



**Humor as a Weapon in Contemporary
Canadian Theatre:**

A Study of Selected Plays by Tomson Highway

By

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Abstract:

Although many critics evaluate Native humor as a mirror reflecting Native traditions or marking it as always subversive, Native writers frequently use humor to deal with sensitive social tensions and paradoxes. The writers may oscillate between confirming and criticizing divisive beliefs, classifications, and identities because of humor's regulating and disordering effects on their writings. This paper investigates Native humor as a social practice developed out of cultural and historical circumstances that enable Native people to confront change while retaining a feeling of consistency and flexibility. In Native writings, originality, identity, and social concerns are frequently brought up in humorous behaviors. Humor challenges narrow conceptions of "Naiveness" while enabling Native people to keep a sense of self. For instance, "the white man" satires enable writers to interact with and challenge the dominant society. The idea of authentic identity is both undermined and supported by humorous images of racial and ethnic hybridity. *The Rez Sisters*, first performed by Native Earth Performing Arts in Toronto in 1986, and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, first presented at Theatre Pass Muraille in Toronto in 1989, marked the theatrical debuts of Canadian Native playwright Tomson Highway on both the domestic and international stages. At the time, both pieces received overwhelmingly positive reviews, making Highway the focus of the Canadian theatre community. Both plays received the Floyd S. Chalmers Canadian Play Award, given to Canadian plays performed professionally in the Toronto region, as well as the Dora Mavor Moore Award for an Outstanding New Play (1988–1989).

Keywords: Canadian Theatre, Humor, Tomson Highway, Native.



ملخص :

على الرغم من أن النقاد قد يقيمون الفكاهة الأصلية كمرآة تعكس تقاليد السكان الأصليين أو تميزها بأنها تخريبية دائما، إلا أن المؤلفين الأصليين يستخدمون الفكاهة في كثير من الأحيان للتنقل بين التوترات والمفارقات الاجتماعية. يمكن للمؤلفين أن يخطوا ضيقا تأكيد وانتقاد المعتقدات والتصنيفات والهويات المثيرة للانقسام بسبب تأثيرات الفكاهة المنظمة والمضطربة في كتاباتهم. تبحث هذه الورقة في الفكاهة الأصلية كممارسة اجتماعية تم تطويرها من الظروف الثقافية والتاريخية التي تمكن السكان الأصليين من مواجهة التغيير مع الحفاظ على الشعور بالاتساق والمرونة. في كتابات السكان الأصليين، غالبا ما يتم طرح الأصالة والهوية والاهتمامات الاجتماعية في سلوكيات فكاهية. تتحدى الفكاهة المفاهيم الضيقة لـ "السذاجة" مع تمكين السكان الأصليين من الحفاظ على الشعور بالذات. على سبيل المثال، تمكن هجاء "الرجل الأبيض" من التفاعل مع المجتمع المهيمن وتحديه. إن فكرة الهوية الأصلية تقوضها وتدعمها صور فكاهية للتهجين العرقي والإثني. الأخوات ريز، التي أدتها لأول مرة الفنون الأدائية الأصلية الأرض في تورونتو في عام 1986، و شفاه جافة، التي قدمت لأول مرة في تورونتو في عام 1989، كانت أول ظهور مسرحي للكاتب المسرحي الكندي الأصلي تومسون هاي واي على كل من المسرحين المحلي والدولي. في ذلك الوقت، تلقت كلتا القطعتين مراجعات إيجابية ساحقة، مما جعل هاي واي محور تركيز مجتمع المسرح الكندي. حصلت كلتا المسرحيتين على جائزة فلويد س. تشالمرز الكندية للمسرحيات، التي تمنح للمسرحيات الكندية التي تم تقديمها بشكل احترافي في منطقة تورونتو، بالإضافة إلى جائزة دورا مافور مور لمسرحية جديدة متميزة (1988-1989).

