The Ecstasy of Rita Joe

by George Ryga

a Western Canada Theatre Company (Kamloops) / NAC English Theatre Company coproduction

Study Guide

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About This Study Guide
This Study Guide is formatted in easy-to-copy single pages, which may be used separately or in any combination that works for your classes. The photo and drawings provided on pages 18-20 are intended for classroom display but may also be photocopied for distribution to students.

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ArtsAlive.ca
Have You Heard?
This NAC hosted site has a wealth of educational resources available for teachers and students of music, English theatre, French theatre, and dance. It’s well worth a visit.
http://www.artsalive.ca
Preface

The use of the word “Indian” is contentious in this country at this particular moment in history. The *Student’s Oxford Canadian Dictionary* states that “the use of ‘Indian’ to refer to the indigenous people of North and South America has declined recently because it is thought to reflect Columbus’ mistaken idea that he had landed in India in 1492” — and that the people he encountered were, therefore, “Indians”. In this sense, the word is a true misnomer that, for many, is freighted with the history of colonization and its offensive, denigrating assumptions about the racial and cultural inferiority of Native people.

A rejection of “Indian” is forcefully presented in the preface to Native Earth Performing Arts’ latest study guide: “In Canada, we now refer to Aboriginal people either as Aboriginal, Native, First Nations, Métis, Inuit, Anishnawbe, or Ojibway, Cree, or Algonquin, etc., depending on what nation a person belongs to…. [“Indian”] is archaic and offensive….” As the *S.O.C.D.* goes on to point out, though, the word continues to be commonly used, and expresses a distinction under the law among Aboriginal groups in Canada (Indians, Inuit, and Métis) for which no other agreed upon term currently exists.

Recently an editor at the *Toronto Star*, following that paper’s style manual which holds that the word “while objectionable to some, is still perfectly useable,” replaced “aboriginal” with “Indian” in a review of the NEPA production mentioned above. The action prompted strong criticism from the staff at NEPA. *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* director Yvette Nolan, when asked to comment further on the issue, said “This is indicative of a systemic problem, of how the power structure is still built. We have no self-determination. We can't name ourselves. The play itself is about how the naming of things gives or takes away their power. If we don't call it genocide then we do not have to accept responsibility for what happened to the First Nations here. There is power in naming, in every tradition. To say that we cannot be called what we ask to be called is disrespectful.”

In this study guide, the word “Indian” will be avoided except for instances where it reflects the original usage choice in a source document.
Production Credits

Creative Team
Director ................................................................. Yvette NOLAN
Musical Director ......................................................... Micah BARNES
Set Designer ............................................................... Phillip TIDD
Costume Designer .................................................... Catherine HAHN
Lighting Designer ....................................................... Michelle RAMSAY
Choreographer .......................................................... Michelle OLSON
Composers ......................................................... Jennifer KREISBERG and Michelle ST. JOHN

Cast
Mr. Homer/Murderer .................................................... Pierre BRAULT
Magistrate ..................................................................... Layne COLEMAN
Young Indian Man/Witness/Murderer ......................... Ryan CUNNINGHAM
Priest/Witness/Murderer ............................................ Todd DUCKWORTH
Young Indian Man ..................................................... Telly JAMES
Policeman/Witness/Murderer ...................................... Darcey JOHNSON
Eileen ............................................................................. Falen JOHNSON
Jaimie Paul ................................................................. Kevin LORING
Teacher/Old Woman .................................................. Renae MORRISEAU
Young Indian Man/Murderer ........................................ Jeremy PROULX
Rita Joe ........................................................................ Lisa C. RAVENSBERGEN
David Joe ................................................................. August SCHELLENBERG
Singer ........................................................................... Michelle ST. JOHN

Stage Management Team
Stage Manager ........................................................... Kelly MANSON
Assistant Stage Manager ................................................ Samira ROSE
Overview of *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* (page 1 of 4)

**Significance in Canadian Theatre History**

“‘Canadian Playwright’. The words seem a little incongruous together, like ‘Panamanian hockey-player’, almost, or ‘Lebanese fur-trapper’.”


Artistic Director Malcolm Black commissioned George Ryga to write a play for The Playhouse Theatre Centre (later known as the Vancouver Playhouse Theatre Company, now the Playhouse Theatre Company) in Canada’s centennial year — 1967. Black had been moved by a newspaper story about a murdered Aboriginal woman whose body had been found in an impoverished Vancouver neighborhood. The play Ryga scripted for Black — *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*—premiered on November 23, 1967. The production was a defining moment in the history of Canadian theatre.

