

## PLAYING GAMES/THE GAME IN TOMSON HIGHWAY'S REZ CYCLE

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**ABSTRACT:** Award-winning Cree author Tomson Highway has created memorable characters for the stage and has continued to fascinate both theatre audiences and critics for decades. Set on the Wasaychigan Hill Indian Reserve, Manitoulin Island, Ontario (Canada), his Rez Cycle—*The Rez Sisters* (1986), *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* (1989) and *Rose* (1999)—revolves around playing games, be it bingo or hockey, as a way of coping with the challenges of reserve life. Relying on decolonizing perspectives, this article demonstrates how practices such as storytelling and using humor promote solidarity on stage. Also, Highway's characters are proven to be winners who have mastered the art of *playing the game*, that is, of following the rules of life and surviving inimical circumstances.

**RESUMEN:** El galardonado autor cree Tomson Highway ha creado personajes memorables para la escena y lleva décadas fascinando tanto al público como a la crítica teatral. Ambientado en la reserva india de Wasaychigan Hill, en la isla de Manitoulin, Ontario (Canadá), su ciclo Rez -*The Rez Sisters* (1986), *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* (1989) y *Rose* (1999)- gira en torno al juego, ya sea el bingo o el hockey, como forma de afrontar los retos de la vida en la reserva. Apoyándose en perspectivas descolonizadoras, este artículo demuestra de qué forma las prácticas como la narración de historias y el uso del humor promueven la solidaridad en el escenario. Además, se demuestra que los personajes de Highway son ganadores que han dominado el arte de jugar, es decir, de seguir las reglas de la vida y sobrevivir a circunstancias adversas.

This essay explores the ways in which Tomson Highway reflects on the theme of game-playing as well as the ways in which, through the theatrical strategies he uses in the three plays of the Rez Cycle, the renowned Cree playwright reveals his ideas and vision on stage-playing. Set on the Wasaychigan Hill Indian Reserve, Manitoulin Island, Ontario (Canada),<sup>1</sup> *The Rez Sisters* (1986) focuses on playing bingo as a way of coping with the challenges of reserve life. The seven female characters at the center of the play initiate a trip to “THE BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD,” and this is their approach to *playing the game*, facing various life circumstances, but continuing and supporting one another unwaveringly. The setting and the trickster character, Nanabush, are preserved in the sequel *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* (1989), but bingo is replaced by ice hockey and the play features seven male characters who offer audiences another night of healing through laughter. *Rose* (1999) completes the trilogy and Highway’s depiction of this community, while also consolidating his use of indigenous languages and storytelling as innovative devices meant to subvert European-based traditions of stage-playing. Launching his theatrical works at a time when audiences were hardly familiar with Native worldviews, Highway managed to breathe new life into Canadian theatre at the end of the twentieth century and to pave the way for an entire generation of Indigenous playwrights.

Born in 1951, Highway is an internationally acclaimed versatile artist, who has embraced drama, fiction, life-writing and music as forms of expression. In his drama, he incorporates Cree and Ojibway traditions, often using these Indigenous languages for considerable passages. One notable element whose source is the Native mythology of North America is the trickster character, known as Nanabush in Ojibway. Establishing himself as a practitioner of theatre in all its complexity, Highway also directed the Native theatre company and, later, the Native Earth Performing Arts (NEPA) festival, around which Canadian Indigenous drama developed at the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Significantly enough, Native plays are usually judged on whether they appeal both to Native and non-Native audiences, as Ann Haugo explains in her contribution to the seminal volume *Indigenous North American Drama: A Multivocal History*: “It is important to note that mainstream success is only one

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<sup>1</sup> Even if it is based on the real Wikwemikong Reserve on Manitoulin Island, Wasaychigan Hill Indian Reserve is a fictional place.

measure of value in a minority theatre movement" (53), the critic adding that Native reception matters as well (53). The Rez Cycle has clearly obtained both and has consolidated its author's reputation as a beloved playwright.