الكلمات المفتاحية: المسرح الكندي، الفكاهة، تومسون هاي واي، السكان الأصليين.

Introduction:

Humor makes readers laugh or aims to make readers relieved and minimize nervous tension. Its goal is to relieve tension among the audience by breaking up the wearisomeness, boredom, and tediousness. In literature, theatre, films, and advertising, when the main goal is to make the audience happy, humor is frequently used. This explains why it is frequently wise to add a comedic character, even in the scariest and tragic stories. When humor is infused into a narrative, it can significantly lighten the tone and end up making the reading experience more pleasurable.

Additionally, images of laughing in Native American culture support the development of the community while also casting doubt on it. Native humor frequently draws inspiration from and sheds light on Native customs. For instance, a direct recounting of tragic incidents is discouraged by traditional Native values. Even while writing mostly in English, native writers promote Native languages by using a similar double-positioning. They expose the power politics of language by jokingly flipping between numerous tongues and styles. Native philosophy, which aims to reconcile system and chaos, can be understood as the foundation for the order and depolarization of Native comedy. This paper assesses Highway's accomplishment in transforming what is fundamentally an oral storytelling practice into one in which chosen actors play a script in front of a crowd in a unique location created for the performances. This transition is

investigated in terms of the theatrical style employed by Highway as well as the incorporation of some components from Native mythology and traditional storytelling (with particular emphasis on Nanabush and how his/her contribution to Highway's plays differs noticeably from that in traditional storytelling).

The paper examines how Highway strikes a mild balance between theatrical humor and Native American ritual performance. In addition, it emphasizes Highway's ability to make this evolution, and it makes the case that he was successful because he ignored mimetic aspects and instead made the transition from oral storytelling to a postmodern theatre that incorporates elements of humor, the absurd, and hybridity. There are only a few unchangeable things: The first thing that distinguishes humans from all other creatures is our shared sense of humor. Second, a lot depends on the individual reader or listener and their own sense of humor to determine what is amusing and what is not. Thirdly, humor appears to be developed from a topic that has some antagonism or ambivalence, such as a conflict between what is genuine and what is false or between what is believable and what is illogical. Native humorists often use this idea. Fourthly, for a joke to be understood by the performer and audience, specific background knowledge must be shared. The question of how these ideas, which were undoubtedly based on Euro-American contexts, fit into the writings of North American Indian authors still must be answered.

Discussion:

Tomson Highway is a North American Indian who grew up “on his father’s trap-line on a remote island on Maria Lake away up in northern Manitoba, [...] in a tent, like all his brothers and sisters [...] on December 6, 1951” (*Rez Sisters*, vi). The government forced Highway and his brother René into a residential school, an experience he subsequently transformed into his works. He also had to abandon his first language, Cree, and learn English. He, on the other hand, has retained his mother tongue and has made a significant contribution to “his unusual dramatic style”. Denis Johnston identifies three Cree language characteristics that have influenced Highway's work: its sense of humor, its instinctive nature in the sense that bodily functions are discussed openly and casually,” and the fact that Cree words have no gender (Johnston, 254). In fact, Highway focuses on physical functions as well as gender roles in his two most famous plays, which feature only one male and one female character, both played by Nanabush, the Trickster.

Highway excelled as a concert pianist in high school before attending university to study English and music. Instead of taking this route, he finally agreed to spend the next few years working with various Native support organizations” (Johnston, 254), with “Native people on reserves, in friendship centers, in prisons, on the streets and in the bars” (*Rez Sisters*, viii). When he began writing plays, he fully integrated the experiences he gained during that time into his work. According to Johnston:

in less than three years [...] Highway has joined a select group of playwrights whose new plays [...] are treated as significant cultural events by Canadian critics, scholars, and audiences (254)

By releasing two major plays in a brief period of time: *The Rez Sisters* in 1988 and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* in 1989. In addition to these two award-winning plays, he wrote the novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (1998), as well as a number several plays and short stories. Highway's humor, unlike other humorous writers, appears less frequently on the language level and more frequently in what Raskin refers to as the basic semantic opposition” between “real and unreal or between actual and non-actual” (Raskin quoted in Mulkay, 41-42), He “delights in linguistic estrangements and paradoxes” (Johnston, 266). This appears to be identical to Drew Hayden Taylor's intentions, but Highway employs much more clever methods that leave white audiences perplexed at times.

