

## 12. What we talk about when we talk about Indian

*Yvette Nolan*

‘There are many Shakespearean plays I could see in a native setting, from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* to *Coriolanus*, but *Julius Caesar* isn’t one of them’, wrote Richard Ouzounian in the *Toronto Star* in 2008. He was reviewing Native Earth Performing Arts’ adaptation of *Julius Caesar*, entitled *Death of a Chief*, staged at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, Toronto. Ouzounian’s pronouncement raises a number of questions about how Indigenous creators are mediated, and by whom, and how the arbiter shapes the idea of Indigenous.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, white people seem to desire a Native Shakespeare; on the other, they appear to have a notion already of what constitutes an authentic Native Shakespeare.

From 2003 to 2011, I served as the artistic director of Native Earth Performing Arts, Canada’s oldest professional Aboriginal theatre company. During my tenure there, we premiered nine new plays and a trilingual opera, produced six extant scripts (four of which we toured regionally, nationally or internationally), copresented an interdisciplinary piece by an Inuit/Québécois company, and created half a dozen short, made-to-order works, community-commissioned pieces to address specific events or issues.

One of the new plays was actually an old one, the aforementioned *Death of a Chief*, which we coproduced in 2008 with Canada’s National Arts Centre (NAC). *Death*, an adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, took three years to develop. Shortly after I started at Native Earth, Aboriginal artists approached me about not being considered for roles in Shakespeare (unless producers were doing *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, because apparently fairies can be Aboriginal, or *Coriolanus*, because its hero struggles to adapt to a consensus-based community). Even when they did get an audition, they often did not have the tools to nail the part. Most of our artists still do not have conservatory training;

1 There is no single appropriate or agreed-upon term that can be adopted to refer to the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island (North America), and nomenclature shifts and evolves in different cultures. This chapter uses the term Indigenous in the broadest sense, to include such disparate and far-flung groups as the Māori, Canadian First Nations and Aboriginal Australians. I often use Aboriginal when referring to a community of artists from different First Nations, or in the case of Native Earth, respecting the way the company self-identifies (‘Canada’s oldest professional Aboriginal theatre company’). Where possible and appropriate, I refer to particular nations, such as Guna, Algonquin, Cree and so forth.

many did not go to universities for acting, all the places where one learns about Shakespeare. So Native Earth offered a Shakespeare-intensive workshop with Kennedy C. MacKinnon, who is a coach at the Stratford Festival in Ontario and has a profound and unshakeable belief that Shakespeare belongs to everyone. At the end of the week-long workshop, the artists said, 'Great, now we have the tools, we need a production'.

My first Shakespeare was *Julius Caesar*, when I was a toddler. My mother was an autodidact – an Algonquin woman whose first language was Algonquin, second French and third English – and so we learned much together. In the 1960s, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation televised various productions including a *Julius Caesar* from the Stratford Festival. Some 40 years later, casting about for a likely Shakespeare, I settled on *Caesar*. It is, after all, about how we choose our leaders, elevate them, perceive them to be corrupted, tear them down and look for a new leader, starting the cycle all over again. This has too often been our experience in our long return to self-government as Aboriginal people; we choose a leader who turns out to be self-serving, and we have to depose him and choose another.

Over the next three years, we held workshops, working with the text, choosing what spoke to us, exploding the timelines and putting the scenes back together, often simultaneously. More importantly, perhaps, we negotiated over the years our own kind of self-government within the company. We were, after all, a company drawn from a host of nations: Mohawk, Guna, Rappahannock, Wampanoag, Métis, Gwich'in, Algonquin, Cree, Ojibwe, Tuscarora. We each brought our own teachings and traditions to the room – in some cultures women do not drum, some are matrilineal – and negotiated a new set of rules for this community, this Rome, Ontario. We self-governed. And that which we did in the room, we extended into the play, and in my heart I could imagine a way forward for First Nations in Canada.

Canada's NAC English Theatre in Ottawa, the nation's capital, came on board as a coproducer late in the development process, bringing a much-needed injection of cash to hold a week-long workshop six months before we went into production. The artistic director of English Theatre at the time, Peter Hinton, had made a commitment to include First Nations work on the NAC stages. The previous year, his first season, he had premiered Métis playwright Marie Clements's *Copper Thunderbird*, about the Anishinaabe painter Norval Morrisseau.

