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New Native American Drama: Three Plays



Synopsis

This first collection of plays by an Indian playwright presents a spectrum of Indian life that ranges in time from the past to the present and on into the future. *Body Indian*, the earliest, most widely performed, and most highly acclaimed of Geiogamah's plays, deals with a problem of the present -Indian alcoholism. But the play is not so much about alcoholism as it is about the social and moral obligations that Indian people owe to one another. *Foghorn*, through the use of humor rather than bitterness, tries to exorcise the harmful stereotyping that often stands in the way of non-Indians' understanding of Indians, and even on occasion of Indians' own appreciation of themselves. In the play *49* the author links the past with the present and points a road to the future. Here the approach is synchronic rather than diachronic. The value of Indian traditions is emphasized -but only where those traditions are used imaginatively and not treated as ossified relics to be blindly venerated. *49* celebrates the continuity of Indian life in the vigor of new forms and with an abiding optimism. This collection of plays-all widely performed and seriously and extensively reviewed-adds a new and important voice to the small body of Indian authors who write about their own people.

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Customer Reviews

"I write everything for an Indian audience. I feel that if an Indian audience regardless of what tribe, or where it's at, or what region, if they respond to something, and they understand it and appreciated it, then I feel that what I've done is at least a long way down the road to succeeding."

Jeffrey Huntsman is Assistant Professor of English in Indiana University. He earned his Ph.D. degree at the University of Texas, Austin, and has taught Native American literature courses since 1970. Hanay Geiogamah is an active playwright and director in Native American theater. He has traveled to almost every part of Indian America, and as Artistic Director of the Native American Theater Ensemble from 1972 to 1975 he conducted tours for the company across America and in Europe. He was born in Lawton, Oklahoma, and studied journalism at the University of Oklahoma. Geiogamah has taught Native American Theater at the University of Washington and has lectured on creative writing and the role of the arts in contemporary Indian life at many other colleges and universities.

The copy I received (besides coming too late) was technically fine, but the front cover was covered in something. Not damaged or anything, just dirty, and it makes me wonder why no one just took some safe cleaning solution and a paper towel to it before sending it out. It just seems sloppy.

So glad to find this.

These three plays are to be read and understood together as being a vast parable of the epiphany, the resurrection of the Indian nation in Northern America. The whole parable can only be understood if you keep in mind the two historical events that are the turning points in the fate of the Indian Nation: first the occupation of Alcatraz Island from November 20, 1969, to June 11, 1971, and second the occupation of Wounded Knee from February 27, 1973 to May 5, 1973. These two events are the turning points in modern America as for the place and fate of American Indians in modern society. The first play, *Body Indian*, is a vivid description of the total and absolute alienation of the Indians that some Americans may have thought final. They pay a "lease" to the Indians to survive on federal money, doing nothing and deprived of any perspective, except drinking the money into oblivion and waiting for the next check that imposes complete control and dependence. The main character, Bobby, is the direct representative of the Indian nation, amputated of one leg that was lost when some train ran over it, like the Steel Horse of the Transcontinental Railroad cutting the Indian nation in two and alienating it to the point of needing a prosthetic leg to walk and two crutches to help. The Indian nation was thus reduced to that state of alcoholic stupor and amputation. But the most pathetic element is that Bobby's leg is stolen from him when he is in an alcoholic span of unconsciousness by his own fellow Indians who are going to exchange it for some wine in a white American liquor store. The Indian Nation, the Indian body, reduced to American

prosthetic limbs is raided by other Indians becoming the predators of their own people, of their own life, of their own Nation. The alienated Indians are thus preying on themselves to an even deeper state of alienation. And Bobby can remember the train that cut off his leg, when he realizes his prosthetic leg has been raided or preyed upon by his own fellow alienated Indian brothers and sisters:"I can hear ... a ... train ... that ... train ... my leg ... that train's gonna ... gonna hit ... my ... ley--g!"

