

The Bingocentric Worlds of Michel Tremblay and Tomson Highway

Les Belles-Soeurs vs. The Rez Sisters

The emergent theatre of Native peoples offers theatre scholars and historians a unique opportunity to observe the fusion of cultures in the making. While contemporary postmodern theatre represents just one more link in a long chain of historical evolution that goes back two and a half millennia, contemporary Native playwrights are forced to work in a genre without direct antecedent in their culture—although theatrical elements are present, of course, in many aspects of traditional ritual and storytelling. In the best plays to emerge so far, the authors have successfully grafted the techniques of Euramerican postmodern theatre onto this traditional matrix of ritual and storytelling. The result is a theatre which shares all the surface aspects of Western postmodernism, but differs essentially in spirit. A comparative study of Tomson Highway's *The Rez Sisters* (1988) and Michel Tremblay's *Les Belles-soeurs* (1968) illustrates this point vividly, because of the exceptionally close parallels between these two sister plays.

The parallels are immediately apparent on the levels of subject matter and dramatic techniques; there are also less apparent parallels with respect to the authors. Both *Les Belles-soeurs* and *The Rez Sisters* are first productions which catapulted their young authors, and with them the society they represent, into the spotlight of national and international attention; both plays marked the beginning of a new and original dramaturgy, the "nouveau théâtre québécois" in the case of Tremblay, Native Canadian theatre in that of Highway.

Both plays focus exclusively on female characters. In both plays, these characters are closely related, as indicated by the respective titles. In both plays, the characters are struggling against poverty, as indicated by the respective

settings: East Montreal in one case, the Wasaychigan Hill reserve in the other. In each play, Bingo represents a central experience in the characters' lives.

The critical statements which were made about *The Rez Sisters* not surprisingly parallel many comments made earlier about *Les Belles-soeurs*. Daniel David Moses, for example, points to "the spiritual malaise which is the subject of the play" (Moses, 89)—a clear parallel to Tremblay's much-commented "maudite vie plate" motif. Moses also states that "The accomplishment of *The Rez Sisters* is that it focusses on a variety of such undervalued lives and brings them up to size" (Moses, 89)—a point much emphasized in the reception of *Les Belles-soeurs*. Finally, the two plays share a central image: Bingo, symbol and illustration of the consumerism of the women represented and the spiritual emptiness of their lives.

Dramatic Techniques

Both playwrights have developed an original and highly effective way of combining bold superrealism, verbal and non-verbal, with theatrical techniques, most importantly, the use of spotlighted inner monologues and surrealistic effects. Dramatic structures in both cases reflect the two authors' passionate interest in music. Tremblay's *Les Belles-soeurs* has been referred to as an oratorio, his *Forever Yours, Marie Lou* as a string quartet, *Sainte Carmen of the Main* as an "opéra parlé." Similarly, Daniel David Moses says of Highway's plays: "He structures his theatre pieces according to models of musical composition. He uses characters like themes and thinks of character conflict in terms of counterpoint and contrast" (Moses, 1987, 89). Pennie Petrone states that Highway combines his "knowledge of Indian reality in this country with classical structure, artistic language. It amounted to applying sonata form to the spirit and mental situation of a street drunk" (Petrone, 173)—words that catch Tremblay's mixture of lyricism and naturalism exactly.

Given the fact that Highway himself has stated his admiration for the work of Michel Tremblay, one might be tempted to look upon *The Rez Sisters* as a purely derivative work. Nothing could be more wrong. On the contrary: close analysis shows that the surface similarities actually help to bring out more dramatically the deep seated differences between the two works. These are, of course, rooted in the basic difference in Weltanschauung on which the plays are based: *Les Belles-soeurs* reflects the negativism, nihilism and spiritual void of Western postmodern society; *The Rez Sisters*, in spite of the similarity of its dramatic matrix, reflects the essential humanism, life-affirming and hopeful world view of Native peoples.

