

# Culture and Native American Theater: A Structural Analysis of Diane Glancy's "The Truth Teller"

Isis Golden, *Queens College, CUNY*

*Isis Golden is a 2003 graduate of Queens College and a native of Queens, NY. This essay is a shortened version of her senior thesis, in which she discusses the ways in which theater and dramatic text, with cross-cultural ideas of racial identity, are very important to theatrical education. In 2003 Isis will begin the doctoral program in Dramatic Arts at the University of California at Davis.*

## Introduction

Theater seeks to educate an audience. In analyzing cross-cultural dramatic texts and performance, one of the questions to ask is how cultural ideas are communicated to audiences from another culture. Stanley Fish argues that "...there is no single way of reading that is correct or natural, only "ways of reading" that are extensions of community perspectives."<sup>1</sup> The same is true for a theatrical performance. Native American theater poses additional issues: audiences consist of people who come from many cultural backgrounds and social influences, and each audience member comes to a performance with various types of cultural knowledge about a show. Because of such knowledge, audience members will have left the show with their own interpretations about what messages, either cultural or moral, the characters in the performance are conveying to them. Also, each interpretation is important to what was seen in the performance because these ideas that have developed in the minds of the audiences come to represent various social ideas among a group of people.

## Connections between Anthropology and "The Truth Teller"

Jeffrey Huntsman shows that theatrical performances with cultural contexts can have a significant impact on different groups of people because:

...Native American drama is by its nature celebratory of the essential being of the community, emphasizing that ultimately all are affected by what the central participants do. The community, the audience, is an integral part of the creative process before, during, and after the fact of the performance, because the performance realizes an aesthetic and metaphysical immanence of the society.<sup>2</sup>

Diane Glancy's "The Truth Teller" is among one of the works of dramatic literature in Geiogamah's and Darby's compiled anthology of Native American drama.<sup>3</sup> What is anthropologically significant about the play is its ability to

present before an audience issues that contain cultural ideas of what it means to be a man and a woman, with a racial identity and socially influenced ideas about the meaning of truth. Issues that involve gender and racial conflict and solidarity have always been a part of the daily lives of people. As a result, these issues affect how one thinks about oneself, other people and life situations.

The play also makes an audience think about what causes instances of social balance and imbalance. It also makes an audience think about whether or not social changes that are imposed upon people are good, bad or necessary in some instances. Also, the play has the potential to use characters to direct certain messages about gender, race, and truth to a specific group in the audience, and at times, to the audience overall. Furthermore, it is also capable of using the splitting and imbalanced oppositions entailed in male versus female and Indian versus White to bring the audience together as a community, by bringing awareness to various other shared understandings about gender, race and truth, which exist outside of one's social influences. It is crucial to bring emphasis to these issues, because ideas about gender and race shape the ways in which people teach one another the differences between right and wrong, what results from social imbalance versus balance, as well as the decisions and judgments that one makes about people and situations in the midst of social interaction.

## Scaffolding: Learning from Structural Oppositions

Les Pereira discusses the concept of scaffolding as a significant means of transferring knowledge from the teacher to the learner. Pereira writes "We start from where the learner is 'at,' utilize their background knowledge, set a context which they perceive to be relevant and build upon their experiences and understandings [and].... often the context presented to the learner is based upon the biases of the teacher."<sup>4</sup> Artists have a significant role in the process of scaffolding ideas to the audience and influencing how they think after a show. The characters of a play, as presented through the artists, the playwright and actors, not only have roles within the play, but also important roles that go beyond the performance. In a performance for a culturally diverse audience, some characters may be conveying ideas to one group and other characters to other groups. Some characters may be talking to women in the audience while other characters are talking to men in the audience. There are also

<sup>1</sup> Fish, Stanley. *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. (Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1980), 16.

<sup>2</sup> Huntsman, Jeffrey F. "Native American Theatre: Drama in Traditional Native American Societies" (1983) in Hanay Geiogamah and Jaye T. Darby, eds., *Stories of Our Way: An Anthology of American Indian Plays*. (Los Angeles: UCLA American Indian Studies Center, 2000), 81-113; 86.