*Death of a Chief* opened in Ottawa in the NAC's 300-seat Studio, playing to 99 per cent-full houses. Although we had included a glossary in the house programme – something to which I had been resistant – in the frequent talkbacks, audiences invariably asked about the significance of things such as the rocks which formed the medicine wheel that began the show and the

colours of each of the four banners: red, yellow, black, white. Evidently, this concerned some of the reviewers as well. In Ottawa, one of them (Connie Meng) said, 'A mixed audience of Natives and non-Natives needs more specific cultural information, if not from the stage [then] at least in programme notes. For example, what is the significance of the opening and closing sequences with the stones?' (2008).

The stones that mystified Meng were actually a circle of stones, arranged in the form of a medicine wheel. These sacred symbols dot the landscape of Turtle Island (North America), the oldest being the Bighorn wheel in Wyoming, with Alberta boasting the majority of known medicine wheels, some 66 per cent. Here, when the audience is presented with an authentic marker of Native presence on this land, they – or at least the reviewer, purporting to speak for the audience – are baffled, ignorant about one of the oldest artefacts connecting the Indigenous populations of the past to those of the present.<sup>2</sup> This is the same reviewer who stated in reference to *Death of a Chief*, 'They have incorporated some native languages as well as singing and movement to better reflect Native culture' (Meng, 2008). *The Toronto Star* reviewer, the one who relegated us to *Dream* and *Coriolanus*, suggested that the only 'Indian' – his word, not mine<sup>3</sup> – in the play was in the 'ritualistic trappings that designer Camellia Koo has given it ... On a virtually bare playing space, the cast performs in earth-toned garments that morph from tribal robes to urban hoodies' (Ouzounian, 2008). The reviewer from Canada's national newspaper, *The Globe and Mail*, stated that 'the play fails to make any resonant connection to Aboriginal issues' (Nestruck, 2008).

## Native on its own terms

Métis scholar Jason Simmonds, in his PhD dissertation about Native Shakespeare, talks about the reviews and the reviewers of *Death*, saying that 'many of the critics suddenly became experts and thereby border guards of what constituted a Shakespeare performance and also of what constituted a performance of aboriginality' (2011, p. 193). He continued: 'Their issue is with the power Native Earth has to represent and present itself as Native on its

- 2 The two-dimensional representation of the stone medicine wheel is a circle with the four colours – black, white, yellow and red – each of which is associated with a direction, a season, a stage of life. These are the medicine wheel teachings in Anishinaabe culture and some of the Plains cultures.
- 3 'Indian' as an appellation for Indigenous people is problematic for many reasons going back to Columbus and his belief that he had reached the Indian Ocean when he landed on the shores of Turtle Island. Nonetheless, many of the pieces of legislation and bodies that govern the Indigenous populations of Turtle Island use the term (The Indian Act in Canada, the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the United States). On 8 January 2013, the Supreme Court of Canada handed down a decision that officially recognises Métis and non-status Indians as Indians under the 1867 Constitution Act, effectively doubling the number of 'Indians' in Canada.



Figure 12.1. Monique Mojica plays Caesar in *Death of a Chief*. Photo: Nir Bareket.

Figure 12.2. Scene from *Death of a Chief*. Photo: Nir Bareket.

own terms' (ibid., p. 195). My reading of these responses, from both spectators and reviewers, was that somehow we were not authentic. Not Indian enough. Yet, authentic by definition is real, genuine, not false or copied.

In spite of our three years of development as a community of artists working on the production, in spite of the development processes being achieved through an Indigenous practice, in spite of what we did, or what we said, or what we said we were doing, we were very often told we were not Aboriginal enough: 'Nice singing, nice drumming, [but] why do they have to speak Shakespeare's language?' One of the markers of authenticity that the viewer – whether audience member or reviewer – was missing seemed to be language. That we did not speak in either a Native language or in rez-speak<sup>4</sup> indicated that we were not authentically Aboriginal.