The second play, *Foghorn*, is a vast and extremely dynamic depiction of the history of Indians after the arrival of the White Europeans. The first scene is the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus, from the Spanish call of the Spanish sailors from the ship approaching the coast: "Estos hombres, cho-co-la-tes! Los Indios! Los Indios! Ellos son los indios!" (note the trinity of "los Indios" that turns the two "hombres" and "chocolates" into a diabolical pentacle) to the immediate ellipse of their total rejection by the English settlers: "'Vermin! Varmits!" repeated three times like a hell bound trinity. And then "Filthy savages! Murderers! Scalpers!" sounding like a second hell bound trinity. And the conclusion is simple: "I say let's force 'em off the land! Move 'em with force, guns! Now!" and the whole thing is declared by some US Senator to be "our great American Manifest Destiny", five words, another diabolical pentacle. The second scene is an evocation of the occupation of Alcatraz Island on Thanksgiving Day, 1969 and the Indian project of bringing real liberation and civilization to "their white brothers". The third scene is the Christian alienation with some nun preaching God's absolutely unavoidable will to have these "heathens, pagans, poor, miserable, ignorant, uncivilized, NAKED" Indians Christianized and thus have "[their] souls" saved from "burn[ing]! Brun[ing] forever, for eternity! In HELL!"

The fourth scene is about the education of these Indians by some school mistress in some American school, an education which is first a deculturation (to the point of forbidding signs because they may be sign language) and then the imposition of an acculturation into the American model Star Spangled Banner and American flags included. Punishments are the only solution for this forced alienation: "(She pulls out a bottle of castor oil and pours it down the struggling child's mouth.) It's the dark room for you. (She pushes the child into a dark closet space.) You will stay here all day. No food! No water! And no toilet! (turns to others.) She is a lesson for all of you to follow. I caught her doing a sign-language gesture." You can imagine the result with the castor oil in the empty stomach of that girl. That's what the American education of Indian children was, in the good tradition of corporal chastisement, another way to amputate and prosthetically rebuilt the amputated limb from the proper melting pot. The fifth scene is an evocation of Pocahontas and John Smith who seduced the Princess and actually declared his love and then tried to rape her but had an erectile breakdown at the crucial time preventing the rape. The scene is high mockery against the pretention of these omnipotent and yet slightly frigid whites

and Pocahontas concludes: "He said to me, I love you, dear Pocahontas. I promise you it won't happen the next time. I promise. I promise. I promise." We can note the devilish trinity of the end that is in fact turned into ridicule by the previous "promise" bringing the number to four but upside down for the traditional Indian story telling since it should be the fourth one that stood out and brought a positive solving outcome, and thus it becomes an inverted echo of the Trickster's stories that makes it even funnier than the incredible final results of these Trickster's misadventures. The sixth scene is the most surprising one. The famous Lone Ranger is having his boots polished by his Indian servant Tonto. Lone Ranger, that American myth of absolute justice who is predicting how he is going to get rid of this Indian that cast a shadow on his fame, and when he asks Tonto what he thinks of it, "Tonto cuts his throat with a knife." That is a good Indian, isn't it? Kill yourself to leave the whole stage of glory to your white master. The seventh scene is the inauguration of a National Park by the First Lady; She has decided that since the Indian reservations are superbly picturesque and graphic for tourists they should be turned into such National Parks for the pleasure and entertainment of the Whites who need some rest and relaxation in beautiful scenery. Of course the Indians will be kept as some form of wild life in the landscape. But the scene ends up on a sarcastic reversal since the inaugurating First Lady is turned into a touristic attraction of her own by the Indians: INDIAN: (with prop camera in hand, interrupting) Hey, First Lady, would you smile for me? FIRST LADY: Why, why I'd be mighty happy to. She strikes a lavish pose as the Indian clicks his shutter. A puff of smoke, sparks fly, the First Lady lets out a very ladylike scream. "You can imagine what happened, it is not specified. The eighth scene is the negotiation by some spy of the end of the occupation of a place of interest (the Washington Monument is suggested at the beginning and the Bureau of Indian Affairs is specified in the scene) by Indians. A spy is sent by the Secretary of Interior or the White House and he suggests that \$66,500 should be given to the "money-happy Indians" for their travelling expenses back to their reservations, which should satisfy them and public opinion at the same time. But the spy himself will get \$250,000 since we are two days before the presidential election and that's the only way to avoid a blood bath. There is of course no irony about the white spy who infiltrated the Indians by wrapping himself in a blanket: he is not money-hungry just fair and useful. The ninth scene is turning particularly strong since it is the enumeration of all the treaties signed with the Indians from the treaty of Atoka (1736) to the treaty of Point no Point (1855), altogether twelve treaties, presented in groups, three groups of four treaties each, the perfect European trinity multiplied by the perfect Trickster's quadruple repetitive pattern. And at the mention of each treaty, hence three times four times, "an actor wearing a bull's head is spotlighted with a pretty girl in pigtails, who reads from a giant roll of toilet tissue. The bull also holds a roll, and