Tomson Highway's first significant play, set on the fictitious Indian reserve *Wasaychigan Hill on Manitoulin Island* in northern Ontario, won the Dora Mavor Moore Award for "the best play created in Toronto" in the 1986-87 season. The set of characters can be perplexing at first because it includes no less than six sisters and half-sisters, all of whom are women living on the contingency fund and dealing with their own issues the only

male protagonist is Nanabush, the Trickster, who appears as Nighthawk, Seagull, and Bingo Master. Then there's Zhaboonigan Peterson, the mentally challenged protagonist who is one of just two main characters who can see Nanabush when he shows up on stage. But, returning to the *'Rez Sisters,'* Pelajia Patchnose begins the play alone with her house's roof, trying to nail shingles to it. She and her sister, Philomena Moosetail, talk about their problems in their daily life and on the contingency fund, fantasizing about leaving. When Philomena "tickles Pelajia on the breasts" and utters "chiga, chiga, chiga" sounds (*Rez Sisters*, 3-4), Highway, in ridiculing her sister's rapid aging, gives us a taste of the typical flirtatious sense of humor of N.A. Indians, in which body parts frequently play a major role.

Soon after, the women start talking about bingo, fantasizing about winning "The Biggest Bingo in The World," which is rumored to take place in Toronto soon. The name of this occasion is always written in upper case letters, emulating and thus mocking colonial consumption society's grandiosity by humorously granting it the name "effect of an advertising slogan while simultaneously suggesting that the bingo represents something beyond itself" (Hammil, 49), which it does, as I will demonstrate later. When their half-sister Annie Cook joins them, they get even more enthralled, discussing who managed to win how much in earlier experiences and what they will do if they win the big prize. Highway's great gift of designing a structure that is itself humorous is first revealed here. He employs a tension between [...] two cultural traditions." The "Euro-

Christian dramatic form” he learned in high school and university with its “linear elements” that manifests in the women, “becoming lost by stubbornly following a straight line while circular (Native techniques) signal regeneration” (Johnston, 255). The women's longing for Western civilization's primary commodities, such as Philomena's:

PHILOMENA: I'm gonna go
to every bingo and I'm gonna
hit every jackpot between here
and Espanola and I'm gonna
buy me that toilet I'm
dreaming about at night... big
and wide and very white (*Rez
Sisters*, 5) .

Philomena has aspirations that are far from N.A. 'Indian culture and civilization.' Highway also criticizes N.A. Indians' desire for (white culture) purchaser items by referring to the toilet as "very white." Then there's Philomena's bowel issue, which is the origin of her desire. Highway's mother tongue, Cree, reveals its emotive nature when her sisters try to impress her with her regular toilet visits. However, they do not have many 'nobler' wishes. Veronique St. Pierre, all other women's sister-in-law, wishes to “go shopping for a brand-new stove [...] at Eaton Centre [in Toronto],” Annie Cook desires to go “to every record store in Toronto [buying] every single one of Patsy Cline's records” (*Rez Sisters*, 35-36), and Pelajia needs to “build

[herself] a nice paved road” since she thinks that Nanabush will only return to them if he found a nice paved road to dance on (*Rez Sisters*, 8). Marie-Adele Starblanket, Philomena and Pelajia's half-sister, is the only woman who appears to have an ' N.A. Indian desire. She looks after Zhaboonigan and is the second person who can see and communicate with Nanabush. She intends to employ the funds to purchase an island for herself and Zhaboonigan, “in the North Channel [...] – the most beautiful island in the world [with] lots of trees and [...] sweetgrass” (*Rez Sisters*, 36). As Faye Hammil puts it, “she alone desires a lifestyle more akin to the traditional Aboriginal existence” (Hammil 51), This clarifies why she is one of only two protagonists who can see Nanabush, indicating her deeper bond with traditional life in comparison to the other women who already have 'lost' connection with their cultural roots.

