

## SZABOLCS SZILÁGYI

### VERBAL VERSUS NON-VERBAL ASPECTS IN *THE REZ SISTERS* AND *DRY LIPS OUGHTA MOVE TO KAPUSKASING*

Out of the three main literary genres, drama seems to be the most unique in that while it is heavily dependent on verbal language it cannot be fully realized without its equally important non-verbal elements of the script—that is, of course, if one treats dramatic works not simply as written texts but rather as play-scripts designed for theatrical performances and inherently ‘equipped with’ several non-verbal means of communication.

In the case of post-colonial writing the matter becomes even more complicated because quite frequently the mere *choice* of language(s) may become a crucial issue and gain an even finer tone.

Tomson Highway is one of Canada’s most exciting and distinctive playwrights as his plays explore the contemporary Indian in a dominant white society, and the results are both exciting and challenging. Highway is the first major native-Canadian playwright who had a great influence on Canadian theatre on a broader level and on alternative theatre in particular. In the multiculturally open Canada he had the support through the institute of Native Earth Performing Arts Centre to become a significant figure in the mainstream of Canadian literature and theatre.

Both *The Rez Sisters* (1986) and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* (1989) employ Native languages. Referring to this question in his foreword (being the same text in the published versions of both plays), he states that:

both Cree and Ojibway are used freely [...] for the reasons that these two languages, belonging to the same linguistic family, are very similar and that the fictional reserve of Wasaychigan Hill has a mixture of both Cree and Ojibway residents. (Highway 11)

While *The Rez Sisters* (which received the Best New Play Dora Mavor Moore Award) is a moving and powerful portrait of seven women making their way to the biggest bingo in the world, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* (awarded with the Best New Play Award in 1989) tells the story or rather several minor events of seven 'Wasy' men and the game of hockey of the mythical Wasaychigan Hill Indian.

Almost without exception all the translations of words, phrases or passages are given in the text, but the fine task of deciding how to interpret these to the audiences is up to the directors. The English language is only a second language for the characters, just as it is for Highway himself, yet they choose to express themselves in this language but the peculiarity of the use of the language is apparent.

Their English is broken English and it is a multilayered result of cultural oppression: a) English is not the mother tongue of the characters, and b) it is also due to the lack of proper education. Very often Natives happen to fall into both categories despite the fact that they do try to retain some form of their native language. In Wasaychigan Hill the use of English and all kinds of 'civilised benefits' (drinking beer, watching TV, playing hockey, shopping, etc.) are taken for granted. Even the title of *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* (the play, which will be in the focus in the first part of this paper) itself suggests several things: while it can reflect the influence of everyday use of English on the Natives, it can also have the connotation that this is how the people of this place are thought of, this is how they are treated, and, as a result, this is how they will *want* to behave: uneducated, low-class, blue-collar, simple, inferior, common, everyday.

The same feeling is expressed through the use of words like 'gimme', 'tank you', 'kinda', etc. and the consistent drop of 'g' at the end of gerunds or continuous forms of verbs like 'rattlin', 'livin', 'shoppin', etc. Although these naturally imply real-life-like dialogues, the emphasis is placed on the 'broken-English' the Natives speak.

The change occurs when the Natives shift 'back' into their Native languages. As soon as they reach a point which is either emotionally or spiritually too difficult to handle, they switch to their Native language—sometimes for no more than a word; which is probably due to Highway's use of 'english' as a postcolonial linguistic code (cf. Ashcroft 7–8), which is not only a somewhat distorted language of the English, but is mixed with Native words, thus characterizing a special region, special group or nation of people.

Besides the language another form of civilisation and colonisation must be mentioned: the symbols of Christian religion and the faith of most people as the majority are converted from 'paganism.' This is an issue that has to be dealt with in more detail, especially because it has significance in connection with language as well. Some of the people who converted did so as a result of disappointment in their own beliefs. At one point the two sides are brought to the surface in the following way:

Spooky: *(to Simon)* If Rosie Kakpetum is a medicine woman, Simon Starblanket, then how come she can't drive the madness from my nephew's brain, how come she can't make him talk?

