem" is ubiquitously found in letters, newspaper articles, and records of speeches and policies throughout much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a catchall phrase for the numerous difficulties involved in subduing and controlling American Indians in the name of U.S. interests.

[4] Under Spanish rule in the beginning of the 1800s, Indians in California faced similar circumstances. Millions of natives had died from European diseases; tens of thousands who survived were coerced into converting to Catholicism and were forced to build, live, and work in the Missions. Between 1800-1850 the California Indian population suffered tremendous losses; due to American settler interest in gold and land as well as the lawlessness of the region, militia groups of American gold diggers and land speculators waged war on California Indians.

and performing arts survived this dark time. An important example is the practice of the Navajo Chantways. These performance based ceremonies involve the extended family and friends of a sick, injured or imbalanced person gathering together for days to witness a trained singer/shaman, the *hataaxi*, sing ceremonial songs and recite creation stories and dialogue in order to restore balance to the ailing. Other examples of a traditional native performance that survived the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are: the Ojibway bear ceremonials, the Zuni rain dance, and the various Plains medicine bundle rituals.[5] American Indians were officially allowed religious freedom and cultural expression only after the U.S. government passed the Indian Reorganization Act in 1934 and various Indian policies associated with the New Deal in the 1940s. This period of cultural awakening slowly began to "generate creative energy and vision," including renewed interest in sacred and secular performance within and across tribal communities.[6] Today, many American Indian playwrights and performers draw upon traditional tribal performance practices, stories and characters to inform their dramatic work.

The Trickster Character in American Indian Drama:

The most ubiquitous character in native orature, literature and drama is the Trickster. The Trickster is a shape-shifter who can switch genders and change

[5] Huntsman, "Native American Theatre," 89-92.

[6] Hanay Geiogamah, "The New American Indian Theater: An Introduction" in *American Indian Theatre in Performance: A Reader*. Edited by Hanay Geiogamah et al. (Los Angeles: UCLA American Indian Studies Center, 1999). 159.

between human and animal form within the course of story. S/he often appears as Raven in stories from Arctic and Northwest societies, and as Coyote in stories from the West. In his/her many manifestations, the Trickster is a mischievous jokester, and is often depicted as prone to human temptations, greed, laziness, and lust. Traditionally, Trickster stories function to show the pitfalls of human behavior, providing valuable lessons for individuals and groups to live in balance with each other and the natural world. Contemporary native playwrights such as Tompson Highway, Hanay Geiogamah, Marie Clements and many others have used Tricksters as comic, witty troublemakers who dramaturgically push the action forward. They provide insight and humor to stir up relationships or solve problems presented in the plays.

Native Worldview in Literature and Drama

Besides traditional characters and stories, contemporary American Indian theatre and performance is also greatly influenced by traditional ways of seeing and understanding the world that are dissimilar to the Western worldview. In her book *The Sacred Hoop: A Contemporary Perspective* American Indian scholar, writer, poet and activist Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna Pueblo/Sioux/Scott/Lebanese-American) explains major differences between the Western and Native worldviews, and makes the case that native literature, poetry, drama and ceremony should not be evaluated out of their cultural contexts. She writes:

> The tribes seek – through song, ceremony, legend, sacred stories (myths), and tales – to embody, articulate, and share reality, to bring the isolated, private self into harmony and balance with this reality, to verbalize the sense of majesty and reverent mystery of all things, and to actualize, in language, those truths that give to humanity its greatest significance and dignity (55).

Native drama today is informed by the goals of traditional ceremonial performances and storytelling, which are to bring the performers, participants and audience to a place of balance and feeling of unity with each other and the universe. This goal is often achieved through the theatrical use of cyclical time and infinite space; many American Indian plays weave stories, layering traditional myths with historical events, biographies, performers' autobiographies, and fictional elements in order to dramatize the links between the past, present and future. The stage can also represent multiple spaces within the course of one play and sometimes will illustrate movement between the metaphysical world and earthly locations. Critics who are unfamiliar with the Native worldview and corresponding aesthetics often misunderstand American Indian performances that dramatize dynamic notions of time, space and characterization.