The striking parallels between the two plays might therefore seem paradoxical. However they can perhaps be explained by the fact that, historically, both works stand as early monuments to postcolonial emancipation and self-assertion, each appearing in the wake of a—more or less—“quiet revolution”: that of Quebec in the 1960s, that of native people in the 1980s. Politically, Native demands for self-government echo Québécois demands for separation. Just as Tremblay’s use of the *joual* was in itself a political act in 1968, the very emergence of a Native dramaturgy represented a political act in 1988. The choice of all female characters in both cases underlines the oppression of the respective societies and their desire for empowerment. Each play brought in its wake a veritable explosion of theatrical activity—in the 1970s in Quebec, in the 1980s with Native people. The political impact of these cultural revolutions became clearly manifest in a change of nomenclature from colonial to independently assertive: “French-Canadian” to “Québécois”, “Indian” (the colonizers’ term) to “Native or “Aboriginal.” An oft expressed and deep-seated nostalgia for the precolonial heroic past accompanies the cultural and political revolution in both cases. In Quebec, it is a nostalgia for the pioneering glories of the period before the British conquest; with Native peoples, it is the memory of pre-contact lifestyles, free from the psychological tutelage and social and physical ills imported by the colonizers. One might offer the hypothesis, then, that obvious similarity in the “moment” within the historical evolution at which the two plays were written accounts for their many parallels, while the equally obvious essential differences between the two societies living through this “moment,” would account for the differences. Let us proceed to an examination of these two aspects of the “sister plays.”

Parallels

1. *The Bingo Game*

In both plays, the authors focus on a group of disadvantaged women whose lives revolve around bingo. In *The Rez Sisters*, “THE BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD” [sic] actually provides the axis on which the action of the play revolves, from news of the impending event, to preparations for the trip to Toronto, to the event itself and its aftermath. In the earlier play, the importance of bingo in the women’s lives is presented more subtly, through one of the two stylized Odes which create the leitmotifs for each act. In act one, it is the *Maudite Vie plate* recitation, a summary of the *belles-soeurs*’

frustrated and meaningless lives. In act two, the *Ode to Bingo* mobilizes all of the women's latent energy and enthusiasm. For one brief moment, hostilities cease and they are all united in their common panegyric to the supreme stimulant of their lives. Even senile old Olivine Dubuc is overcome with excitement at the mention of the word "bingo."

The women's bingo mania gives both authors a wonderful opportunity for satirizing their cheap consumerism and materialistic attitudes. In the Tremblay play, the high point of this satire occurs with Germaine's litany of all the household goods she will be able to order, now that the entire catalogue is within reach of her unlimited greed. Highway outdoes the vulgarity of Germaine's monologue by focussing on the particular wish fantasy of one woman, Philomena:

"Myself, I'm gonna go to every bingo and I'm gonna hit every jackpot between here and Espanola and I'm gonna buy me that toilet I'm dreaming about at night..big and wide and white" (Rez Sisters, 5); and after she has won the money to make her dream come true: "...But the best, the most wonderful, my absolute most favorite part is the toilet bowl itself. First of all, it's elevated, like on a sort of..pedestal, so that it makes you feel like..the Queen..And the bowl itself-white, spirit white—is of such a shape, such an exquisitely soft, perfect oval shape that it makes you want to cry. Oh!!! and it's so comfortable you could just sit on it right up until the day you die!" (R.S., 118)

Women waxing rhapsodic over the shape of a toilet bowl or the Mickey Mouse pattern on their wallpaper obviously lack ordinary emotional, physical or spiritual fulfilment. Bingo represents the ultimate escape—more pathetic even in the case of the belles-soeurs whose rewards seem hardly worth getting worked up about ("plaster dogs, floor lamps") than for the rez sisters, who are true gamblers at heart, always expecting the big jackpot that will take them out of their misery. Neither Tremblay nor Highway chose to present an actual bingo game realistically on stage. The stylization of the *Ode to Bingo*, and surrealistic quality of THE BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD clearly emphasize the preeminently psychological reality of bingo in the lives of the women.