Highway's plays have received wide critical attention since the early period of his career. A notable study is Sheila Rabillard's "Absorption, Elimination, and the Hybrid: Some Impure Questions of Gender and Culture in the Trickster Drama of Tomson Highway," which was initially published in the periodical *Essays in Theatre* (1993), and later included in the volume *Aboriginal Drama and Theatre* (2005). Using theoretical insights crystallized within postcolonialism and feminism, her analysis illuminates relevant aspects of the hybridity, which according to her, defines *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*. Another interpretation worth mentioning is Marc Maufort's chapter on "polymorphous Indigenous dramaturgies in Canada," in which Highway's *The (Post)Mistress* receives attention alongside other Native playwrights' works.

A recent tool for theatre and drama researchers, *Critical Companion to Native American and First Nations Theatre and Performance: Indigenous Spaces* (2020), written by Jaye T. Darby, Courtney Elkin Mohler (Santa Barbara Chumash), and Christy Stanlake, includes discussions of Tomson Highway's first two plays of the Rez Cycle in the chapter entitled "Advancing the Stage," which also features playwrights Emily C. General (Mohawk/Cayuga) and Drew Hayden Taylor (Ojibway), thus offering readers a sense of context essential for not isolating his contribution as a singular instance of Indigenous talent. In the initial chapter of the volume, the three critics put forward insights indispensable for understanding Native dramaturgy, explaining:

Storytelling and the power of language enrich Native theatre's potent expressions of Native worldviews. Native concepts of language are based on orality: through the act of speech, our thoughts physically enter the world as they ride along our breath. These spoken words then circulate upon the winds connecting us to one another, the natural world, and the spiritual world. [...] While the power of speech weaves interconnections across all forms of Native art that rely upon language, Native theatre, with its reliance upon the embodied presentation of spoken words in a communal setting, allows Native worldviews to become manifest in a material form that possess great potential for generative, transformative action. (Darby et al. 6)

Underlining the special functions of the spoken word in a Native context proves essential when analyzing Highway's drama. Through the storytelling enacted on stage, the playwright achieves forms of interconnectedness between all human and non-human elements, and, at the same time, contributes to manifesting a Cree vision of the world, engendering change for generations to come. As importantly, Highway engages in "asserting tribally centered literature" (Hafen 28) that requires an appropriate critical approach that takes into account tribal knowledge and perspectives, which Native scholars such as P. Jane Hafen (Taos Pueblo) have long advocated for. In her essay "Living to Tell Stories", for example, Hafen emphasizes the responsibilities inherent in scholarship about Native texts, insisting that "The stories in indigenous literatures are in academic writing as well" (38). Her warning against the danger of re-colonizing when applying problematic critical lenses to Native works (Hafen 30) is definitely heeded here.

Taking these viewpoints into consideration, the current article demonstrates that all three plays in the Rez Cycle cultivate game-playing, as well as a certain disposition for playfulness and laughter that goes with it, as *modus vivendi* or the best manner to play and win the game of life. Also, the discussion illuminates Highway's capacity to render these themes through strategies emblematic for Indigenous drama: using humor, circularity, storytelling and Native languages. Contributing to the decolonizing project, Highway is proven to reflect convincingly on the need for healing, reconciliation, solidarity, transformation and continuance.

### **THE REZ SISTERS: PLAYING BINGO AND BUILDING SISTERHOOD**

*The Rez Sisters* (1986) premiered in Toronto and received the Dora Mavor Moore Award for Best New Play in Toronto's 1986-1987 season and the 1986 Floyd S. Chalmers Award for Outstanding Canadian Play, among other prizes. Since the 1980s it has been revived and scrutinized in numerous instances, such long-standing interest reaffirming its significance in the history of Canadian Aboriginal theatre and beyond.

