

Tomson Highway: An Interview

Amrapali Chatterjee ¹

Tomson Highway is Canada's leading Aboriginal playwright. Though he came to limelight with his "Rez" cycle in 1992, he continues to inspire the younger generation of Aboriginal playwrights, actors, dancers in North America. Trained in western classical music, the lyrical angst of his compositions are embedded in the socio-cultural history of Aboriginal performance in Canada. His humour is deeply rooted in the story telling tradition of his elders, which engages his readers and audience to participate in the textual negotiation (which has its own politics of bringing the 'Weesaygeechak' back, according to Tomson). His cultural productions are popular across the globe and his plays are part of academic discourses on indigeneity and 'post' colonial studies.

Plays:

Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing

Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout

The Rez Sisters

Rose

Fiction:

Kiss of the Fur Queen

Criticism:

Comparing Mythologies

For Children:

Caribou Song

Dragonfly Kites

Fox on the Ice

Amrapali: We have always heard you in connection with indigenous Canadian Theatre. Would you like to talk about your position within that space?

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Tomson: I was one of the people who started Native theatre in Canada. There were other people involved but my younger brother René Highway, who was a dancer, had a significant hand in the way of the Native theatre movement in Canada. He was one of the first modern dancers in Canada so that was a remarkable achievement on his part. As he was approaching 30, he was starting to experiment with choreography. By age 30, a lot of dancers start looking for a second career and one of the possible careers that dancers always look at as a distinct possibility is choreography. The first thing a choreographer needs is music. I'm a trained classical musician and I have a university degree in music. One of the many courses that one takes to earn a degree in music at university is composition so I know how to compose. I wrote my brother a small piece and it worked, I wrote him a second piece and that worked and I wrote him a third piece. They just kept working and they kept getting bigger and bigger and transformed into experimental plays which became increasingly successful until eventually, at age 36, I had accidentally written a very successful play. It was never my intention to be a director. It was just my brother encouraging me to write music: music which increasingly included words in Cree and English. That's how it came about. I would say that my brother was probably the one who lit a spark in Native Canadian theatre and I was by his side. Now there is a whole army of people associated with Native theatre. Back when we started, there were only a few other people involved with Native theatre, such as Graham Greene and Gary Farmer. That's how Native theatre began and I just happened to be a part of it because of my brother.

Amrapali: Is Indigenous Canadian Theatre today driven by any specific agenda?

Tomson: It is driven by many agendas but, I think, the one that is most specific is our position as Native people. Our voice as Native people has to do with the preservation of the land and the environment. It is driven by the need to preserve our culture and, secondarily and immediately related to that, the need to preserve our land and our environment.

Amrapali: The environment seems to be very central to life in Canada. Would you like to comment on the interface between the environment and theatre?

Tomson: Dominant society/European society is monotheistic, based on a straight line of progress. Time is of the essence. From point A to point B to point C. From the beginning of time to the middle of time to the end of time. To give it a little bit of context: from the Book

of Genesis to the Book of Revelation. Native thinking is based on a circular structure, not on a phallic design but a yonic design. Space is of the essence here. Space also refers to land and living space. Time is secondary. There is no beginning, there will be no end. We'll just pass the planet on to future generations. There is an expression in Native culture that says, 'We are not here to inherit the earth from our ancestors, we are here to borrow it from our children.' Space owns us, we don't own space.

Amrapali: When you say women are powerless, are you referring to your community, your nation or would you apply this notion worldwide?

Tomson: Worldwide.

Amrapali: What is the actual position of women now, on- reserve and off- reserve?

Tomson: Increasingly strong. Earlier, it was rare for a reserve to have a woman chief. That started changing about 30-40 years ago. Now, there are many Native women chiefs. That has come forward very nicely and interestingly. In the field of Education, women are doing well and seeking higher education in greater numbers. If you especially look at the Humanities divisions in universities across the country, you will find that a lot of those classes are filled with Native women. Native women are slowly taking on positions in politics, education, business and other fields. It is improving little by little and Native women are getting out of the position of powerlessness, both on and off reserve.