2. Use of Language

For both Tremblay and Highway, the creation of a dramatic idiom represents a political statement of self-assertion and identity. Each play mirrors the language spoken by the people, rather than the literary idiom. Tremblay actually created his own idiosyncratic spelling to transcribe an oral language to the printed page. His use of *joual*, highly controversial at the time, forced

a breakthrough in Quebec dramaturgy and brought about the evolution of a new stage idiom, totally different from “literary” French. Highway’s problems in creating a dramatic idiom are obviously even more difficult than those faced by Tremblay. Like other Native writers, he finds himself trapped between the desire to express himself in his own language, which he loves and admires, and the practical need to use the language of the colonizer (“forced appropriation”) in order to have his plays produced before a wider audience. In *The Rez Sisters*, he has achieved a double compromise: small portions of the dialogue are actually written in Cree and Ojibway, with English translations in footnotes; the bulk of the dialogue however, reproduces the “village English” spoken on the reserve, an idiom whose relationship to literary English parallels the relationship of joul to literary French. Although Highway is clearly more reticent than Tremblay about abandoning “correct” grammatical structures, his choice of vocabulary and sentence patterns do convey the feeling of spoken English; his abundant use of swear words amply matches the *sacres* found in Tremblay. Tremblay discovered the poetic qualities of his own vernacular early on in his career and has defended it from the start: “Le joul est très pres de la musique, très lyrique..” (Tremblay, 1971, 48). Native writers sometimes find it difficult to dare embrace this non-literary type of language. As Maria Campbell says:

“A lot of my writing now is in very broken English. I find that I can express myself better that way. I can’t write in our language, because who would understand it? So I’ve been using the way I spoke when I was at home, rather than the way I speak today...what linguists call “village English.” It’s very beautiful...very lyrical, but it took me a long time to realize that...it’s more like oral tradition.” (Lutz, 48)

3. *Superrealism*

Both authors use superrealism—a grotesque extension of naturalism—verbally and as part of the action. With Tremblay, it is the combination of faulty grammar, mispronunciations, clichés, formulas, and swearwords—especially those with religious connotations, the *sacres*—which give the dialogue a superrealistic quality; in the Highway play, it is the totally uninhibited use of offensive language. To give just one example, Emily Dictionary’s outburst during the riot scene (R.S. 44):

Emily: (to Philomena). So damned bossy and pushy and sucky. You make me sick. Always wanting your own way. To Veronique. Goddamned trouble-making old crow. To Pelajia. Fuckin’ self-righteous old bitch. To Marie-Adèle. Mental problems, that’s what you got, princess. I ain’t no baby. I’m the size of a fucking

church. To Annie. You slippery little slut. Brain the size of a fuckin' pea. Fuck, man, take a Valium.

Violence, scatology and sex as part of the stage performance are the hallmarks of surrealism. Because of the absence of men in the plays under discussion, sex is not shown, although verbal references are made quite frequently. Violence on stage, however, appears prominently in both plays. In *Les Belles-soeurs*, the physical violence is mainly centered around the helpless, pathetic Olivine Dubuc. This unfortunate old lady takes a tumble down three flights of stairs in her wheelchair, an additional fall in Germaine's kitchen afterwards, and is mercilessly beaten over the head by her "saintly" daughter-in-law Thérèse. None of the other women expresses the slightest sympathy for her. General violence erupts at the end of the play, when the "sisters" finally openly admit their rage at Germaine's good luck and not only reveal all the booklets of stamps they have stolen, but start fighting for more stamps among each other like a horde of wild animals, with the old lady gleefully riding her wheelchair amidst their vicious antics.

The most striking examples of surrealism in the *Rez Sisters* occur in act one, as the women meet at the store. Philomena is shown sitting on the toilet, at the back of the store, in full view of the audience; later, she comes forward, slowly pulling her clothes back on. The riot scene that follows exceeds the violence of the riot scene in *Les Belles-soeurs*, which is fully mimed; in *The Rez Sisters*, physical aggression is matched by verbal aggression, as illustrated in the quotation mentioned earlier.