The first act of the play presents its seven women going about their daily lives on the reserve land that constitutes their home. The hardships they face both collectively, because of various generalized inequities, and individually, because of specific misfortunes such as disease, are revealed one by one. However, rather than succumb in

the face of difficulty, they continue to fight and, more importantly, to dream. Each one of them thinks of at least one aspect of their lives that can be improved, if she managed to obtain some money. In order to move the play forward in an entertaining way, Highway introduces for his characters the possibility of playing bingo. The women cling to the idea of winning the game and talk about the deepest desires they would like to fulfill with the money gained, this dramatic technique allowing the playwright to show their capacity for mobilization and hope. First, the fact that "THE BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD" is coming to Toronto is just a rumor passed on from one woman to another (*The Rez Sisters* 27). Veronique St. Pierre, a 45-year-old woman, finds out about it from Gazelle Nataways, whose source is actually not necessarily reliable since it is a patient who just got back from hospital and does not have the details that everyone wants. Indeed, unreliability is very much on Veronique's mind: "I don't know whether to believe her" (*The Rez Sisters* 28). Even before finding out more, she discloses that, if she wins, she will buy "a brand-new stove" (*The Rez Sisters* 36), while two other women she is talking to also fantasize about what they could buy with the money won. Annie Cook's prize would be "every single one of Patsy Cline's records" (*The Rez Sisters* 35), while Marie-Adele Starblanket wants "the most beautiful island in the world" (*The Rez Sisters* 36).

By the end of the first act, Annie receives a letter from her daughter and they all have the confirmation and the details they needed: "The jackpot is \$500,000. It's on Saturday, September 8" (*The Rez Sisters* 54). Also, this first part of the play establishes that there are a lot of contentious issues between the women at the center of the play and sometimes diplomatic ways of addressing conflict fail, since the audience witnesses "a full-scale riot" (*The Rez Sisters* 44) in which verbal and physical forms of violence erupt. Various accusations and rivalries are exposed before the audience, with the characters resorting to offensive language and screaming. When Veronique pesters Emily Dictionary with biting words and even makes fun of her name, the latter is enraged, responding in a brutal manner: "*Emily grabs Veronique and throws her across the room*" (*The Rez Sisters* 40). Later, Emily reveals that she survived an abusive relationship, which forced her to "learn to fight back like you've never seen a woman fight for her life before" (*The Rez Sisters* 51). Gradually, details about these women's troubled lives are revealed, the "riot" turning out to be a form of releasing disappointment, anger and frustration at the injustices they all have suffered. The play makes every effort to suggest that the

precarity and trauma they have all experienced in different ways constitute the ultimate pressures that determine such misbehavior. The group's ability to come together around a shared objective, that of finding a way to participate in the bingo game, is even more spectacular once the disadvantageous conditions on the reserve and their personal struggles have been laid out in the open. The play's focus on the characters' journey to self-improvement has been highlighted as follows: "*The Rez Sisters's* largest transformation is a shift from competition and discord among the women to a sense of community through acceptance of both one another and oneself" (Darby et al. 118). Capitalizing on the need to survive together represents the play's ultimate aim.

Building sisterhood despite the conflicts that have divided the characters in the past becomes the way to move forward and strive for a better life. The first act ends with a speech from Pelajia, the woman whose "I wanna go to Toronto" (*The Rez Sisters* 2) opens the play. Now her position as leader of the group clearly emerges as she articulates not only their complaints and requests, but also possible solutions:

I say we all march down to the Band Office and ask the Band Council for a loan that will pay for the trip to this bingo. I know how to handle that tired old chief. He and I have been arguing about paved roads for years now. I'll tell him we'll build paved roads all over the reserve with our prize money. I'll tell him the people will stop drinking themselves to death because they'll have paved roads to walk on. I'll tell him there'll be more jobs because the people will have paved roads to drive to work on. I'll tell him the people will stop fighting and screwing around and Nanabush will come back to us because he'll have paved roads to dance on. There's enough money in there for everyone, I'll say. (*The Rez Sisters* 59)