A Legacy of Representing "Indian"

Many scholars of American Indian Studies and American Theatre History have argued that there is evidence that Europeans arrived to the American colonies with

preconceived notions about the land's indigenous peoples.[7] Early American literature and theatre grappled with the Indian Problem, often illustrating dichotomous representations of Indians as either savage, ruthless heathens or as childlike, innocent 'natural men,' in need of European and Euro-American leadership. For decades following the Revolution, Euro-American novelists, playwrights and artists were preoccupied with creating a national identity that was distinct from those of the European countries from which their ancestors had immigrated. Historians and cultural critics often argue that in an attempt to develop a 'truly American' body of literature, early American authors wrote stories that featured romanticized American Indians as a unique aspect of the new country's past.

Although arguably sympathetic to the American Indian plight, authors such as Lewis Henry Morgan, James Fenimore Cooper, and Washington Irving contributed to the national legacy of imagining Indians as a doomed and vanishing race.[8] Some critics have argued that works such as Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* influenced the American cultural imaginary in two interconnected ways: first, they promoted the idea that all American Indians were dying off due to the military, political (and genetic) superiority of white America, justifying Manifest Destiny and continuing

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[7] Don B. Wilmeth, "Noble or Ruthless Savage? The American Indian on Stage and in the Drama," in *American Indian Theatre in Performance: A Reader*. Edited by Hanay Geiogamah et al. (Los Angeles: UCLA American Indian Studies Center, 1999), 128-130. And: Sally L. Jones, "Edwin Forrest and Mythic Re-creations of the Native" in *Dressing in Feathers: The Construction of the Indian in American Popular Culture,* ed. S. Elizabeth Bird, (Boulder: Westview Press, Inc., 1996), 15. And: Philip J. DeLoria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 4.

[8] DeLoria, *Playing Indian,* 1-6, 185. And: Jones, "Edwin Forrest," 13-16.

Indian removal policies; secondly, such rhetoric established a unique American myth of origins that began with uncivilized, pagan disorder and ended with Euro-American modernity and the "moral progress of civilization."[9]

Images of Indians in the nineteenth-century vacillated between pitiable and frightening, but nearly always depicted the American Indian as an "historical relic," stuck in an imagined pre-colonial time.[10] Characterizations of noble and ruthless savages as well as submissive Indian princesses filled the American stage between 1829 and the turn of the century. These "Indian Plays" ranged from farces to melodramas and usually featured a sachem or chief fighting the loss of his homeland at the face of evil European colonists. *Metamora; or the Last of the Wampanoags* written by Euro-American playwright John Augustus Stone and first produced in 1829 offers an infamous example of the 'Noble Savage' character and the nineteenth-century American cultural fascination with romanticized depictions of American Indians as fallen victims of history. This play was commissioned by American actor Edwin Forrest as a star vehicle for himself and was produced with great regularly between 1829 and 1872, the year of Forrest's death. In the role of the booming, majestic, half-naked Wampanoag sachem, Forrest helped circulate the image of the Noble Savage and added to the popular belief that Indians were inevitable victims. Forrest's red-faced portrayal of Metamora as the last of a dying

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[9] Donald, B. Grose, "Edwin Forrest, 'Metamora', and the Indian Removal Act of 1830," *Theatre Journal* Vol. 37, No. 2. (May, 1985): 191.

[10] Donald L. Kaufmann, "The Indian as Media Hand-Me-Down," in *American Indian Theatre in Performance: A Reader*, ed. Hanay Geiogamah et al. (Los Angeles: UCLA American Indian Studies Center, 1999), 114.

people had lasting consequences on the American psyche. In 1976 the Wampanoags of Mashpee filed a suit to reclaim lands taken over by the town in 1869. The plaintiffs lost the case on "grounds that the Wampanoag tribe had been exterminated in King Philip's War three hundred years earlier. Even though anthropologists, ethnohistorians, and others testified to the contrary, the Mashpee Wampanoags were told that they did not exist."[11] Many American Indian artists today directly address issues of presence, asserting present-day identities and community concerns in their works.