4. *Theatricalism*

Again, the type of theatrical techniques used in the two plays are strikingly similar: both plays focus on individual characters with stylized, spotlit monologues, and on key motifs with highly stylized scenes. In *Les Belles-soeurs*, the stylized monologues reveal the deepest concerns of the women, concerns they are unable and unwilling to verbalize and share: Yvette's obsession with her daughter's wedding and obvious craving for a closer relationship (B.S., 45); Mademoiselle Des-Neiges Verrette's secret, hopeless love for the brush salesman (B.S., 53); Lisette de Courval's snobbery and disdain for the other women (B.S., 59); Rhéauna and Angéline's obsession with illness and death, (B.S., 63ff); Angéline's admission of her only, and sinful, pleasures at the "club" (B.S., 81); and Rose's bitter denunciation of marriage and her husband's unending demand for his sexual "dues" (B.S., 101).

Highway uses stylized, spotlit monologues in act one, spotlit duologues in

act two. The speeches in act one, by Annie, Marie-Adèle, and Veronique are all framed by the refrain WHEN I WIN THE BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD, and express each woman's greatest dream. For Annie, it is to be able to buy records, and to sing with the band of her idol, Fritz the Katz; Marie-Adèle fantasizes about a lovely island of her own; and Veronique sees total bliss in a new kitchen stove, just like the one used by Madame Benoit on television (R.S., 35-37). Similarly, Highway uses characters isolated by spotlight in act two; however, here, in the van en route to Toronto, the women do not speak singly, but in pairs revealing themselves to each other in moments of total intimacy: Annie with Marie-Adèle, Philomena with Pelijia, Emily with Annie and Marie-Adèle. Thus, we learn about their underlying troubles, fears and anxieties, not normally mentioned: Marie-Adèle's fear of what will happen to her husband and children after her death from cancer; the trauma of Philomena's past, the white man who left her, the child she had to abandon; Emily's tragic loss of her best friend in a motorcycle accident.

Unlike the spotlit monologues and duologues, which reveal the thoughts and feelings of individual characters, the stylized scenes illustrate their collective concerns. In *Les Belles-soeurs* these take the form of choral recitations: the *Maudite vie plate* chorus in act 1, the *Ode to Bingo* in act two. In the *Maudite vie plate recitation*, by five women, a solo voice alternates with the chorus in a litany enumerating the endlessly repetitive daily chores of everyday life in a loveless family setting. The entire piece is framed by the play's leitmotif, the "maudite vie plate" refrain. "Chus tannée de mener une maudite vie plate! Une maudite vie plate! Une Maudite vie plate! Une maudite vie plate! Une maud..." (B.S., 24). The *Ode to Bingo* is similarly set in a leitmotif frame: "Moé, l'aime ça, le bingo! Moé, j'adore le bingo! Moé, y'a rien au monde que j'aime plus que le bingo!" The recitation itself is done by a chorus of four voices, with four other women shouting out bingo numbers in rhythmic counterpoint.

While Tremblay's stylized scenes operate entirely on the verbal level, Highway's are based exclusively on movement and sound. As in *Les Belles-soeurs*, each act features one major stylized scene. In act one, the superrealistic scene in the store fades into a highly theatrical, mimed finale, accompanied by sound effects:

"The seven women have this grand and ridiculous march to the band office, around the set and all over the stage area, with Pelajia leading them forward

heroically, her hammer just a-swinging in the air. Nanabush (the Trickster figure) trails merrily along in the rear of the line. They reach the “band office”—standing 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.

PELAJIA: No?

Pelajia raises her hammer to hit the “invisible” chief, Nanabush shrugs a “don’t ask me, I don’t know,” Emily fingers a “fuck you, man.” Blackout”. (R.S., 60)

A similar pattern appears in act two. Following the women’s (realistic) planning session in Pelajia’s basement, a series of highly theatrical sequences—seven “beats”—illustrates their superhuman fundraising efforts for the trip to Toronto. Musical effects accompany their frantic activities, mimed at ever accelerating speed:

“And the women start their fundraising activities with a vengeance. The drive is underlined by a wild rhythmic beat from the musician, one that gets wilder and wilder with each successive beat, though always underpinned by this persistent, almost dance-like pulse. The movement of the women covers the entire stage area, and like the music, gets wilder and wilder, until by the end it is as if we are looking at an insane eight-ring circus.....Pelajia’s basement simply dissolves into the madness of the fundraising drive.” (R.S., 70)