The problem of not having paved roads has a snowball effect, as she suggests. Moreover, what is essential here is that besides capitalizing on issues that have historically plagued Indigenous communities (e.g., unemployment and alcoholism on the reserve), by mentioning Nanabush, the speaker points to a mythical dimension of the Indigenous worldview, about whom the playwright gives an explanation in a prefatory note, since this trickster figure becomes a presence throughout the play. In "A Note on Nanabush," Highway elucidates the importance of the trickster figure: "Essentially a comic, clownish sort of character, he teaches us about the nature and the meaning of existence on the planet Earth; he straddles the

consciousness of man and that of God, the Great Spirit" (*The Rez Sisters* xii). Predictably, the rich value of Nanabush's presence will be revisited in the last part of the play.

In the second act, after overcoming all obstacles, the seven women are driving to Toronto on what one of them calls "Good ol' highway 69" (*The Rez Sisters* 86) and they are on a highway to play bingo both literally and metaphorically; when participating in this game of chance, they are actually embracing life and its riskiness, proving their willingness to overcome impediments and play the game of surviving. Nothing can stop them, not even a flat tire. Collaborating in order to solve the impediment of the flat tire is just one example of the instances that bring them together on this trip. The lesson of strength in unity is absorbed when they have to change the tire and they have to lift the car for that since the jack is not working. Clearly the desire to play the game and the benefits of winning constitute great motivation. When Veronique tries to find an excuse not to join the others in this, Emily retorts: "You wanna play bingo?" (*The Rez Sisters* 91), which turns out to persuade the hesitant member of the team.

Taking the journey to play bingo together and becoming aware of the fact that they depend on one another also brings about confessions from each of them. The sense of camaraderie and safety which is created in the limited space offered by their vehicle helps them share personal experiences, such as giving birth or losing a loved one. Sharing some of the most traumatic moments of one's life during these ludic moments is conducive to healing, as the others listen, offering support, comfort and acceptance afterwards. Trust, reconciliation and confidence between the members of the group are built under the audience's eyes; thus the highway to playing bingo becomes therapeutic not only for the characters, but also for those watching them, especially if the latter are female members of a Native community who feel part of the same circle of women as the characters themselves.

One clear proof that this sense of inclusiveness is cultivated by the play appears when the stage directions indicate that "*The entire theater is now the bingo palace*" (*The Rez Sisters* 100) and "*The audience plays bingo, with the seven women, who have moved slowly into the audience during the Bingo Master's speech, playing along*" (*The Rez Sisters* 101). Playing the game represents the climax of the second act and in the entire play. The excitement of playing morphs into rage at the bingo machine. Even as it ends in "total madness and mayhem" (*The Rez Sisters* 103), this scene gives Nanabush a key role. He is the

Bingo Master advertising the game and motivating the players: “out of this chaos emerges the calm, silent image of Marie-Adele waltzing romantically in the arms of the Bingo Master. The Bingo Master says “Bingo” into her ear. And the Bingo Master changes, with sudden bird-like movements, into the nighthawk, Nanabush in dark feathers. Marie-Adele meets Nanabush” (*The Rez Sisters* 103). It is not just suggested, but clearly stated, that Nanabush leads Marie-Adele into the next world and that her relatives and friends are left to mourn (*The Rez Sisters* 104). The dance, anticipating Paula Vogel’s *The Baltimore Waltz*, invites audiences to contemplate death from a new perspective and to imagine the possibility of serene return to harmony.