Amrapali: Would you like to situate the contemporary aboriginal cultural productions with special emphasis on theatre, within the neo- liberal space of Toronto and the politics behind the projects sponsored by the Canada Council for the Arts?

Tomson: The Canadian Council for the Arts has a special section for Aboriginal theatre and literature. I think that is a very good sign that the Canadian government supports us. It's a positive gesture because it didn't exist even 30 years ago. The Toronto theatre industry is the most vibrant industry in Canada. If you were to compare with Montreal, Toronto has been very supportive ever since the emergence of Native theatre in Canada which is not something you'll find in Montreal(Mind you, there isn't as much activity in Native theatre in Montreal). People encourage us. White people love us!

Amrapali: When you were told how contemporary Canadian literature is being taught here in Kolkata, what was your initial reaction?

Tomson: I thought it was fantastic! I was pleased, I was thrilled, I was moved and I was touched. I was thankful for the support we're receiving in this part of the world. I was very excited that our voice was being respected in the opposite side of the world.

Amrapali: What according to you, would be a plausible way of approaching indigeneity from a global perspective?

Tomson: At the beginning of Canadian history, Native people were considered a dying race. There is documented proof that Mackenzie King, Prime Minister of Canada in the 1940s, said that Native people have no place in the future of Canada. In the Meech Lake Accord, Brian Mulroney tried to push through the legislation that would say that the Canadian constitution was powered by two Nations- French and English- while completely forgetting the fact that there was a third nation—constituting of Native people. Elijah Harper stopped the Meech Lake accord from being signed and proved the fact that there was a third nation that needed to be recognized. He told Brian Mulroney that we were the ones who helped your people when you first got here. Without our help, your ancestors would not have survived. Now you are pretending like we don't exist. We do exist and we are increasing in numbers. Most non-Native families have 2 or 3 children, Native families have anything from 6 to 14 children. Far from being a dying race, we are a dynamic race. We stand to make a considerable difference in the future of the country and in the future of the world, particularly vis-à-vis Global warming. The very structure of Native Cosmology may just hold the answers to saving the earth and solving such crises.

Amrapali: We have known that aboriginal culture has always embraced two- spiritedness. Would you please comment on that ?

Tomson: It has to do with the structure of the language, in the sense that everybody is male and female. There is no gender. He and she are both "heshes". God is a "heshe". The two gender system that monotheistic thinking promulgates does not work. Men have way too much power over women. In a pantheistic, nature-based thinking, both have an equal voice. No one side has power over the other. In the straight line of monotheistic thinking, there are only two genders. A circular structure has room for many genders. Theoretically, there should be less violence. There should be much more respect. There is a buffer zone and a dynamic relationship between genders. The question is, what is more harmful to society? A man beating his wife to death in front of his children, which is something that happens quite often and there is not taboo against that kind of behaviour whereas a man being loved by another

man is considered sick and abnormal. Which is sick and which is not? That's my question and that question is reverberating to a greater and greater extent everywhere. Situations are changing. Every year, a new country is legalizing homosexuality. We have had a voice in changing that dysfunctional structure. Shouldn't heterosexual sex be examined? Homosexual sex is doing quite fine. Discussions about gender need to be deepened, widened and intensified.

Amrapali: Do you really believe that there is something called an indigenous methodology of approaching cultural texts? Please explain.

Tomson: There is. I don't know how to define it but there is a method of approaching cultural texts. I always have trouble when I read an English or European text. The languages are so male-centric and women have no place in the equation. When it says "he" in a text, there's something in me says, "that's wrong." It should be "heshe". There has got to be a change. Native writers are making a change. In those texts, you can also find the idea of nature as being inanimate. In our culture, nature has a soul.

Amrapali: Would you please share with us what you are currently working on?

Tomson: I have a new play, a one-act musical, which is making the rounds. What I'm working on right now is my biography because I have a very interesting history. How many people born in snow banks go on to become classical pianists? How many rich white people in Toronto can play Chopin? That's my book right there. Also, to prove that we are not a dead race but a spectacular race and we stand to make spectacular changes.