As a final, and obvious, parallel, the theatrical, rather than realistic, conclusions to both plays must be mentioned: Tremblay’s surrealistic rain of gold bond stamps to the tune of “O Canada,” Highway’s Trickster figure Nanabush in a triumphant dance on the roof of Pelajia’s house. Both authors have thus chosen to end their basically realistic play on a highly unrealistic finale. However, the feeling we are left with in each case is totally different. Underneath the surface parallels, the two sisters plays are poles—or rather, cultures—apart.

Differences

The rain of gold bond stamps at the end of *Les Belles-soeurs* reinforces the consumerism which is being satirized throughout the play. It also serves to make a political statement: material bliss (unlimited stamps) is linked to toe-ing the patriotic party line (singing of *O Canada*). On both levels, the author’s cynicism is complete and absolute. In contrast, the appearance of the Nanabush character at the end of *The Rez Sisters*, not just dancing, but dancing “triumphantly,” points to the underlying spirituality, affirmation of life and joie de vivre which characterize the play as a whole—a far cry from the spiritual and emotional aridity of *Les Belles-soeurs*. This essential differ-

ence between the Quebecois and the Native “sisters” play can be easily demonstrated by examining the different treatment of settings, representation of characters and representation of religion and morality in the two works.

1. *Settings*

The obvious difference here is the single setting of Tremblay as opposed to the multiple settings of Highway. Tremblay achieves the oppressive atmosphere of his play largely through classical concentration. Not only does all the action take place within the confined space of Germaine’s kitchen; concentration of time is also used, to the point where acting time in fact parallels real time. Even the division into two acts is carefully engineered so as not to break this unity: the beginning of act two reiterates the final lines of act one, so that the linkage is complete.

Corresponding to the greater spirit of freedom in the Highway play, a variety of settings is used, both indoor and outdoor: on the roof of Pelajia’s house, in front of Marie-Adèle’s, inside Emily’s store and Pelajia’s basement; in the “van,” the bingo hall, by the “graveside.” Some of these are realistic, others, such as the van, the bingo scene and the grave scene, only indicated. Some of the transitions take the form of conventional scene changes, others are built into the action in such a way that imaginary settings are created through mime and movement on stage: the march to the store, the march to the band office, the shift from van to bingo hall and from bingo hall to Marie-Adèle’s porch and graveside. Tomson deals as freely with time as he does with space. Time zones are telescoped and crossed as he cuts from one scene to the next without transition. These technical differences in dramatic structure create a diametrically opposed “atmosphere” for each of the two plays. In, *Les Belles-soeurs* the audience is drawn into the oppressive, almost claustrophobic ambiance in which the characters conduct their lives; with *The Rez Sisters*, we feel a sense of fluidity, movement and greater freedom.

2. *Characters*

The essential difference between the two plays becomes even more apparent if we take a closer look at the depiction of the characters. The “sisters” of the two plays differ considerably in their attitude towards each other. Tremblay’s belles-soeurs detest each other with a vengeance; although they try hard to maintain a facade of polite behavior, their underlying hostility, envy, and aggression shows through at all times, occasionally erupting into vicious quarrels and bouts of insults. The only time they seem to be able to

act in unison is in a collective act of disloyalty as they embezzle all of Germaine's gold bond stamps. The rez sisters, too, have their often violent disagreements and their anger often flares up. However, an underlying spirit of cooperation and genuine sisterhood permeates the play. The women work together, rather than against each other, and thus manage to carry out their ambitious project of going to Toronto.