4 Rez-speak is English spoken with a certain cadence that mainstream audiences, especially in Canada, have been trained to receive as an 'Indian accent'. Often, English is the speaker's second or third language, and the cadence of the mother tongue affects the pronunciation of the English. Children may not learn the mother tongue, but may learn English with the accent. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation has long had First Nations representation on the radio and television, but may have contributed to the notion that all Aboriginal people speak with an accent. Examples include Jasper Friendly Bear and Gracie Heavy Hand in *Dead Dog Café* and the Joe character in *Joe from Winnipeg*, both produced by CBC Radio. The irony is that *Dead Dog Café* writer Thomas King and Ian Ross, who wrote and performed *Joe From Winnipeg*, both speak without the Indian accent in daily life.

In 2010, I got word that Tom Bird from Shakespeare's Globe was looking for a Native Canadian Shakespeare for their Globe to Globe Festival, part of the 2012 London Cultural Olympiad. I offered to send him a package about *Death of a Chief*. He asked me what language the production was in, because the concept of the Globe's festival was 'to do all 38 Shakespeare plays, each one in a different language'.<sup>5</sup> I explained as follows:

Our *Caesar* is mostly in Shakespeare's English, though there is a smattering of Ojibwe, a few words in Guna, Mohawk, and a whack of vocables. Native Earth is, of necessity, a pan-Indian theatre. Our constituency is primarily the urban Aboriginal population. Our artists come from all over, all over Turtle Island, all over the world, really ... What so many of us have in common is that we have not got our languages. The Oracle speaks in Ojibwe when he calls Caesar – and of course she doesn't understand. That's one of the points.<sup>6</sup> Having said that, the piece is in our language in that it is crafted through a practice of Indigenous thought ... time is less linear, the ancestors are with us, the players grow right out of the land. Scenes happen simultaneously, layered. We – the company who crafted it – agreed to rituals and practices through a process of discussion and negotiation. But if you are looking for a Caesar in one Native language, we are not it.

We were indeed not it. Tom thanked me and declined, saying,

We won't get away with doing a show that's mainly in English, just because it's not really fair on all the other companies who'd like to do that! ... [But if] you do hear of any Shakespeare-influenced work solely in Native languages in either Canada or the US, I'd love to hear about it.

Several months later I happened to be checking the title of one of Yirra Yaakin's plays on their website (Native Earth has in the past toured with Yirra Yaakin, a Noongar company in Perth, Australia, as part of Honouring Theatre, an initiative showcasing Indigenous works). The first thing that popped up on their attractive new site was a banner stating: 'Yirra Yaakin Theatre Company and Olympic partner Woodside are proud to announce our invitation by Shakespeare's Globe Theatre to translate Shakespeare's sonnets into Noongar and present them on the Globe stage as part of the Cultural Olympiad Festival'. The website includes a video about the project, in which three of the artists involved talk about the process of translating Shakespeare into Noongar. Towards the end, artistic director Kyle Morrison says: 'And the interest, as soon as I talk to people, as soon as I mention what we're planning on doing, what the

5 This correspondence took place in a series of emails dated 30 Dec. 2010 to 5 Jan. 2011.

6 The actor playing Caesar, Monique Mojica, is Guna and Rappahannock; she speaks English, Spanish, French and a smattering of Dulegaya, the Guna language.

idea is, automatically people just wanna hear more, they wanna hear it straight away, can you do it for me?’<sup>7</sup>

I was happy to see our colleagues at Yirra Yaakin meet the challenge of translating Shakespeare into Noongar and presenting at the Cultural Olympiad and was in no way jealous. Opportunities like these can be as much a curse as a blessing, distracting a company from the work it is mandated to do, and often tempting its members into following the money, doing work that is commissioned or resourced by someone whose idea of Indigenous may be different from the company’s.

In his last year at the helm of Canada’s NAC, Peter Hinton programmed an ‘all-Aboriginal *King Lear*’ as his First Nations piece. However, while the cast was all-Aboriginal – and many of them alumnae of *Death* – there was no Aboriginal person in any position of power. The director, designers and dramaturg were all non-Native. Perhaps this should not have been a problem, given Peter’s vision for *Lear*. When he was casting, he told actors he was considering for the roles that this was not an adaptation, this was a straight Shakespeare; this was not *Death of a Chief*.