The women have a highly amusing comic relief claim in a retail area, hurling insults at each other in a circle until nobody recalls what they're arguing about. Philomena is resting on John, whose door is constantly open to enable her to participate in the horrific struggle. Because no clear linear line is followed, this scene depicts the play's notice, 'Tricksterish,' and traditional Native components. The play's 'structural' humor is reevaluated when the women 'march' to the music group office to demand money for their tour to “The Biggest Bingo In The World” in Toronto. Again, their blind and stubborn struggle for money is exemplified by this “oddball delegation” (Johnston, 256). During this scene, the women are followed by Nanabush in the guise of a

male dancer, “playing tricks and mimicking their movements” (Horne, 135). In his role as a mimic, Trickster “creates the illusion that he/she is the target in order to the actual target audience, and translate it through laughter” (Horne, 135). Highway emphasizes the women's obnoxious behavior of floundering for money and consumer items in this case. But there's more to it than that. After being turned down by the chief, the women stage a hilarious collage to raise money for the trip to Toronto. Nanabush is experiencing “a holiday, particularly with Marie-Adele’s lines of laundry” (*Rez Sisters*, 70), observing the women at work, having an effect on them, and imitating them. The scene itself is full of mockery and comic relief humor, which adds to the scene's horrific nature. During this scene, there are seven drum beats, each of which increases the women's endeavors:

Beat six. Emily goes to the cash register and tallies their earnings; she works the register with tremendous speed and efficiency all this beat. [...] Philomena sticks a sign in beer bottles: World’s Biggest Bottle Drive. She now has five babies attached to her. Veronique sticks a sign on her table: World’s Biggest Bake Sale (*Rez Sisters*, 73).

To raise money, it appears that all women are doing jobs typically associated with white North American high school students, possibly as a commentary of ancient beliefs that emphasized NA Indians as no more sophisticated than infants. Philomena is becoming more connected to her with each beat as she raises money nannying; the others are selling cakes or beverages. Highway mocks imperial culture's fixation with instigating "The Biggest..." of everything once more. Dee Horne explains that the number seven, symbolized by the seven women and the seven rhythms, has special significance. The mystics of old predicted that the North American Indians would be liberated in the seventh generation after Columbus' arrival. As a result, Trickster not only mocks the women by impersonating them on the way to the band office, and yet also "symbolize(s) the seventh generation in which American Indians are liberated;" he is a "comic sign of American Indian cultures and of liberty," for the women's generation is, in fact, the seventh one. (Horne, 135) Eventually, the women save enough money for the trip and depart for Toronto. The scene at "The Biggest Bingo in The World" is perhaps the funniest of the entire play, as well as a great realization for the women. The women encounter Nanabush in the pretext of the Bingo Master, and all of them see him for the first time. "becomes associated with the women's deepest desires" (Hammil, 51). When Nanabush enters the stage as the Bingo Master, "the lights come on full blast:"

The Bingo Master, the most handsome man in the world, comes running up the center aisle, cordless mike in hand, dressed

to kill: tails, rhinestones, and all. The entire theatre is now the bingo palace BINGO MASTER: Tonight, ladies and gentlemen, you will be witness to events of such gargantuan proportions, such cataclysmic ramifications, such masterly and magnificent manifestations that your minds will reel, your eyes will nictitate, and your hearts will palpitate erratically. [...] you will see the biggest, yes ladies and gentlemen, the very biggest prizes ever known to man, woman, beast, or appliance (*Rez Sisters*, 100-101).