Again Pelajia is given a crucial line: “Well, sister, guess you finally hit the big jackpot. Best bingo game we’ve ever been to in our lives, huh?” (*The Rez Sisters* 105). Here the playwright ironically identifies the trophy with death, bringing a new twist to the idea that life is paradoxically cruel, and no matter how rigorously, courageously or masterfully one plays the “game,” no one can change its end. However, the play does not close on a tragic note. Insisting on circularity, “the utilization of the metaphorical and literal power of the circle” (Darby et al. 6) being quintessential to Native dramaturgy, Highway returns to the image of Pelajia’s “hammering on the roof” (*The Rez Sisters* 118), which had opened the play. It is indeed an inspired visual and auditory representation of Native resilience and will to continue in one’s homelands, a suggestion that the game is not over, but merely being reloaded in order to start once again. At the same time, it is a form of subverting preconceived ideas about femininity, since Pelajia defies what is considered proper for a woman in Western traditional households. Instead of engaging in womanly activities, she resorts to strength and skill in order to repair her house, proving that she is fully capable of taking care of herself. As a matter of fact, this is an exemplary image with which the play demonstrates women’s empowerment, which in an Indigenous context means recuperating the matrilineal and matriarchal position that once existed within the tribal cultures of North America.

### **DRY LIPS OUGHTA MOVE TO KAPUSKASING: PLAYING HOCKEY AND SURVIVING VIOLENCE**

The reality of women’s fierceness and leadership in the first play of the Rez Cycle has echoes in its sequel, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* (1989), which includes predominantly male

characters. Produced by Theatre Passe Muraille and Native Earth Performing Arts Inc. in Toronto, the play's premiere was directed by Larry Lewis. From the very beginning, the shocking news that triggers a whole series of events is the fact that the local women have decided to play hockey, the team's name being the Wasy Wailerettes (*Dry Lips* 29). Nanabush appears in this play again, but this time "as the spirit of Gazelle Nataways, Patsy Pegahmagahbow and Black Lady Halked" (*Dry Lips* 14). Each of the three women embodying these characters is directed to wear different prosthetic body parts (breast, bum and belly, respectively). The critical interpretation of such a requirement has understandably emphasized that "The characters' exaggerated female anatomies simultaneously reference the misogynistic views the men have about women, the life-giving and sustaining properties of female deities, and the trickster's voracious sexual appetite" (Darby et al. 121). During the performance of the play itself, the clownish enhancements would certainly create visual effects that would be coherent with the rest of hyperbolic dimensions of the performance.

In "Revolution Night in Canada: Hockey and Theatre in Tomson Highway's *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*," Jessica Langston (with Mike Chaulk) references key facts about the national sport in Canada in order to explain its history as a powerful tool for colonization and more recently decolonization (175-176). Appropriated from the Native peoples, the game developed over decades, mid-twentieth century witnessing the success of First Nations sportsmen playing in the major league (175-176). The article then proceeds to demonstrate astutely that "the Wasy Wailerettes' aggressive playing becomes an explicit reappropriation, a taking-back, of the game" (177). Indeed, Highway's Native hockey players perform an important act of decolonization, despite the fact that the playwright chooses to have male characters report on the game rather than to show the actions of the female characters who participate in the actual match. Audiences are asked to imagine the women's decisive moves, thus becoming actively involved in the development of the play.

When the game actually starts, the stage directions indicate the women's invisibility: "*All the hockey players on the 'ice' are unseen by the audience; it is only the men who can actually 'see' them*" (*Dry Lips* 68). Pierre, the referee, calls out their names, and the audience needs to visualize the women players, relying on the verbal descriptions provided by the male characters watching the game. For members of the audience familiar with the production of *The Rez Sisters*, visualization of the women (i.e., the characters whose names

are mentioned on stage) could occur in a (un)conscious manner, memory bringing forth images from the previous performance. In a highly intertextual fashion, Highway uses some of the protagonists of his previous award-winning play, *Veronique St. Pierre*, *Emily Dictionary* and *Annie Cook*, in order to establish a sense of continuity and cohesion within his *Rez Cycle*. Big Joey broadcasts the game without missing this chance for self-advertising:

This is your host for the big game, Big Joey—and they don't call me Big Joey for nothin'—Chairman, CEO and Proprietor of the Wasaychigan Hill Hippodrome, bringin' you a game such as has never been seen ever before on the ice of any hockey arena anywhere on the island of Manitoulin, anywhere on the face of this country, anywhere on the face of the planet. (*Dry Lips* 69-70)

Big Joey's need to inflate his ego through self-praise even when he should be reporting on the women players' performance is a symptom of his complicated relationship with women.