What I saw when I attended a performance in Ottawa on 25 May 2012 was Shakespeare in beads and buckskin. The play was ostensibly set in Algonquin territory, the land on which the NAC sits. It is also my territory; my community of Kitigan Zibi is 90 minutes up the road from Ottawa. Early press stated that the play would be set in the time that it was written, which would place it in 1603–08 (in his programme notes, Peter Hinton states that *Lear* was first performed in 1606). Given that Samuel de Champlain, the first European to make contact with the Algonquin people (and the Huron, the Montagnais and the Etchemin), did not do so until 1609, I assumed the play would be moved on a bit in time. Later press and the programme notes situate the play ‘in 17th-century Canada’.

In a remarkably frank interview with *Guerilla* magazine, Suzanne Keptwo, the production’s ‘Aboriginal advisor and community liaison’, expressed a number of concerns about the production, and how it was going to be received. Her concerns prefigured what I observed:

The problem is that the first publicity sets up the play for some very serious cultural and historical inaccuracies. It sets up the media to misread the production as it is now. It sets up audiences to misread it. And for those Algonquin people who know their history – and most know it very well – this production will be inaccurate. It will be confusing. The Algonquin never signed a treaty with the British, the French, or the government of Canada. They never divided lands; they occupied traditional territories.

7 Click ‘video’ link at bottom of home page of [www.yirrayaakin.asn.au](http://www.yirrayaakin.asn.au) (accessed 29 Aug. 2013). ‘Shakespeare’s sonnets in original Noongar language’ is also available on YouTube.

And it is not just the historical setting but the cultural interpretation found in the set and costume design. For example, there will be palisade fencing to depict the Algonquin village, but the Algonquin of this territory never used fencing to envelop their communities. The land and the water served as natural protective barriers. Hairstyles are another important symbol. How a person's hair is worn and styled, cut, or braided has deep significance and provides cultural distinctions between nations in traditional First Nation societies. These are details that need to be understood. (quoted in Finken, 2012)

Suzanne felt the pressure of being the only Aboriginal person on the decision-making side of the table:

I am somewhat nervous about this production. My name is on it as the Aboriginal Advisor and Community Liaison but, ultimately, decisions are made for various theatrical and artistic reasons that are above my control and may not, in the end, reflect cultural accuracy or authenticity. (ibid.)

What is ironic is that the production's costumes were assembled out of real feathers and animal skins so as to seem as authentic as possible. The setting – 17th-century Canada – gave the creative team permission to dress the company of actors as what the Cherokee author Thomas King calls 'Dead Indians':

The Dead Indians I'm talking about are not the deceased sort ... [T]hey are the stereotypes and clichés that North America has conjured up out of experience and out of its collective imaginings and fears. North America has had a long association with Native people, but despite the history that the two groups have shared, North America no longer *sees* Indians. What it sees are war bonnets, beaded shirts, fringed deerskin dresses, loincloths, headbands, feathered lances, tomahawks, moccasins, face paint, and bone chokers. (2012, p. 53)

The costumes of *King Lear* included all of the signifiers King lists, with the exception of the war bonnet, which would have been inaccurate in an Algonquin setting, given that the war bonnet comes from Plains culture.

So, although the creative team has gone to great lengths to ensure that the audience receives the all-Aboriginal *Lear* as authentic, the very signifiers are used in such a way that they actually say things about their wearers that are antithetical to an Indigenous worldview. Goneril, *Lear*'s eldest, is bedecked in a coyote cape made of multiple tails. Where, one wonders, are the rest of those animals? Is this coat of many tails supposed to indicate that the Duke of Albany is an exceptionally good hunter? To a community whose tradition is to thank each animal for giving itself for food and shelter and warmth, the effect is ostentatious, wasteful.