Through his aspect and despicable imitation as Bingo Master, Nanabush “parodies settler society and its emphasis on consumerism, media (talk shows), and materialism” (Horne, 133), and predicts something big that is about to happen – hence Trickster’s role as creator/destroyer. Undoubtedly, something significant is taking place, but it is not the women winning the big grand prize and fulfilling their aspirations. They ended up losing everything, and enraged by their bad luck in the contest, the women storm the stage, “attacking the bingo machine and throwing the Bingo Master out of the way” (*Rez Sisters*, 103). In this scene, Highway also humorously “exposes the savagery of Christianity and its civilizing mission” (Horne, 133) when Zhaboonigan appears “behind the Bingo Master, where a long table has magically appeared with [her] at the table’s center banging a crucifix [...] the scene is lit so that it looks like ‘The Last Supper’” (*Rez Sisters*, 102). However, this is not the only substantial metaphor in the scene, and the second is not at all amusing. Zhaboonigan has been sexually assaulted by four white

boys using a screwdriver, as we learned earlier in the play. In this scene, she tries to alleviate her pain by the help of Nanabush.

The real impact of this final scene is the emancipation of women. Throughout the play, one knows that Marie-Adele is suffering from incurable cancer. The women discover this when Nanabush dances away with the spirit realm on stage. “in Nanabush’s world, preparation for death involves [...] a willingness to accept ironic coincidence” (Perkins, 266). As a result of Marie-relative Adele's calm facing death, women accept their own destiny and abandon their fight for money. Their “engagement with one another and with Nanabush they “realize their own liberty” (Horne, 136). Rickster has completed his role as a creator. He has cleared the way towards something new, for emancipation, and for all men by demolishing one of them. Men “have undergone transformations, now accept[ing] their lives” (Horne, 136). The play's spherical aspect is visible here. It concludes with Philomena and Pelajia back on the latter's roof, as they were at the start of the play. They discuss the problems on the reservation once more and Philomena's new toilet because she is the only one who managed to win something at the bingo. Thus, the cycle ends where it began, but on a much more optimistic note as Nanabush dances “merrily and triumphantly in the background” (Gilbert, 329). The women accept their fate now; we are assured that Nanabush is still with them and that there is hope for the future.

Though not outlandishly hilarious, there is no wonder that this play contains a number of several components, albeit concealed and sometimes carrying a very serious or even gloomy idea. The women's obstinate endeavor of western cultural principles is clearly a test element, which is emulated and subverted by Trickster's unnerving initiatives, portraying the two customs that have impacted Highway's writing - the Euro-Christian and N.A. Indian ones. Trickster eventually succeeds and appears to work as a “catalyst for others’ empowerment” (Horne, 127). He “foregrounds the agency of American Indians and subverts colonial efforts to disempower them” (Horne, 129). It means liberating the women from their (hegemonic) wishes and introducing them relatively close to their heritage in this particular instance.

In contrast to this negative attitude toward the loss of Native American heritage, Highway presents a contrasting vision firmly rooted in humor, irony, and defensive adjustment to the international scene. Highway denies the classical/modernist distinction, with its obsession with common values and ideal form and stability. As a result, Highway transforms what could be a crisis in collective identity (misrepresentation of basic Native traditions and famous figures like Nanabush) into the development of a new kind of validity. This authenticity is based on the creativity discovered in the effectiveness of our basic humanity, aspects that all societies must have if they are to remain alive.