Following the onslaught of "Indian Plays," all of which were written by non-Indian writers, came the next major genre of Indian representation: Wild West Shows. The most famous and longest running of these spectacles, "Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show" ran from 1883-1913. These shows romanticized the wild nature of the newly acquired western frontier, and mainly played to the expectations, fears and excitement of their audiences in the American East. "Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show" employed massive casts of hundreds of performers, including cowboys, Mexicans, American Indians, Texas long-horns, and Buffalo. Usually they featured an elaborate equestrian parade, staged gunfights, a buffalo hunt and other rodeo type events. Significantly, these shows also featured historical reenactments of Indian-white conflicts, which characterized American Indians as ruthless, bloodthirsty savages.[12]

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[11] Jones, "Edwin Forrest," 22.
[12] Jeffrey Steele, " Reduced to Images: American Indians in Nineteenth Century Advertising," in *Dressing in Feathers: The Construction of the Indian in American Popular Culture,* ed. S. Elizabeth Bird (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), 46. And: Wilmeth, "Noble or Ruthless," 139-140.

Such performances popularized the Noble Savage/Ruthless Savage binary in white imagination. Unfortunately, representations of the "vanishing (or vanished) Indian" have continued in American films and television shows of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Negotiating Stereotypes/Establishing Native American Presence

From the 1960s on, American Indian activists, artists and scholars have admonished representations of the 'Noble Savage,' the 'Ruthless Savage' and the 'Indian Princess' because these stereotypes help enforce the notion that American Indians are victims of past colonial atrocities, and are no longer part of the present day American population. Additionally, many feel that the continual reproduction of the historical Indian, regardless if the representation is sympathetic to the colonized or the colonizers, obscures the real cultural, political and economic issues of contemporary native peoples. Professional Native theatre artists work to correct such misrepresentation and ingrained stereotypes by telling stories from the American Indian point of view, often drawing on oral history and personal narratives in their work. Plays often weave aspects of Native ceremony, storytelling, and performance traditions with current community concerns in order to illustrate the interconnectedness of past, present and future American Indian issues.

American Indian Theatre from the 1930s to the Present

Many scholars now recognize Lynn Riggs, a biracial enrolled member of the Cherokee Nation, as the first American Indian playwright of note. Riggs wrote several notable Broadway dramas, including the 1931 drama *Green Grows the Lilacs*, upon which musical theatre moguls Rodgers and Hammerstein based their musical *Oklahoma!* Although its 1932 premiere production was not met with critical success, Riggs' *Cherokee Night* is now considered to be the first and one of the most influential examples of modern American Indian theatre and dramaturgy.[13] *Cherokee Night* explores issues concerning the Cherokee people such as: the extreme racism inflicted upon full and mixed blood Cherokees in Oklahoma, the displacement of American Indians from their ancestral lands, the desperation and economic hardship felt during the transformation of Indian Territory to Oklahoma's statehood, the eradication of Native traditions and languages, infighting and prejudice exercised between Cherokees with varying degrees of Indian ancestry. Although Riggs work predated the American Indian Movement (also known as AIM and the Red Power Movement) by several decades, many of its themes foreshadowed the concerns American Indian playwrights would later explore in the 1960s.

American Indian performance practices endured and transformed between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries even as tribal communities suffered tremendous

[13] Christy Stanlake, *Native American Drama: A Critical Perspective*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 7. And: Jaye T. Darby, "Broadway (Un) Bound: Lynn Riggs' *The Cherokee Night,*" in *Nations Speaking: Indigenous Performances Across the Americas.* Spec. issue of *Baylor Journal of Theatre and Performance* 4.1 (2007): 7-23.

losses in population, removal and Americanization policies. It was not until the Red Power Movement of the 1960s, however, that many of these performance traditions, transformations and innovations gained national attention and established a place within the political and ethnic U.S. Theatre scene. Pan-tribal theatre collectives formed, espousing radical political activism, renewed cultural awareness, and community empowerment for native peoples. The plays developed during the Red Power Movement had political goals distinct from those of other ethnic groups at this time which fought for civil rights and increased social equality; many American Indian artists and activists during the 1960s and 1970s advocated instead for increased independence, treaty rights, and political and cultural sovereignty.