Even more problematic for me was a moment in the final act. When Edgar reappears for the final confrontation with Edmund, he is wearing a full bearskin, the bear's head on his own head. I froze in my seat and held my breath. As an Algonquin woman descended from medicine people, the sight of a real bearskin being used as a costume took my breath away. *Mukwa dodem*, or bear clan, is traditionally associated with healing, and with defence. Here was a man arrived to kill his brother, wearing nothing but a loincloth and a bearskin. Did the company understand the symbolism of the animal onstage? Did the audience? A real, full bearskin is to me a sacred item, and so I felt that the animal was being disrespected. I am distressed not only because the use onstage of things I consider sacred offends me. Theatre has the power to shape the opinion of the audience. If theatre's only purposes were to entertain and distract, then it would not be so dangerous. Nor would I be practising it. So much of who I am and what I believe has been shaped by my experiences of sitting in a darkened theatre receiving some artist's interpretation of the world: Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, Martin Sherman's *Bent*, *The Diary of Anne Frank* by Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett, Peter Shaffer's *Equus*, John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, to name but a few. Theatre may not be the best delivery system for facts, but it very often delivers things we apprehend to be truth. So what truths were being received by the NAC audience?

Recently, I spoke about the NAC production of *King Lear* to a non-Native colleague, a director with whom I have worked occasionally, someone I respect. I described some of the images: the bearskin, the coyote cape, the multiple drums played (or airplayed, in some cases), Lear's tomahawk-waving followers. She could see that I was disturbed; I could see that she was not comprehending my consternation. At the end of my description, she leaned forward and looked into my eyes: 'It sounds like it was spectacular ... I mean, if you are not culturally sensitised ... was it spectacular?' We sat across from each other, the table and a huge abyss of non-comprehension between us. Yes, it was spectacular. Once again, the spectacular trumps the authentic, and yet, I cannot help feeling that the audience was receiving *King Lear* as somehow *more* authentic because of the trappings.

As a dramaturg, I have questions about the insistence on not adapting at all, brooking no changes to the text to accommodate an Indigenous worldview, or even situating the play on Turtle Island. Hence, when Gloucester introduces the King of France with 'Here's France and Burgundy', when the King invites Cordelia to be 'queen of us, of ours, and our fair France', when Lear responds 'Thou hast her, France', the effect on the audience is jarring, for the King of France is bedecked in buckskins, two feathers sticking up in his hair. He does not look like the King of France, he looks like a dead Indian.



I wonder if the reviewer who could not accept a *Julius Caesar* ‘in a native context’ would take issue with the choice of *King Lear*. Our *Caesar* was about how we choose our leaders, how our leaders disappoint us with pride and greed and ego, and how we have to overthrow them and choose new leaders, falling into a destructive cycle that threatens the harmony of the community. *King Lear* is based on the very un-Indigenous concept of personal land ownership. The idea that one can divide and give the land to anyone is contrary to the belief and practice of most Indigenous nations on Turtle Island. The land is held by a nation on behalf of the members. The entire conflicted relationship between the settlers and the Indigenous people has been about white folks taking the land on which the Indigenous people have lived, not about us giving it away.

During his time at the helm of the NAC’s English theatre programming from 2005–11, and as the director of this *King Lear*, Peter Hinton made a Herculean effort to include Aboriginal artists in his programming. Peter’s First Nations programming had included the *Copper Thunderbird* premiere, *Death of a Chief* and *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, a canonical Canadian play about First Nations written by George Ryga, a Canadian of Ukrainian descent. *Rita Joe* had opened the NAC 40 years before, and is occasionally identified as the beginning of a contemporary Canadian theatre because it is about the relationship between the First Nations and the settlers, and because it was commissioned to celebrate the Canadian centennial. Peter Hinton’s NAC’s 40th anniversary production fulfilled his vision by engaging for the first time an Aboriginal director – me – to direct the play, and I built a company of primarily First Nations artists.