Highway's second best-known play, *Dry Lips*, is set on Wasyachigan Hill Reserve on Manitoulin Island. In fact, it is mirror equivalent to the original play; “intended as a ‘flip side’ sequel to “*The Rez Sisters*” (Johnston, 260). Almost everything is reversed: instead of seven women, we meet seven men, and Nanabush is a man. The tragic figure is a boy suffering from mental retardation rather than a mentally disabled girl traumatized by sexual assault. The stage is divided into two sections: the domain of the 'real' protagonists and the level of Nanabush above them. Nonetheless, the “apparent dichotomy between the two levels [...] is not clear cut” (Horne, 132). Nanabush visits the holding on a regular basis to play pranks on men or imitates them. We first see her when we see Zachary Jeremiah Keechigeesik naked on a couch. Nanabush seems behind the couch as Gazelle Nataways, with whom Zachary is cheating on his wife:

reaches under Zachary’s sleeping head,
from where she gently pulls a gigantic
pair of false, rubberized breasts. She
proceeds to put these on over her own
bare sts. [...] Pleasurably and
mischievously, she leans over and
plants a kiss on Zachary’s bum. [...] Then Nanabush/Gazelle exits, to sit on her perch on the upper level of the set
(*Dry Lips*, 15-16).

However, the majority of the humor in the play stems from the creation of a female hockey team. The 'Wasy Wailerettes,' a group almost entirely composed of women on the reserve, represent a danger to the men who believe the world has gone insane. More evidence can be found in the “inversion of stereotyped gender roles” (Horne, 132) in the play. For example, Spooky Lacroix, a former drug abuser turned preacher (a successful example of cultural imperialism) is constantly stitching shoes for his wife's upcoming baby:

Spooky is knitting (pale blue baby booties). A bible sits on the table to the left of Spooky, a knitting pattern to his right. The place is covered with knitted doodads: Knitted doilies, tea cosy, a tacky picture of ‘The Last Supper’ with knitted frame and, on the wall, as subtly conspicuous as possible, a crucifix with pale blue knitted baby booties covering each of its four extremities. [...] He knits with [...] great concentration [...], getting the bible and the knitting pattern mixed up with each other (*Dry Lips*, 36).

Highway makes use of comedy to emphasize the men's fraudulent activity by inverting conventional (settler) stereotypes and gender norms. “critiques the psychology of those American

Indian men who have adopted patriarchal colonial values” (Horne, 132). Simultaneously, he satirizes Christianity's imposition on the N.A. When Spooky mingles his knitting patterns with the Bible, he creates N.A. Indians. Zachary is working on new baking recipes in preparation for the bakery he plans to open soon. Pierre St. Pierre, is yet another member who has been 'obligated' by his wife to be the team's referee. When Pierre wants to enter the upper level, Nanabush mysteriously vanishes. This may be interpreted as evidence that Pierre is another symbolic representation of Nanabush. He is also in charge of disseminating information about the hockey team to all of his male friends, causing a commotion that will eventually result in a big reveal - another classical 'job' of Trickster. However, Nanabush mocks men's gender inequality by wearing huge breasts, tummies, and bums - a sign of the new settlement society's emphasis on (female) sexual identity. When she induces the Marilyn Monroe poster in Big Joey's kitchen to fart, she demonstrates her mockery:

Split seconds before complete black-
out, Marilyn Monroe farts, courtesy of
Ms. Nanabush: a little flag reading
'poot' pops up out of Ms. Monroe's

derriere, as on a play gun. We hear a
cute little 'poot' sound (*Dry Lips*, 107).

This occurs only minutes after Dickie Bird attempts to commit suicide. With her humor, Nanabush "deflates the grim

moment" (Wassermann, 40). Nevertheless, more tragically, Events will take place that Nanabush will contribute to by telling jokes. Returning to the men's struggles, we discover that Simon Starblanket, a young man who repetitively wishes for Native 'spirit' to return to them, is the only man who has no issue with the women's hockey team. He is, on the contrary, cheering them on in their first game. Noticeably, he and Dickie Bird Halked, a 17-year-old boy struggling with fetal alcohol syndrome, are the only two characters able to see Nanabush. These two characters are clearly modeled after Marie-Adele and Zhaboonigan from *Rez Sisters*, and their fates are equivalent. The men are disturbed by the women's ambitions. Anxious by the women's aims the men sense that "apocalyptic changes" may be "lurking over the horizon" (Johnston, 260).