The game should emphasize feminine mastery of hockey, a reclaiming of the sport for the Native women's purposes, but it is distorted by the male gaze and the male discursive framing of what happens on the ice. The problem of credibility rises again: is the game itself violently played or is the men's discourse about it transforming the exchange between the female players into a violent confrontation? As the members of the audience do not have visual access to the actual game, but perceive it as a mediated event, they can never be certain. At the end of the first act, the game is violently interrupted by the loss of the puck and later shadowed by another traumatic occurrence.

This occurrence is an act of rape. The perpetrator is Dickie Bird Halked, Big Joey's illegitimate son, who suffers from fetal alcohol syndrome. Shockingly enough, the disturbed young man's actions are witnessed by this biological father, who does not intervene. When questioned about his complicity, as a peer wants to know "Why did you let him do it?" (*Dry Lips* 120), Big Joey confesses his stance towards womanhood, revealing his own troubled connection to the opposite sex and the world in general: "Because I hate them! I hate them fuckin' bitches. Because they—our own women—took the fuckin' power away from us faster than the FBI ever did" (*Dry Lips* 120). The play distances itself from such a deeply harmful sentiment coming from a deeply harmed individual. The play also condemns the violence Dickie Bird Halked, a mentally challenged young man, enacts using a

crucifix, which he has taken from the Catholic uncle who has raised him. Highway has his character turn the crucifix into a weapon in order to comment on what this object stands for. The misogynistic viewpoints and actions in the play are shown to be the result of systemic colonization and Christian conversion, forces that have alienated Natives from ancestral matriarchy and respectful ways of relating to others and the environment.

The ending of the play makes every effort to dispel the darkness brought about by the violence that was represented on stage. The puck reappears and the game is resumed. The players are introduced in all their glory: "there they are, the most beautiful, daring, death-defying Indian women in the world, the Wasy Wailerettes" (*Dry Lips* 124). The respect, honor and love these emblematic women deserve are sounded clearly on stage so that, given the capacity of spoken words to engender changes in the world, these sentiments would actually turn into reality, being embraced by Native and non-Native communities everywhere.<sup>2</sup> The revolutionary process of decolonization symbolized by the Wasy women playing hockey, according to critical interpretation (Langston 179), continues. Highway's own examination of the power of theatre to make political statements continues.

### **ROSE: PLAYING THE GAME OF LIFE AND EMPOWERING WOMEN**

The third play of the Rez Cycle, *Rose*, centers on gambling, a more problematic kind of game-playing, and its implications for the community. Big Joey's plan for expanding his basement operation into a larger scale enterprise, taking over the Community Hall and turning it into Big Joey's Island of Gold Casino Royale, is opposed by many on the reserve. Those doubting the fact that such a business endeavor will benefit the people and fearing the involvement of the mafia as well as various other detrimental effects are represented by Chief Big Rose, or Pelajia Rosella Patchnose, one of the memorable characters from *The Rez Sisters*. She enlists the help of her friends and supporters, the members of the Wasaychigan Hill Indian Reserve Homemakers' Club, in order to preserve their current headquarters and protect what they

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<sup>2</sup> This positive vision of the women players is expressed in unequivocal terms on stage, "the power of language" (Darby et al. 6) being inevitably activated despite the fact that this particular section of the play "becomes more and more dream-like, all the men's movements imperceptibly breaking down into slow motion" (*Dry Lips* 124), as the stage directions suggest.

consider to be their sound values and interests. Since the destination of the Community Hall depends on the decision of the Band Council, there ensues a vicious, and often clandestine, “war” to win the votes of its members.

