

NATIVE DRAMAS

The land called Morning: Three Plays (“Teach me the ways of the sacred circle,” by Valerie Dudoward; “Gabrielle,” by Lon Borgerson *et al.*; “The land called Morning,” by John Selkirk with Gordon Selkirk), ed. Caroline Heath. Fifth House, 1986. 112 pp. \$14.95, \$5.95 cloth, paper. ISBN 0-920079-26-1, 0920079-24-5.

Each play in this group invites reflection on a particular problem. The choice between ancestral ways of living and a high-tech future is the crux of “Teach me the ways of the sacred circle.” Oil-extracting machinery threatens to pollute the lakes where the people portrayed in “Gabrielle” fish and trap. And the suicide of a teenaged Cree girl is the subject of “The land called Morning.”

Nevertheless, the plays are also metaphorical statements of dilemmas many of us face: why not compromise one’s ideals and go for the big bucks? Whose water is not polluted anymore, and getting worse, and what am I doing about it? Are we not all directly or indirectly contributing both to this self-destructive pollution and to the suicidal nuclear arms race? I do identify profoundly with the types of struggles these plays dramatize; yet, considering the distinctiveness of the people represented in the works, it is important to insist also on their particularity.

“Teach me the ways,” set in Vancouver, packs a couple of days in the Jack family’s life with the grandmother’s severe illness and Matthew Jack’s rehearsing with two friends for a musical performance to take place at their high school graduation. Matthew is torn between his career plans and his Tsimshian heritage, the latter advocated by his Indian friends and personified by Granny Jack and the dead Grandpa Jack, who appears to Matthew in a dream. Matthew is determined to attend business school and to become a powerful executive. Through the dream-vision of his grandfather, the traditional stories his grandmother tells him, and his friends’ demand for respect, Matthew’s clash is resolved. Since for the most part Matthew is a jerk, the ending is a surprise; Valerie Dudoward is to be congratulated for her courage in concluding the play as she does. The gist of the dream-vision and stories is that one should discover and be true to the path found inside oneself. Matthew also learns to respect others’ freedom to follow their own paths; the audience must learn to respect Matthew’s choice. The play very effectively dramatizes the contemporary relevance of the Indians’ traditional wisdom, and takes a stand which risks

offending narrower traditionalists. Dudoward's occasional clumsiness with dialogue is mostly the result of conveying background. For instance, "Let's work on 'Teach me the ways,'" says Matthew. "That's our opening song. We better be able to get our opening song right anyhow" (10). Dudoward gets most of the important things right and I look forward to further writing from her.

More ambitious in scope and in staging than "Teach me the ways," "Gabrielle" is the result of improvisation by Lon Borgerson and his students at Rossignol School in Ile-à-la-Crosse, Saskatchewan. Grounded in Louis Riel's diaries, "Gabrielle" juxtaposes Riel's issuing of the Metis Bill of Rights and the death of Thomas Scott with present-day events. Riel, awaiting execution, communicates with Gabrielle the leader of a modern Metis movement to gain the right to participate in decisions which affect their existence, such as the incursion of an oil company. The contemporary events promise to turn out disastrously much as events finally went for Riel. The play attempts to appropriate this recurrence as a source of energy for the Metis' ongoing fight for rights. Possibly in performance the play creates this momentum. It reads rather as a complaint about insensitive bureaucracy.

Of the three plays, "The land called Morning" presents the most interesting characters: four Cree teenagers on a reserve in northern Saskatchewan. Noting that the first names of the original cast members are the same as those of the play's characters, I am curious about the authors' methods of characterization. Did these young people supply their personalities as well as their names? Oddly, the vivacity of some of the characters causes the main flaw in this play.

Robin, a successful boxer, marries Patsy and they have a baby. Robin's friend Peter is a likable rowdyman, Anne, Robin's younger sister and Peter's girlfriend, is a dreamy poetry-reader overshadowed by her brother's successes and her boyfriend's antics. In the end, though, the play is centred on her death. The effect is lifelike in that plausibly one's response to a suicide might be, "I never knew and now it's too late." But in a play, one must know. The funeral scene, for instance, is hollow; we never got to know the person so eloquently mourned.

According to Caroline Heath, who edited this collection, for Metis and Indian people the germinal question right now is: "Robbed of its traditional lifestyle and livelihood, and demoralized by the Janus-faced threat of discrimination and assimilation, how does a people get its pride back?" Fifth House has made a worthy contribution to this goal by publishing *The land called Morning*. The three plays deserve to be read and performed widely.

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