Highway has chosen not to deal with the generational conflict in his play. Tremblay, on the other hand, includes three young women to illustrate the tragic mother/daughter relationship among his belles-soeurs. The play opens with dialogue between Germaine and her daughter Linda, and the antiquated form of address they use (Linda says "vous" to her mother, Germaine "tu" to her daughter) already indicates the existence of a hierarchical relationship that can only lead to tension. Intolerance and total lack of comprehension on the part of the older generation creates resentment, rebellion and often, as in the case of Lise, despair for the younger women. Both playwrights have included a black sheep in their roster of characters. In *Les Belles-soeurs*, it is the unfortunate Pierrette, who works in a "club"; in *The Rez Sisters*, the infamous Gazelle Nataways, "who's got them legs of hers wrapped around big Joey day and night" (R.S., 7). The rez sisters look upon Gazelle with a certain amount of amused disgust; but the belles-soeurs, rejoicing in their moral superiority and Pierrette's inevitable eternal damnation, feel justified in ostracising her fully and refusing all help, even when she reveals her desperate situation. Their lack of tolerance is absolute.

A similar pattern applies in the treatment of the old and handicapped, nonagenarian Olivine Dubuc in *Les Belles-soeurs*, Zhaboonigan Peterson, the 24-year old mentally retarded adopted daughter of Veronique in *The Rez Sisters*. Tremblay's vitriolic representation of the women's heartless treatment of the old lady contrasts sharply with the rez sisters' friendly acceptance and mothering of Zhaboonigan. The belles-soeurs' uncharitable attitude is further aggravated by their hypocrisy. Although they are all exasperated by the presence of the senile old woman, only Rose, the most outspoken of the group, openly voices what they secretly think: "Est assez vieille! Est pus bonne à rien!" (B.S., 70). Meanwhile the others vie with each other in their hypocritical encouragement of Thérèse's self-indulgent martyr complex:

GERMAINE: Mon Dieu, Thérèse, que j'vous plains donc!

Des-Neiges Verrette: Vous êtes trop bonne, Thérèse!

GABRIELLE: C'est vrai, ca, vous êtes ben que trop bonne!

THÉRÈSE: Que voulez-vous, y faut ben gagner son ciel!

marie-ange: On pourra dire que vous l'avez gagné, vot'ciel, vous!

THÉRÈSE: Ah! Mais, j'me plains pas! J'me dis que le bon Dieu est bon, pis qu'y va m'aider à passer à travers!

LISETTE: C'est ben simple, vous m'émouvez jusqu'aularmes!

THÉRÈSE: Voyons donc, Madame de Courval, prenez sur vous!

DES-NEIGES VERRETTE: J'ai rien qu'une chose à vous dire, Madame Dubuc, vous êtes une sainte femme!

Nobody objects, of course, when the object of their adulation administers vigorous blows to the old woman's head, her normal method of keeping Madame Dubuc senior in line. Zhaboonigan, too, often makes a nuisance of herself; but one of the women invariably finds a way to distract and control her in a casual and friendly manner. There is little self-pity on Veronique's part, and certainly no undue praise given by the other women.

Intolerant, narrow-minded and emotionally stunted, Tremblay's women are naturally unable to form intimate relationships with each other. We learn of their real lives only through the stylized monologues. In contrast, Highway, by spotlighting not only single characters, but also pairs, emphasizes the openness and intimacy between the women.

In both plays, the consumerism of the women depicted is heavily satirized. However, even here there is a difference. In *The Rez Sisters*, crass materialism is tempered by some more humane ideals: Veronique dreams of a shiny new kitchen stove, but she also plans to use it to cook for all the motherless orphans on the reserve; Marie-Adèle's utopic private island will provide an ideal spot to bring up a happy family. In contrast, the belles-soeurs' greed is unmitigated: Germaine has no intention of sharing a single item of her windfall with anyone.

In the pursuit of their materialistic goals, the two groups of women also show essential differences. The belles-soeurs live in a state of resignation. They may curse their "maudite vie plate," but do nothing to improve their lot. They can only count on good luck to improve their fate: a windfall of gold bond stamps, or maybe a win at bingo. The rez sisters, too, set all their hopes on the chance of winning at bingo. However, once they find out about THE BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD, they display enormous energy to get what they want (the fundraising drive). In fact, the author emphasizes his characters' active, resolute commitment to self-help by beginning and ending the play with the image of Pelajia, hammer in hand, repairing the roof of her house. The conclusions of the two plays also

sharply contrast the belles-soeurs' inertia with the practical, no-nonsense approach of the rez sisters. At the end of Tremblay's play, nothing has changed for his group of women. At the end of *The Rez Sisters*, a number of positive developments have taken place: Philomena has the coveted new toilet; Annie gets to sing backup with the band of Fritz the Cat; Emily is carrying a child; Véronique cooks for the widowed Eugene and his fourteen children. Just like the differences in dramatic structures, the differences in the depiction of the characters reveal the almost polar opposition in attitude between the two cultures.