Simon: Because the medical establishment and the church establishment and people like you, Spooky Lacroix, have effectively put an end to her usefulness and the usefulness of people like her everywhere, that's why Spooky Lacroix.

Spooky: Phooey!

Simon: Do you or your sister even know that your nephew hasn't come home in two days, since the incident at the hockey game, Spooky Lacroix? Do you even care? Why can't you and that thing...

*(Pointing at the bible that sits beside Spooky.)*

and all it stands for cure your nephew's madness, as you call it, Spooky Lacroix? What has this thing...

*(The bible again).*

done to cure the madness of this community and communities like it across this country, Spooky Lacroix? Why didn't "the Lord" as you call him,

come to your sister's rescue at that bar seventeen years ago, huh, Spooky Lacriox? (90–91)

In these lines the traditional native view clashes with that of the colonised world in a somewhat usual way, but there are two interesting points that could be mentioned here: a) the much finer and sophisticated way of expressing the traditional views in Simon's case versus the much simpler way of thinking in Spooky's case which might reflect that the less smart one is the easier prey for the new ideas he might be; and b) the lack of capital letter at the beginning of the word Bible which might indicate Highway's own personal attachments—though it is only apparent in the written text, the treatment of colonizing religion is clearly treated with despise.

The person who almost entirely lacks the skills for verbal communication is one of the most controvesrial figures of *Dry Lips*. Dickie Bird Halked symbolizes the desperate need of a nation hoping to express itself, yet the means he/it finds follows the wrong structure, omits grammatical rules, and ends in a kind of dead-end street which is not so surprising if one traces these inadequacies back to Dickie's past.

Although everybody knows who the 17-year-old Dickie Bird's real father was and that his mother had a husband after whom he had been named, he has always been treated more or less as a bastard but it does not seem to matter as he is thought to be mentally handicapped or retarded. One of the scary messages of the play comes when his biological father accepts him as a result of a very shocking rape which he commits against Nanabush/Patsy with a crucifix.

As for mental handicap: according to native belief the special mental state allows people like Dickie Bird in *Dry Lips* and Zhaboonigan in *Rez Sisters* to have a unique kind of relationship with the spiritual world which is the obvious explanation why they can see and interact with Nanabush.

In *Dry Lips* the first Native reference is a separate and lonely sentence "Igwani eeweepoonaskeewuk. (The end of the world is at hand)" (36) which is from the Bible when Spooky tries to enlighten Dickie Bird. Although Dickie Bird cannot speak, he can write and whenever he wants to communicate, he writes words on a piece of paper—in English. Yet, when anyone tries really hard to get

something across to him, they speak in Cree or Ojibway as if the *real* means of communication could be nothing but the Native language.

Shortly after this, Simon (whether his name has any implication of the Simon of the Bible is yet another question, but if he is anything, he is a solid rock of Native culture) is approached by another man, Zachary, who is looking for an answer in the middle of a Native dance performed by Simon. One would assume, and is fooled for a while to believe, that Zachary seeks Simon's advice for spiritual reasons, and it is quite ironic to realise that it is because Simon worked with 'dough-making' machines that his help is asked for. In this scene, Simon constantly dives back into the Native language as if it was the only way to retain and maintain his spirituality, and although Zachary understands everything Simon says, his responses are always in English. He (Zachary) is so converted and materialistic at this point of the drama (and by this point of his life) that—especially from a Native observer's point of view—one can feel nothing but a strong kind of detachment from him and resentment over his actions. Nevertheless, this kind of behaviour is what will allow him the significant change that he goes through. So by the end, when he questions the existence of any kind of God, he does so out of true feelings for his people as he loses his materialistic view.

Besides the occasional Native words that come up every now and then, there are three major scenes when the use of Native language is extensive.