unwinds enough tissue to wipe his behind each time a treaty is called out."The gesture is explicit enough.The tenth scene is the Wild West Show of universal fame, but the announcement of the show is in fact reducing it to:"An original, authentic WAAARRR DANCE! . . . A Savage, Brutal SCALP DANCE! THE TRIUMPH OF THE WHITES! . . . fascinating true-to-life scenes of this vanishing specimen of primitive mankind."We can then come to the eleventh and last scene in which Indians are tried for the occupation of what we understand as being Wounded Knee in a courtroom in Rapid City, South Dakota, and another in Sioux City, Iowa. The Indians are not individuals anymore but are identified as tribes, Pawnee, Creek, Winnebago, Sioux, Apache, Ojibwa. The objective of these Indian tribes is to go "back to our homes, our people." And the end is surprising but open since we go back to the Spanish sailor's announcement of the beginning "Los indios! Los indios! India! Ellos son los indios!" The trinity of "indios" is squared in a tricky way by the major mistake of the whole enterprise, "India". And the Narrator speaking for the Indians, maybe, says:"I am . . . NOT GUILTY!"That's when the third play is bringing the real salvation, epiphany. 49 is a ritual night of dancing after a powwow and that dancing is supposed to rejuvenate and resurrect the Indian people and it does magically. The Indians little by little, besieged by a great number of armed and aggressive cops, just sing and tell a story of resurrection, when an old woman from far away came and tricked a whole bunch of children into disappearing, but when the parents protested nothing happened. They had to come together, sing along with an old wise man and believe the children were really there around the fire in the tipi for them to reappear."One of the older boys stood up to talk before all the tribe. "We have been inside the tipi," . . . "We could see all of you, but you could not see us. We could not come out until you believed that we were inside. We sang, danced, used the colors." . . . "We have changed" . . . "We are better men and women now."And then the people taking part in the 49 can sing and refuse to move at the injunction from the cops and that will lead to the cops leaving the place. If Indians believe they exist and are legitimate occupants of the country that has always been theirs then they are renewed and can assume the future. Sing, dance and believe. The Night Walker can then conclude that night of renaissance:"Go! Go forward! The tribe needs you. I go with you. I am always with you. We are a tribe! Of singers. Of dancers who move with the grace of the bird. Of people who know color. Of weavers. Of good hunters. We pray. We are a tribe! Of people with strong hearts. Who respect fear As we make our way. Who will never kill Another man's way of living."The tribe has been renewed, the Indians have been reborn and they are bringing to the world the concept of reconciliation that will emerge in Canada and the USA at the initiative of the Catholic Church some twenty years later."NIGHT WALKER I am the oldest man in the tribe! I heal my sister's child. I pray for you. I sing for you. I smoke

for you. I give to you these things. You give them life." The Indian in modern America is the intercessor, the go-between of the future coming to the present not to erase the past but to redeem it. Absolutely magisterial epic of the American Indian. Dr Jacques COULARDEAU

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