In 1962 the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) was founded in Sante Fe, New Mexico. The school developed several native arts training programs, including an influential professional theatre program. Under the direction of Dr. Rolland Meinholz, the theatre program brought together many talented professional theatre teaching-artists, drawing on multiple American Indian performance traditions to formally train young Native performers. In 1969, the director of the IAIA, Cherokee Lloyd Kiva New wrote the "Credo for American Indian Theatre," which stated that a new era of American Indian theatre "can be evolved out of the framework of Indian traditions," and "will come only as the result of an educational process in which Indian artists are created who can then make their own statements."[14] Several key

[14] Lloyd Kiva New, "Credo for American Indian Theatre," in *American Indian Theatre in Performance: A Reader*. ed. Hanay Geiogamah et al. (Los Angeles: UCLA American Indian Studies Center, 1990), 3.

Native theatre artists were trained at IAIA, including playwrights Bruce King (Oneida) and Terry Gomez (Comanche).

By the 1970s AIM had gained considerable momentum, partially through its creative public protests, which demanded national attention. Two significant protests that are notable for their performative nature are: the AIM occupation of Alcatraz Island in 1969 and the AIM "Siege at Wounded Knee" in 1973. In both cases AIM protesters mobilized to publicly trespass and occupy United States property that held symbolic significance to America's colonial project. During this radical time of American Indian political protest and cultural rebirth, Kiowa director and playwright Hanay Gieogamah founded the American Indian Theater Ensemble (AITE), which would later change its name to the Native American Theater Ensemble (NATE). Cosponsored by Ellen Stewart of La MaMa Experimental Theater Club, AITE was established during the New York City avant-garde theatre scene in 1972. AITE/NATE developed and toured important political shows such as Geiogamah's *Body Indian* (1972), *Foghorn* (1973) and *49* (1975). Additionally, NATE served as a theatrical incubator, launching the careers of several notable Native actors and playwrights such as Aleut actor Jane Lind, and Navajo playwright and actor Geraldine Keams.[15]

Other theatre groups that formed during the 1970s were also influential in the development of contemporary American Indian performance. Two of these groups,

[15] Stanlake, *Native American Drama,* 9.

Thunderbird Theatre and Spiderwoman Theater, continue to create and perform theatrical work today.

Thunderbird Theatre was founded in Kansas at the Haskell Indian Nations University in 1974, under the artistic direction of Pat Melody. According to the university's website, Thunderbird Theatre was founded as a non-profit, student organization with the mission "to provide Native American theatre to both Native and non-Native audiences; to explore and expand the direction and form of Native American theatre and; to initiate the training of Native American theatre professionals." Over the past three decades many prominent theatre professionals have worked in Thunderbird Theatre as either teaching artists or students. Perhaps the best known of these artists is Bruce King, a member of the Turtle Clan of the Haudenosaunee-Oneida Nation. King has worked extensively at Thunderbird Theatre, IAIA, Indian Time Theater and the Echo-Hawk Theatre Ensemble as a playwright, director and artistic director. The American Indian Studies Center at the University of California, Los Angeles, has included King's works in two of their major anthologies, and published a collection of King's plays in 2007.[16] In addition to Bruce King, students in Haskell's theatre company have also had the opportunity to learn from playwrights Marcie Rendon (White Earth Anishinabe), Dianne Yeahquo Reynor (Kiowa) and playwright and director Julie Pierson-Little Thunder (Creek). Reynor and several other alumnae of Thunderbird Theatre went on to open the American Indian Repertory Theatre in 2006 in Lawrence, Kansas.

[16] Bruce King, *An Evening at the Warbonnet and Other Plays,* Los Angeles: UCLA American Indian Studies Center, 2007.