The least significant but quite surprising one is the hockey commentary of Big Joey in *Dry Lips*, who mixes the Native and English languages so much in his speech relating to the action on the ice that one has to stop and wonder at times whether he just mispronounces a word or two or uses a word of a different language. The reason for such a commentary might be multiple: a) as in most cases, the use of their mother tongue reflects that they are emotionally attached to what they are talking about and feel the need to hide behind their original language, or b) perhaps this is the only way they can express emotions, or c) by announcing or reporting the game, which originates in a different culture in their own language, it might become their own.

The other, and more important instance, of the use of the Native language occurs in the scene when Nanabush/Patsy is raped by Dickie Bird Halked. Shortly before Patsy (acted by Nanabush) appears, Black

Lady, his 'mother' (again acted by Nanabush), exchanges a few words with Dickie Bird about how he resents the crucifix, and he speaks in his Native language even though his mother tells him to say his prayers. When Patsy appears in the scene, he takes the crucifix and rapes her without a single word while this whole act is watched by his real father, Big Joey. As she disappears from the scene, Big Joey comes to comfort his (bastard) son and does so exclusively in Cree/Ojibway. Big Joey is one of the most 'advanced' civilised Natives in town, and his use of the Native language should get special attention. At this point he feels the need to return to it as English could not be a possibility for the confession he makes—admitting that he is the real father—and the whole scene becomes more understandable and, of course, a lot more intimate. Later, he even admits why he let the rape happen and did not intervene by saying, "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" (120). It may not necessarily be the most sound reasoning, yet, in fact, he only projects the hatred he should feel towards himself onto women: but this is again a sign of creating ideologies which is a white phenomenon rather than Native—showing how advanced he is in becoming more and more like the whites. It is also worth pointing out that this moment of confession which (unless interpreted for non-native audiences) might be forwarded in a very subtle way so the non-native audience will have but two choices: either they are sensitive enough and realise the relationship between the characters, or they fall into the typical coloniser phenomena of ignorance about native affairs.

In the penultimate scene we see Simon, who has almost lost his mind over the fact that his fiancée was raped and is ready to take revenge. We see him wandering through the woods as he is trying to express himself and talk to Nanabush but seems to be losing his voice. He comes to terms with the Native language not expressing gender:

... 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!

*(Speaks directly to Nanabush, as though he/she were there, directly in front of him; he doesn't see Nanabush/Patsy standing on the upper level.)*

Aw, Boozhoo how are ya? Me goo. Me berry, berry good. I seen you! I just seen you jumping jack-ass thisa away... (110–111)

He is the one who could express himself in a very sophisticated way but who is not turning away from English totally. What we can see in the examples of the Wasy men is how they come to terms with the difficulties their human nature has caused.

Dickie Bird Halked blames Christian religion for being the cause of his having been born in a bar of a drunkard and then brought up as a bastard. Big Joey sees women to be the main source of his personal problems for not finding a woman he can trust and a woman he would choose to be his only partner—the possible loss of his potency is yet a further just explanation. Simon Starblanket finds the English language (along with other forces of colonisation) to be the major evil of his life. And although he does not deserve the treatment he gets from his fellow Natives, it is not the language that pushes his life in the direction he is heading, finally ends up accidentally shooting himself. He was the one who was trying to assimilate but still tried to hold on to the old traditions and values as well. This is what cannot work, it does not seem possible. You either give your full self to convert or you are lost. The closing scene is again the hockey game, which takes place shortly after Simon's death, and its commentary is delivered by Big Joey in the same old fashion: mixing English with Cree/Ojibway. This seems to be the only solution: yes, one can retain some of its past but it has to be melted into something much larger, much more accepted by English culture: for example, a hockey game.