The play comprises multiple subplots and layers of significance, stirring tears of sorrow and tears of joy on stage and off stage. The audience is involved emotionally as the characters’ playing the game of life unravels at a fast pace on the stage. The intricacies of the central public war the audience witnesses are interwoven with the subtleties of private wars that haunt the characters. The very opening of the play reveals Emily Dictionary crying and praying; she uses Cree, her mother tongue, to ask “What’s the reason for living?” (Rose 13). Next, the stage directions present a dream-like sequence that brings together three Roses. The first one is a girl of five; she is a projection of Emily’s daughter, Rosetta, who would have been five years old if she had lived. The second one is the ghost of Emily’s lover, Rosabella Jean Baez, “*a goddess in black leather, straddling a motorcycle*” (Rose 14), who had died on the road. The third one is Chief Big Rose. All three of them are threatened by men with guns. Woken by a gunshot, Emily utters Rose’s name “*with huge pain*” (Rose 15). However, the first scene does not end on that note. The women characters in the play come on stage, initially crying—“We have lost our sister! We have lost our dearly beloved Rose” (Rose 15)—and then gradually singing in Cree and dancing.

Eventually Chief Big Rose occupies the central position, addressing the audience with a promise: “We’ll tell you stories, you will laugh very hard, you will be astonished, you will cry” (Rose 17). This very excerpt from her speech, a reflection on stage-playing and its purposes, seems to capture the essence of the playwright’s creed and announce irreverence towards the Western separation of comedy from tragedy as well as the prioritization of Indigenous storytelling.<sup>3</sup> The scene might have opened on a tragic note, with the image of one female character’s nightmarish loneliness and despair, but it ends with an explosion of color and sound as well as feminine solidarity and communal feeling, an anticipation of bustling life and comic relief. The

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<sup>3</sup> This is consistent with other Native playwrights’ views; for example, Drew Hayden Taylor considers: “Theatre is a logical extension of the storytelling technique. Looking back at the roots and origins of traditional storytelling, not just Native storytelling but storytelling in general, it is the process of taking your audience on a journey, using your voice, your body and the spoken word. Moving that journey onto the stage is merely the next logical step” (61).

masterful use of music, more specifically of the songs performed on stage by the characters, which will continue throughout the show, discloses what the playwright acknowledges from the very beginning: "Rose started off as a cabaret of songs produced by Native Earth Performing Arts Inc. of Toronto, Ontario" (Rose 5).

At the beginning of the second scene, a conversation between several members of the Homemakers' Club reveals that they are getting ready for a very important visit, intending to finish a headdress to be placed on the guest's head. Philomena Moosetail voices their shared disbelief: "Imagine. The *Premiere* of the province of Ontario coming to *le pauvre* Wasaychigan Hill" (Rose 19). The plan seems to be for Mr. Bob Rae to return an ancestral territory to its rightful Indigenous owners on July 3, 1992. Living up to the promise made in the opening, that of making the audience laugh, the play treats this crucial issue of land restitution, which re-emerges several times before the end, lightheartedly. However, despite the tone used in the play, redressing past injustices remains an imperative. Even if the VIPs scheduled to arrive get cancelled and replaced one by one for comic effect, and even if the audience might not remember all the invitees, among whom Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, George Bush, Queen Elizabeth, Pope John Paul II are mentioned, the importance of fighting for land rights and of raising awareness about the First Nations' priorities is communicated effectively and memorably.

While preparing for the big the July 3 visit, Chief Big Rose also tries to block Big Joey's Casino project, which involves a grand opening on the exact same day, such a coincidence adding another particularly ironic dimension to the play. She appeals to everyone around and even succumbs to resorting to methods as questionable as her opponent's. In the fifth scene, for example, Big Joey tries to persuade Pierre St. Pierre, a member of the Band Council, to vote in his favor, by promising him a reward: "I'm offering you a job, you toothless old bastard, Manager of Libations at Big Joey's Island of Gold Casino Royale" (Rose 43). And only a scene later, when she finds out, Chief Big Rose counters that with a triple promise to Pierre's wife, Veronique. The community's chosen leader apparently fails to realize that bribing a council member's family is another form of trading in influence, as objectionable as the one she condemns: "Bribing Band Councillors is a criminal act" (Rose 52). This very contradiction is hilarious, but emblematic for the machinations that surround politics everywhere. The fact that the chief's speech is recorded on a tape determines further scheming, intrigue and comic moments.