Besides making reference to the history of being accused of kidnapping children, Dickie Bird Halked is desperately looking for the true identity of his father, another sign of N.A. Indians looking for an identity. He discovers that Big Joey was the one who impregnated his mother and abandoned her, watching her almost consume alcohol herself to death with his friends. Simon tries and fails to persuade the men to tell the truth and encounters their culpability. Dickie Bird rapes Simon's fiancée, Nanabush/Patsy Pegahmagahbow, with a wooden cross in an unusual turn of events. Simon sets out to avenge his girl and kill Dickie Bird after a monstrous game of Simon-says with Nanabush/Patsy in which the Trickster character mocks the conferred English language:

SIMON:

...weetha ('him/her' – i.e., no gender) ... Christ! What is it? Him? Her? Stupid

fucking language, fuck you, da Englesa. Me no speakum no more da goodie

Englesa, in Cree we say 'weetha', not 'him' or 'her' Nanabush, come back! [...]

Aw, boozhoo how are ya? Me good. Me berry, berry good. I seen you! I just seen

you jumping jack-ass thisa away...

NANABUSH/PATSY:

As though she/he were playing games behind Simon's back.

... and thataway

SIMON:

... and thisaway and ... (*Dry Lips*, 110-111).

Simon and Nanabush disagree about whether Nanabush is male (as Simon believes) or female. Simon "realizes that the problem lies in English and the gender distinctions that exist in the language." Their following discourse of "thisaway" and

“thataway” comically “parodies the binary thinking underlying much of colonial language and discourse” (Horne, 135).

Simon is still looking for Dickie Bird in order to exact his vengeance. Even before Zachary wants to take his gun away from him, he dies for the evil deeds of his friends in a fit of black humor. Simon has already provided in and is preparing to leave with Zachary when Nanabush steps in and provokes a comic relief tragedy:

The shimmering movements of the bustle balloon out into these magical, dancelike

arches, as Nanabush/Patsy manoeuvres it directly in front of Simon, hiding

him momentarily. Behind this, Simon drops the bank of the rifle to the ground,

causing it to go off accidentally. The bullet hits Simon in the stomach (*Dry Lips*, 115).

As Trickster obliquely induces Simon to drop the gun and kill himself, Jerry Wassermann refers to this as "classic Trickster cosmology - part tragic irony, part dirty rotten trick" (Wassermann, 39). Simon plays Jesus Christ in another of Christianity and Native American mythology, dying for the evil deeds of the men who witnessed Dickie Bird's mother drink herself to madness during her pregnancy. Zachary yells at God when he sees his dead friend:

ZACHARY:

Aieeeeeee-Lord! God! God of the Indian! God of the Whiteman! God-Al-fuckingmighty. Whatever the fuck your name is. Why are you doing this to us? (*Dry Lips*, 116).

When Nanabush seems to be on her level after Zachary observed the tragedy, she replies comically by ridiculing Christianity, "parodying settler society and its concept of a patriarchal Christian God:

She is sitting on a toilet having a good shit.

He/She is dressed in an old man's

white beard and whig, but also wearing sexy, elegant women's high-heeled

pumps. Surrounded by white, puffy clouds, she/he sits with her legs crossed,

nonchalantly filing his/her fingernails (*Dry Lips*, 117).

Nanabush combines Christian mythology with Native folklore, one of which doesn't take itself as sincerely as the other. He clearly parodies the traditional Christian god of the Old Testament by wearing provocative clothing and a white beard. She is "neither good nor evil but playfully uncommunicative," and, as in conventional instructional narrative, she does not

consider giving Zachary a definitive answer to his question but instead encourages him to seek his own. Nanabush "is not the agent of change," Dee Horne emphasizes, adding:

These men, not settlers, are the agents
of their actions and transformations
[...] Nanabush is a catalyst, perhaps,
but only to those who seek direction
(Horne, 136).