<sup>3</sup> Glancy, Diane. "The Truth Teller" in Hanay Geiogamah and Jaye T. Darby, eds., *Stories of Our Way: An Anthology of American Indian Plays*. (Los Angeles: UCLA American Indian Studies Center, 1999), 339-354.

<sup>4</sup> Pereira, Les. "Stepping out with the Constructivists." *Australian Science Teachers Journal*, 42:2 (1996): 26-29.

times when important messages about racial or gender differences as represented through the characters are directed toward different segments of an entire community because of disparate audiences.

It is especially important to emphasize that an artist's meaningful character interpretation helps to appropriately convey socially important messages. Actors are aware that their audiences have a series of social biases. Therefore, the ways in which actors choose to portray a character in a dramatic text with cultural context, will continue to shape the social biases and influences of their audiences. In Native American theater, both the artists and audiences make the process of creating and interpreting materials, which entail both contemporary and traditional themes, an interesting one.

### Structural Oppositions in "The Truth Teller"

Inspired by Levi-Strauss' structural analysis of "The Story of Asdiwal",<sup>5</sup> I analyze "The Truth Teller" as a play with two main oppositions. Levi-Strauss argues that the oppositions that occur in *The Story of Asdiwal* show the various social values that exist within society. In "The Truth Teller," the oppositions in the play are obvious; the two main characters, the half-Indian Man and full-blood Indian Woman display an opposition between male and female and Indian and White. As the play progresses, it becomes apparent that these opposed characters have educational functions for audience members. Diane Glancy's play can be used to show that structural oppositions as represented in drama, especially in relation to gender and race, are very important to the ways that a culturally diverse audience comes to share issues important to Native Americans, such as "truth," "change," and "balance."

### Shamanism: from Structural Conflicts to Resolution

There are also parallels between Glancy's play and shamanism. In "The Sorcerer and His Magic," Levi-Strauss details the story of a Kwakiutl Indian who did not believe in shamanistic power, nor in his ability to be a shaman until he got involved with shamans in the community. He started practicing shamanism when people thought he was a capable shaman. He shows that healing becomes a community ordeal:

...This fabrication of a reality unknown in itself—a fabrication consisting of procedures and representations—is founded on a threefold experience: first

that of the shaman himself, who, if his calling is a true one...undergoes specific states of a psychosomatic nature, second that of the sick person, who may or may not experience an improvement of his condition and finally that of the public, who also participate in the cure, experiencing an enthusiasm and an intellectual and emotional satisfaction which produce collective support, which in turn inaugurates a new cycle.<sup>6</sup>

The characters as represented through the artist and the audience are involved in a shamanistic type of activity. The sickness aspect of the drama lies at the center of the conflicting oppositions that have not yet come to a resolution. The half-Indian Man and Indian Woman are the shamans of the performance because they undergo a series of changes or steps in order to reach the dénouement of the Man/Woman and Indian/White conflicts, at which point, there is a "cure." The role of the audience in the shamanistic process may entail various cultural assumptions (which may at first be negative), about what they expect to see in the performance. During the performance, they are educated through the characters, and depending on which part of the audience the characters are addressing their messages, whether it is the Indian, non-Indian or both audiences, the curing process comes when the audiences involved learn from the characters new ways of viewing various aspects of life and people. At this point, a healing process occurs. The experience becomes intellectual, emotional, social and spiritual. The playwright shows that oppositions, while they can serve an educational purpose, also need to be brought to a resolution before audiences can leave the theater realizing that what has occurred as a result of splitting and synthesizing oppositions, is a sense of community healing.

### Why are Stories important?

Keith Basso's research on the Western Apache tribes is an example of how stories about history and landscapes can be used to criticize people who wrong other people and themselves. His work also shows that stories convey to peoples of a society, the various impacts that historical events can have on a contemporary society. He argues that "If place-making is a way of constructing the past, a venerable means of doing human history, it is also a way of constructing social traditions and, in the process, personal and social identities. We are, in a sense, the place-worlds we imagine."<sup>7</sup> He further points out that

<sup>5</sup> Levi-Strauss, Claude. *Structural Anthropology*. Vol. II. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 146-197.

<sup>6</sup> Levi-Strauss, Claude. *Structural Anthropology*, Vol. I. (New York: Basic Books, 1963), 179.

<sup>7</sup> Basso, Keith. *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache*. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 7.