Founded in 1976 by sisters Muriel Miguel, Gloria Miguel and Lisa Mayo (Kuna/Rappahannock), Spiderwoman Theater is now noted as the oldest continually running feminist theatre group in North America. Spiderwoman originally focused on radical, multicultural feminist politics and included a diverse group of women ranging in ages, sexual orientation, and races; by 1979, however the three sisters split with the other women in the company to concentrate more expressly on issues pertaining to the Native American and Native women's communities.[17] Spiderwoman Theater's are known for creating theatrical pastiche, as the three core members weave elements of their autobiography, traditional stories, contemporary events and community issues, satire, politics, humor, song and dance to create multivocal, original plays. Often considered their signature piece, *Sun, Moon and Feather* (1981) exemplifies Spiderwoman's collaborative, patchwork approach to their work. This style, known as "storyweaving," has had a tremendous impact on Native American Theatre at large.[18]

In 1999, Randy Reinholz (Choctaw) and Jean Bruce-Scott established Native Voices at the Autry Museum of the Southwest as an organization "devoted to developing and producing new works for the stage by Native American playwrights."[19] Reinholz and Scott began their efforts to cultivate new Native American plays in

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[17] "Spiderwoman Theater: About Us," Spiderwoman Theater, accessed June 10, 2010, http://www.spiderwomantheater.org/SpiderwomanAboutUs.htm And: Stanlake, *Native American Drama,* 10.
[18] Spiderwoman Theater, "About Us."
[19] "Theatre, Native Voices at the Autry: Mission Statement," The Autry National Center of the American West, accessed June 10, 2010, http://theautry.org/whats-here/theater-native-voices

1993 at Illinois State University, where they were teaching at the time. After putting out an official call for new Native American plays in the development stage, they organized a series of playwriting workshops called *Native Voices: A Festival of Native Plays.* Among the first playwrights selected to workshop their scripts were Drew Haden Taylor (Ojibwa), William S. Yellowrobe (Assiniboine-Sioux), Bruce King (Oneida), Joseph A. Dandurnd (Kwantlen), and Marie Clements (Métis), who have all gone on to contribute significant work to the field of Native American drama. In later years Native Voices at the Autry has helped develop and produce works by Joy Harjo (Mvskoke), Diane Glancy (Cherokee), Darrell Dennis (Shuswap), Larissa Fasthorse (Rosebud Sioux, Lakota), Terry Gomez (Comanche), Aragon Star (Kickapoo/Creek), and James Lujan (Taos Pueblo).

While its programming has increased steadily throughout the past two decades, Native Voices continues to host a playwriting workshop and festival each year. The company usually selects three new works that have not been professionally produced nor published to workshop over the course of several months. The company connects the playwright with a professional dramaturg and director to provide feedback during the rewriting process, and in a weeklong retreat produces staged readings of the works in progress, read by professional actors. The company usually selects one play from the Annual Playwrights Retreat & Festival of Plays to produce fully at the Autry under Equity contract. In 2011, Native Voices at the Autry is an important resource for Native American playwrights, actors and directors and produces significant new Native works.

The field of American Indian Theatre continues to grow and transform with increased interest from Natives and non-Natives alike. Unfortunately, contemporary artists and producers are faced with several practical challenges. Casting Native American professional productions often proves to be difficult because of the relative lack of trained Native actors. The challenge of casting is compounded because many American Indian playwrights feel strongly that their plays be performed by American Indian actors, sometimes specifying the characters' tribal affiliations within the character breakdowns. Funding and marketing can present additional challenges to the American Indian theatre community, as their audience is arguably niche. Yet, the numbers of Native plays written and produced are increasing, despite these material challenges. Additionally, the field has recently garnered increased academic interest, evidenced by several anthologies of American Indian plays and collections of critical articles on the genre. Ongoing conversations and debates about theatrical aesthetics, representation, funding, inter-tribal and multicultural theatrical endeavors promise that that the field of American Indian Theatre will continue to expand in the twenty-first century.