In her attempt to secure her victory and stop Big Joey's plans of opening a casino, Chief Big Rose does not refrain from even the riskiest of strategies, such as sending spies behind enemy lines. As soon as two of Emily Dictionary's friends come to town with an agenda of their own, that is, to convince Emily to join them on a motorbike ride meant to commemorate Rosabella Jean Baez or else "lay her spirit down to rest" (Rose 28), they are also drawn into the chief's scheming. Liz Jones and Pussy Commanda bring into play memories, songs, energy, camaraderie and support, contributing to enhancing the sense of sisterhood the play capitalizes upon. The two of them are asked to collaborate with the local women to undermine the expansion of the gambling operation, and they accept. The act of spying on Big Joey is equated to fighting or resisting patriarchal oppression. When her friends accuse her of rushing into Big Joey's arms for her own pleasure and not for the purpose of serving the cause, Pussy Commanda retorts: "You're the ones always talking about how we gotta stop them stomping all over us women. Look at you now. All talk, no action" (Rose 57). The intricate consequences of using seduction as a weapon are fully exploited in the play. To what extent can the appointed spy preserve her neutrality, indifference and "professionalism" while being attracted to her victim and pretending to be the perfect partner for him? This age-old conundrum involving sex, trust and betrayal receives an Indigenous context, and audiences are bound to savor the playwright's rumination on gender issues and his invitation for them to examine the intersections between gender, class and ethnicity. On the other hand, the metatheatrical overtones of the situation become obvious as the audience is made aware of the fact that the character who takes upon herself the role of a spy on stage is played by an actress who thus acquires a double role, revealing the fact that sometimes the mask chosen influences the identity behind the mask. In other words, the temporary part an actress/spy embraces might permanently engender a change in her attitude, disposition or conviction. If Pussy Commanda is not completely unaffected by Big Joey's charms, and there are plenty of hints suggesting that she identifies with her role as his lover, chances are that the actresses representing women's self-determination and emancipation on stage might integrate these ideals as part of who they are, embodying them beyond the limits of the performance, inspiring others to do so as well.

Another strategy that Chief Big Rose initiates to increase the sense of collaboration between the women on the reserve, and obviously to empower them at the same time, is the invention of a

hilarium, defined as “a chamber to chuckle, a chamber to / Chortle, a chamber to giggle, a chamber to / Jiggle and laugh” (Rose 65). The hilarium would be a solarium put to better use. Starting from the observation that many (in)famous men,<sup>4</sup> whose deeds were recorded in history, had no idea of how to be jolly, she proposes a session of tickling and dancing and general merriment, which does take place and which definitely makes the audience laugh. Thus the theatre hall itself is turned into a hilarium. Once again, in metatheatrical fashion, Highway advances a vindication for theatre and its transformative powers.

## CONCLUSION

Irrespective of the place audiences are transported to, a bingo hall, a hockey rink or a hilarium, the point Highway makes is that game playing and playfulness have the capacity to make life more bearable. His characters are not kept away from pain or hardships, but they always find resources in themselves and their community to move forward, embracing laughter and through it, continuance. By exploring the versatility of Nanabush, who travels throughout the Rez Cycle and who teaches important lessons while playing tricks on all the characters, the playwright turns into a trickster-like artist himself. His theatre might seem pure entertainment and buffoonery, but it prompts audiences to reflect on, resist and revert the effects of colonization. Imperatives such as building sisterhood, surviving violence and empowering women stay with his audiences long after the stage curtains have closed.

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<sup>4</sup> The figures mentioned here are mostly remembered for their despotism: Stalin, Pol Pot, Vlad the Impaler, Idi Amin and Mussolini.

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