In writing both his plays Highway employed both native and English languages—its reasons can be explained, but the urge to explain them might lead us astray. On the one hand, we could blame Highway's own lack of education as the main reason for the lack of sophisticated English. One can also find a subtle irony in the fact that he used both languages at different levels—English when it was a mere tool in an almost pointless conversation as the majority of the scenes involve the 'humanised' problems, and Cree or Ojibway when it was meant to express spiritual harmony, attempt for such harmony

or the presence of spiritual mystery—mainly the presence of Nanabush. The almost exaggeratedly uneducated English can be a grotesque acceptance of the role cast on Natives by the English as well as a sad reflection on Native affairs—they have not yet mastered the new culture, but seem to forget more and more about the old one.

All these might or might not be true, but what might gain an even greater significance is the lack of communication, lack of attempt to use any visible ways of communication.

The use of verbal communication seems to be in a different light if we consider that while in *The Rez Sisters* Nanabush does not say much (except in the role of the Bingo Master) it has a few dialogues in *Dry Lips*—as Gazelle, as Patsy and as Black Lady—but never as Nanabush. Realising this makes one wonder: can it be that everything that is verbalised on stage is just a petty attempt to reflect something much deeper, stronger, and spiritual which is present perhaps only in the subconscious of the Natives? Could it be that naming these either in English or Cree would drag them too much to a material level where they would have no place or force or even right to exist?

Let us take a look at the scene where Marie-Adele dies. She is taken for a dance by the Bingo Master who transforms into Nanabush, and without any explanation, or long speech leading into it she becomes aware of the change and the significance of having been able to see the bird; and she is taken into the spirit world. The whole scene is as peaceful as the Native spirituality where death is not necessarily the end of something but very much part of a cycle. It is perhaps more direct in *Dry Lips* where Simon Starblanket, after having been shot, “*rises slowly from the ground and ‘sleep walks’ right through the scene and up to the upper level, towards the full moon.*” (118)

Once the importance of speaking and not speaking has been in the focus one should not forget about other—this time non-verbal—means of the play. The two very obvious examples come from *The Rez Sisters*: the first being when the women go to the ‘band office’ at the end of Act I and there they stand “*in one straight line square in front of the audience. The ‘invisible’ chief ‘speaks’: cacophonous percussion for about seven beats, the women listening more and more incredulously. Finally the percussion comes to a dead stop. And Pelajia says, ‘No?’*” (60) Without any male character having to appear it is the responses of the women that show how little success they had. In lack of men in this case one feels that they (the men) are resonant,



hopeless, and ignorant, while in *Dry Lips*, although only Nanabush appears in different roles of women, most of the men's talk is about women who, this way, are just as much 'in the play' as if they were on stage and had lines as well.

The other and perhaps a bit more ambiguous example for the subtlety of showing less is the setting at the beginning of *The Rez Sisters*. It is the roof of Pelajia Patchnose's house which might in fact very well be indicative of the relationship of these women on the reserve to both civilization (or rather circumstances that these people were forced to live under) and the spiritual elevation towards the clarity and freedom of the sky (not surprisingly the role of Nanabush in *The Rez Sisters* is mostly that of a bird). It is exactly the lack of being rooted—or perhaps the symbolic meaning of 'going beyond what is known' lies below and loses its significance—serves as nothing more but a springboard.

Behind the English sentences, the civilised and educating sentences one can often hear a non-verbal sound: a never ending drum which can be the stomping of the feet of Nanabush reminding its people of their culture or just the blood rushing in one's ears louder at times when the sense of guilt (for non-natives) becomes harsher and the same moments more painful for native audiences. The mimicry in Highway's plays is not within the plays happening to the characters, but the simultaneity of emotions happening to the spectators of the performances. These moments are rarely caused by the verbal messages, but rather the more universal understanding of each other. The simplicity with which the playwright manages to treat the most annoying or most mournful moments of his plays prevents sentimentality.

Setting, props, choice of language, spiritual elements, use of words instead of action: the masterful handling or at times lack of all these create the curious reserve of Wasaychigan Hills. Thus when one takes a peek into the lives of its characters, it is hard to get involved but hard to stay neutral. Highway does it in a way that his plays talk to all kinds of audiences, and not always wanting to apply the mind but often hoping to reach out to the soul without falling into the trap of melodrama.

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