I struggled, as did many of my colleagues, on this production. A primarily Aboriginal cast and creative team (nine of 13 actors, the choreographer, composers and director were all First Nations) did not make *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* an Aboriginal play. We needed to shift the gaze of the play, to bring an Indigenous lens to it. Ryga had given us many tools already – the non-linear time structure, the inclusion of music and dance. Much of what he saw about us he included in the play, but he could only capture what he observed. In a way, we put flesh on the bones that Ryga wrote. One of the major, contentious changes was commissioning Michelle St John (Wampanoag) and Jennifer Kreisberg (Tuscarora) to compose new music, and shifting the identity of the onstage singer from what the published text describes as a ‘white liberal folklorist with a limited concern and understanding of an ethnic dilemma’ to the ‘alter ego to Rita Joe’ (Ryga, 1970, p. 15). In our estimation, that meant ‘Native’ and, in essence, Rita Joe’s spirit. Some of the songs were translated into Secwepemc (Shuswap) and everyone sang at various moments in the play. At one point, one of the non-Native actors expressed his frustration at ‘workshopping’ a 40-year-old play. His anger was illuminating for me because

I realised that we were translating every moment to an Indigenous worldview, shifting the gaze beat by beat, in order to transform a white play into a Native one. I was not in the rehearsal hall of *King Lear*, so I have no way of knowing if Peter Hinton and the company had a similar experience.

In his last few years in charge, Peter presented touring productions to fulfil his mandate of presenting Aboriginal work. *Where the Blood Mixes* by Nlaka'pamux artist Kevin Loring won the 2009 Governor General Award for Drama; it played at the NAC as part of a national tour that included stops in Victoria, Vancouver, Winnipeg and Toronto. Anishinaabe creator Waawaate Fobister's one-man show, *Agokwe*, was similarly successful before it arrived at the NAC, garnering six Dora Mavor Moore awards in Toronto in 2009. Both of these were first plays for their authors, developed thanks to years of generous support from theatres and/or festivals with resources. *Where the Blood Mixes* was funded by the Vancouver Playhouse, Western Canada Theatre Company and Luminato among others, while *Agokwe* received support from Buddies in Bad Times Theatre. By the time they arrived at the NAC theatre, they were relatively inexpensive to stage. *King Lear*, presented in 2012, was the culmination of Peter's tenure at the NAC. In a press release for the production, after the announcement of his departure, he stated, 'There are two things that I am proudest of at the NAC. On one level is the Shakespeare, and the other has been our Aboriginal programming'.<sup>8</sup>

Intercultural theatre scholar Ric Knowles asks in his contribution to a forthcoming book, 'Why is it that white people want so badly for there to be a Native Shakespeare?' (2015). I too wonder why I so badly wanted this that I invested close to three years of the life and resources of the company I led to develop what I considered to be a Native Shakespeare. The desire was not mine alone; the actors who asked for training in approaching Shakespearean texts were the genesis of the project. Six members of the NAC's *King Lear* production came to it through having been involved in *Death of a Chief* – four had played Caesar, Mark Antony, Brutus and Calpurnius respectively; two others had participated in the three years of development workshops.

As a theatre professional who has spent a decade working within my communities to support a contemporary Indigenous practice, I argue publicly that just because we do not wear beads and buckskin does not mean we are not doing Native theatre. I sometimes feel like I am battling Buffalo Bill, dead nearly a hundred years now. Canny showman that he was, he recognised the value of Native life as commodity. After making a career of hunting and killing Indians, he switched gears, and transformed them into entertainers, performing their Aboriginality. Cody sexed up the dances and had the Indians reenacting

8 See <http://nac-cna.ca/en/media/newsrelease/3840> (accessed 25 Sep. 2013).

battles, like Custer's Last Stand, that captivated the public. The ensuing decades of Wild West shows cemented in the public's mind the spectacle of Indians in feathers and animal skins, dancing, whooping and waving tomahawks.

Native Earth's marketing for *Death of a Chief* stated that 'Shakespeare's tale of *Julius Caesar* is unearthed ... this time on native ground'. The three-year process allowed a community of theatre practitioners the time and space to negotiate protocols, articulate a vision and maintain creative control over every aspect of the production. The process made the space in which we worked Native ground, and the work growing out of such ground is authentic in a way that is beyond question. As more Indigenous artists take control of their storytelling – and they are, from Marie Clements and her red diva projects in Vancouver to Tawata Productions in New Zealand – so will they wrest control of what is deemed authentic, and the work will be Native on its own terms.

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**Video**

'Shakespeare's sonnets in original Noongar language', available at: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=IrvDQB9ql3w](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IrvDQB9ql3w) (accessed 29 Aug. 2013).