...historical tales have the capacity to thrust socially delinquent persons into periods of intense critical self-examination from which (ideally, at least) they emerge chastened, repentant, and determined to "live right." Simultaneously, people who have been "shot" with stories experience a form of anguish—shame, guilt, perhaps only pervasive chagrin—that moves them to alter aspects of their behavior so as to conform more closely to community expectations. In short, historical tales have the power to change people's ideas about themselves: to force them to admit social failings, to dwell seriously on the significance of these lapses, and to resolve, it is hoped once and for all, not to repeat them.<sup>8</sup>

**Conclusions: What does the audience learn from the main characters?**

In "The Truth Teller," the characters have an important role in communicating a series of social values to specific groups in the audience or to the audience as a whole. Integral to the notion of character and audience communication is the shamanistic process of bringing the Man/Woman and Indian/White oppositions to the resolution of community healing. A theatrical education, which brings to perspective, the importance of teaching about replacing negative ideas about gender, race and other types of social beliefs, with positive ones, makes community healing possible. In order to reach this sense of community healing, there are ideas that Barbara Rogoff (1990) brings to perspective about people learning to allow themselves to be open to other interpretations during social interactions. She writes:

Human exchange is necessary for the survival of the newborn (and of the species) and continues with expanding consequences as the organism grows and becomes capable of more complex changes and learning. Thus social exchanges are themselves the medium for social activities to be transformed and used by individuals according to their understanding and involvement. It is within social exchanges that we should look for the advances in individuals ways of thinking and acting that build on cultural history through the practices of individuals with their social partners.<sup>9</sup>

Balance and survival are issues brought up in relation to the half-Indian Man and full-blood Indian Woman. Both characters engaged in exchanging a series of ideas and feelings they deemed important. The Indian Man shared with the Indian Woman the necessity to think about some of the

positive aspects of White cultures instead of constantly focusing on the negative ones. The Indian Woman exchanged with the Indian Man her feelings about sharing the household responsibilities as a male provider, instead of leaving her alone most of the time. This exchange is especially necessary for their baby son, He-who-sees-the-way. In order for their son to function in the world, both as a man and as an Indian with White cultural heritage in his background, he needs to have positive ideas about gender and racial difference. The son needs to know that there is nothing wrong with engaging in human exchange between himself and other people. Both of these factors will result in a sense of balance and survival.

Balance and survival are also applicable to the audience through means of active communication of shared meaning between the characters and audience. For, as Rogoff writes, individuals are active in participating in events, as well as in exploring situations. Also, and most importantly, Rogoff argues that

For solutions to enhance changes of perspective... individuals must become aware of and interested in exploring alternatives to their own perspective, and there must be intersubjectivity between partners to explore the existence and values of alternatives.<sup>10</sup>

The Indian audience learns from the Indian Man the significance of White-influenced technology and socially shared beliefs, that which make it distinct from Indian cultures. The non-Indian audience learns from the Indian Woman, various Native ideas about religion and spirituality, as well as socio-historical consequences, which influence Indian perceptions of Whites. In relation to gendered labor, the Indian Man and Indian Woman have communicated to the overall audience that partners need one another to be responsible and communicative about household and traveling related duties. Both male/female and Indian/non-Indian audiences leave the performance with new interpretations and attitudes about ideologies that exist outside one's social influences. At the same time, they also learn from the main characters, the ways in which to balance various negative perceptions, existing within gender and racial oppositions, with positive ideas. In doing so, they also learn that one of the truths about life is that nothing is to be learned, gained and discovered if life were always perfect and never were subject to imbalance or change.

Because the Indian Woman is the surviving character, she is the last to convey to the audience, the importance of

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>9</sup> Rogoff, Barbara. *Apprenticeship in Thinking: Cognitive Developments in Social Context*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 195.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 142.

opening one's cultural options, so that people are able to learn about other social viewpoints, that which create a series of socially-shared meanings. In conveying this message, one can say that the audience has left the show having undergone a shamanistic type of theatrical education with the characters. Finally, the sickness existing within the imbalanced oppositions has been brought to a "cure." To bridge these gender and racial oppositions, it is necessary to learn about the importance of reciprocity and communication, which in turn, leads to understanding other people and induces a sense of community healing.