3. Religion and Morality

Both plays depict societies which have retained just a faint echo of the profound spirituality of the past; and where winning at bingo, rather than religious ecstasy, has become the ultimate metaphysical experience. However, the way the two authors deal with this loss of spirituality is essentially different. Tremblay puts on stage the ossified remains of a defunct Catholicism to which the belles-soeurs still adhere, oblivious to the emptiness of their religious practices; novenas and rosaries at home, faithful attendance at all parish events outside. Tremblay's regular stage designer, André Brassard, captured this spirit of excessive, but spiritually bankrupt, religiosity in his stage set for the original production of *Les Belles-soeurs*: Germaine's kitchen appeared cluttered with cheap plaster saints and holy pictures, in cynical counterpoint to the less than Christian behavior of the assembled parish ladies.

In contrast, Highway's rez sisters show no interest in organized religion—other than Church-run bingo games, of course. But the author has chosen to give them a steady, if largely unrecognized, spiritual companion, Nanabush, the Trickster figure of Native mythology. Looking at the two plays under discussion, one must agree with his own basic distinction between native and non-native theatre: “The use of underlying native mythology is the distinctive feature. Native mythology is so alive, electric, passionate.....the relationship in Christian mythology is so academic by comparison...[in] native theatre that spirituality is there. It is magic” (Brask, Morgan, 132). The Nanabush figure in *The Rez Sisters* indeed conveys that sense of magic. According to the author's production notes, he is to be played by a male dancer, “modern, ballet or traditional.” He appears in three guises: a white bird (joy); a black bird (death); and as the glittering bingo master (wish fulfilment). Only Zhaboonigan, the retarded girl, and Marie-Adèle, sick with cancer and close to death, have some inkling of the spirit

within the bird. When Nanabush first appears, a white seagull outside Marie-Adèle's house, the author immediately makes the connection between native mythology and native language: Marie-Adèle addresses him in Cree in the longest Native language passage of the play. Subsequently, Nanabush appears in his multiple roles. As a joyous, comic trickster, he accompanies the women on their march to the store, to the band office, and playfully joins his own antics to their frantic fundraising efforts. In a moving scene with Zhaboonigan, he proves the only confidante to whom she is able to tell the story of her traumatic childhood experiences. Full of trust, she concludes with a childlike: "Nice white birdie you" (R.S., 48). In the surrealistic bingo scene, Nanabush becomes the glitzy bingo master who, however, fails to call out the much-wanted number, B14. Nanabush as the black bird visits Marie-Adèle, and finally comes to take her away in the midst of the bingo riot:

And out of this chaos emerges the calm, silent image of Marie-Adèle waltzing romantically in the arms of the Bingo Master. The Bingo Master says "Bingo" into her ear. And the Bingo Master changes, with sudden, bird-like movements, into the nighthawk, Nanabush in dark feathers. Marie-Adèle meets Nanabush. (R.S., 103)