Simon's death, like Marie-death Adele's in *Rez Sisters*, causes the men to transform their lives; Big Joey, for instance, acknowledges his son Dickie Bird. However, as we learn in the final scene, it all could have been a dream Zachary had when he passed out on his own chair. Everything here is fine, at least for Zachary. He is with his wife; they appear to be very happy; the 'danger' of women playing hockey has passed:

ZACHARY: To Hera [his wife]

Hey, cupcake. You ever think of playing hockey?

HERA:

Yeah, right. That's all I need is a flying puck right in the left tit, nee...

But stops to speculate.

...hockey, hmmm.... (*Dry Lips*, 129)

This conclusion perplexes the audience. On one hand, one is comforted that the tragic event involving Dickie Bird and Simon never occurred; on the other hand, there is no straightforward discovery, as there was in *Rez Sisters*. “There is no women’s hockey team, no death, no consequences to the ‘stupid life’ the men have been leading. Or are there?” (Johnston, 263). Indeed, it is unclear whether any change has occurred. The play concludes in a circular pattern, with Zachary's wife kissing him on the bum in the same way that Nanabush/Gazelle Nataways did at the start. “On another level,” however, “the circle is ongoing,” when Zachary “lifts his infant daughter, who symbolizes the next generation, into the air” (Horne, 137), a sign of a good future.

This play, like *Rez Sisters*, is not particularly funny, and the humor is viciously overlooked by tragedy and suffering in some segments. The type of pattern, open ending, and “the mere presence of Nanabush” on the contrary hand indicate that the play attempts to “move beyond realism” (Gilbert, 392). The truth that the play is set on two levels, with Nanabush continuously interrupting the occurrences on the reserve, supports this viewpoint. When Nanabush appears, none of it is certain. Dreams and visions are real, past-present-future exists simultaneously in a homotropic time, and Nanabush has never left (Horne, 137). The only thing we can be certain of at the end of the play is that “Zachary is not the same person that he was at the beginning of the play and neither are we, thanks to Nanabush” (Horne, 137).

Conclusion:

This paper examined humor as a weapon in contemporary Canadian theatre, with special focus on selected plays by Tomson Highway. Critics have frequently declared that Native humor is about living and society, but Thomas King himself notes that this is "merely stating the obvious" and "won't stand as a definition for anything" (King", 170). As a result, this cannot be considered to be different. Nevertheless, there is one characteristic that sets N.A. Indian humor from all others in this context, and that is the Trickster character. Although other cultures are familiar with Trickster personae, there is a specific way of using his/her powers that only N.A. Indian writers are aware of this. Trickster not only makes it appears in the stories "real-life' characters as an animal or other human being to imitate their misdoings and disrupt everything to exclude them from their lives.

The themes that N.A. Indian humorists make fun of are, of course, very precise and are situated in both the past and current living standards of N.A. Indians. Then, as one would expect, there are crimes committed by colonial rulers in the past. Almost every single author employs humor to ameliorate the agony of this dark period in North American history. To convey their rage over historical mistakes, they frequently imitate or mock colonialists and organizations such as the Church. In some works, such as Tomson Highway, the humor is accompanied by a darker, more tragic component.

Against such a pessimistic outlook on the damage to Native American heritage, Highway presents an opposing vision firmly rooted in humor, sarcasm, and defensive adjustment to the contemporary scene. Highway appears to reject the traditional duality, with its obsession with common values and ideal form and compromise. As a result, Highway transforms what may be a crisis in authenticity (misunderstanding of basic Native ritual practices and cultural icons like Nanabush) into the creation of a new kind of authenticity. This authenticity is based on the creativity found in the performance of our basic humanity, aspects that all societies must have if they are to survive.

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