Nanabush, then, stands for the joyful, life-affirming spirit of Native mythology, as well as for a calm and fearless attitude to death. As Highway points out, contrasting these attitudes to the Christian ones, "One superhero is stating that we are here to suffer and the other basically says we are here to have a helluva good time...One was crucified, the other wasn't; so we have absolutely nothing to feel guilty about..." (Brask, Morgan, 134). The two plays provide a perfect illustration of these basic differences. All the women of the older generation in *Les Belles-soeurs* are deeply steeped in a sense of sin and guilt. Trying to have a bit of innocuous fun at a club brings tragic consequences for Angéline Sauvé, as she is told "mais c'est péché mortel" and "le club, mais c'est l'enfer" (B.S., 78) by her self-righteous best friend Rhéauna. Angéline's spotlight monologue reveals the full pathos of such oppressive Puritanical attitudes, as she comments on her joyless upbringing: "J'ai été élevée dans des salles paroissiales par des soeurs qui faisaient c' qu'y pouvaient mais qui connaissaient rien, les pauvres! J'ai appris à rire à cinquante-cinq ans! Comprenez-vous! J'ai appris à rire à cinquante-cinq ans!" (B.S., 81). Similarly, the belles-soeurs show total intolerance and lack of compassion for any young girl who has "fallen" from the straight and narrow path. Lise Paquette is driven to the edge of suicide by

their vicious self-righteousness, summed up by Rose, speaking for all of them: “Non, pour moé là, les filles-mères c’est des vicieuses, qui courent après les hommes” (B.S., 100). The problem does not arise in *The Rez Sisters*; even Emily Dictionary, the toughest of them all, accepts the fact of her pregnancy quite stoically.

Just as the excessively developed sense of sin and guilt leads to a total condemnation of all pleasures, it brings with it an almost hysterical fear of death and the threat of eternal damnation. This is well demonstrated in *Les Belles-soeurs* as Rhéauna and Angéline contemplate their own death on their return from the funeral parlour:

ANGÉLINE:...J’veux mourir dans mon lit...avoir le temps de me confesser...

RHÉAUNA: Pour ça, non, j’voudrais pas mourir sans me confesser! Angéline, promets-moé que tu vas faire v’nir le prêtre quand j’vas me sentir mal! Promets-le moé!

ANGÉLINE: Ben oui, ben oui, ça fait cent fois que tu me le demandes...

RHÉAUNA: J’ai tellement peur de mourir sans recevoir les derniers sacrements!

The contrast to the attitudes about death in *The Rez Sisters* is absolute. Marie-Adèle’s last words, spoken, significantly, in Cree, convey only trust and serenity:

U-wi-nuk u-wa? U-wi-nuk u-wa? Eugene? Nee. U-wi-nuk ma-a oo-ma kee-tha? Ka. Kee-tha i-chi-goo-ma so that’s who you are...at rest upon the rock...the master of the game...the game...it’s me...nee-tha...come...come...don’t be afraid...as-tum...come...to...me...ever soft wings...beautiful soft...soft...dark wings...here...take me...as-tum...as-tum...pee-na-sin...wings...here...take me...take...me...with...pee-na-sin... (Cr. S., 104);

Who are you? Who are you? Eugene? Nee. Then who are you really? Oh. It’s you, so that’s who you are...at rest upon the rock...the master of the game...the game...it’s me...me...come...come...don’t be afraid...come...come...to...me...ever soft wings...beautiful soft...soft...dark wings...here...take me...come...come...come and get me...wings here...take me...take me...with...come and get me. (Footnote translation, R.S., 104)

In conclusion, we see how Michel Tremblay and Tomson Highway, writing at similar points in the historical evolution of their society, and choosing a similar dramatic matrix, have created two totally dissimilar plays, each reflecting its own culture. Tremblay’s cynical treatment of the topic echoes Western postmodern nihilism; Highway’s idealization of characters and retention of a humanistic value system indicates a society in which hope has not yet died. Highway sums it all up in the funeral speech, given by Pelijia at Marie-Adèle’s grave:

Well, sister, guess you finally hit the big jackpot. Best bingo game we've ever been to in our lives, huh? You know, life's like that, I figure. When all is said and done. Kinda silly, innit, this business of living? But. What choice do we have?...I figure we gotta make the most of it while we're here. You certainly did. And I sure as hell am giving it one good try. For you. For me. For all of us. Promise. Really. See you when that big bird finally comes for me.

NOTES

- 1 For an extensive discussion of superrealism in the theatre, see Renate Usmiani, *The Theatre of Frustration: SuperRealism in the Work of Franz-Xaver Kroetz and Michel Tremblay*. New York: Garland, 1990.

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