The deeply committed cast directed by George Bloomfield included Frances Hyland as Rita Joe and August Schellenberg* as Jaimie Paul. Acclaimed actor Chief Dan George, then Chief of the Tsleil-waututh Nation of Burrard Inlet, played Rita’s father, David Joe. The play won praise from critics for the dramatic force with which it communicated its excoriating anti-establishment message. It was later remounted in Ottawa by The Playhouse Theatre Centre as the National Arts Centre’s inaugural theatre production in June of 1969. A CBC televised version, a French production translated by Gratien Gélinas, and a successful run in Washington, D.C. in 1973 followed. Significant revivals include Alberta Theatre Projects’ in 1978 and Firehall Arts Centre’s 40th anniversary production in Vancouver in 2007.

Veteran theatre critic Jamie Portman has written that *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*’s tremendous success legitimized the idea of Canadian playwriting:

“[Rita Joe] … prompted an awareness of the existence of other plays potentially worthy of production. It provided resounding evidence that it was not necessary for any Canadian theatre to rely solely on imported fare... [as] Canadian plays ceased to be a rarity in English-speaking Canada. Companies dedicated to the production of new Canadian drama sprung up, and in so doing nurtured the further growth of playwriting activity. Canada’s regional theatres—some of them grudgingly—found themselves forced to take the Canadian playwright seriously for the first time.”

*August Schellenberg* will appear in the role of David Joe in this production. Mr. Schellenberg is best known for his roles in the films *Black Robe* (1991) and *Crazy Horse* (1996). He received an Emmy nomination in 2007 for his portrayal of Sitting Bull in the HBO production of *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee.*
Overview of *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* (page 2 of 4)

**Plot**

The play tells the story of Rita Joe, a young Shuswap woman who has left the reserve for the city in search of work, but finds instead that she has embarked on “an odyssey through hell” (in the words of playwright George Ryga) culminating in her rape and murder.6 The interwoven story of Rita’s friend, Jaimie Paul, unfolds in tragic parallel to hers.

The throughline of the action centres on Rita’s repeat appearances in court before an increasingly unsympathetic magistrate. Several witnesses testify against her as she struggles to mount a defense of her character and actions. Other scenes drawn from Rita’s memories of her past and premonitions about her future arise from and often respond to the framing scenes of the trial.

**Setting**

The action takes place in the mid-1960s, the time the play was written. Most scenes occur in urban locations in an unnamed city modeled on Vancouver and include a court of law, a church basement, a jail cell, Jaimie Paul’s rented room, and the streets and alleys of skid row. Rita’s childhood memories are located in the countryside in and around the reserve where she grew up.

**Characters/Themes**

Overtly political in his writing, Ryga explained in the program notes for the the play’s 1969 production that he intended *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* to throw open “the protective shutters of our civilization” and expose to view the desperate circumstances of a “forgotten people...Canadian Indians”.7 The play’s overarching theme — that a cycle of victimization can all too easily arise out of the interaction between a “dominant” culture and a culture that has been systematically rendered dependant and expendable—accomplishes his purpose. Ryga’s drama presents a detailed portrait of an inhumane and destructive social process at work in the life of a young Shuswap woman, Rita Joe.

Ryga uses characters to vividly depict the tragic consequences of the cultural divide separating Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals in this play. Here’s a look at ways of naming selected aspects of the problem Ryga describes through his characters:

- **marginalization:** the process of relegating a person or minority to an unimportant or powerless position within a society or group.

**Rita Joe:** The first time I tried to go home I was picked up by some men who gave me five dollars. An’ then they arrested me.... It wasn’t true what they said, but nobody’d believe me...8

Rita Joe is poor, female and Aboriginal — three factors that work against her being deemed an important or powerful person as defined by the social conventions of her time. Her marginalization works against her voice being credited with any authority by the mainstream, even in terms of accurately describing her own experiences.
Overview of *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* (page 3 of 4)

**Characters/Themes (continued)**

**colonization:**
the process of sending settlers to live in an area in order to establish political control over the area or the people already living there; conversion to Christianity has been a key tool in the subjugation of Aboriginal peoples as a result of European colonization of North and South America.

**Rita Joe:** My uncle was Dan Joe ... He was dyin’ and he said to me, “Long ago the white man come with Bibles to talk to my people, who had the land. They talk for hundred years ... then we had all the Bibles, an’ the white man had our land ...”

**Father Andrew:** We learn through suffering, Rita Joe ... We will only be free if we become humble again ... Will you confess, Rita Joe?

In Rita Joe’s jail-cell conversation with Father Andrew, the Catholic priest who has known her all her life, Ryga references the historical dispossession of Aboriginal peoples in Canada that occurred as a result of British and French colonization.

**assimilation:**
the process of absorption within which a minority culture acquires the characteristics of the majority culture.

**Miss Donahue:** Do you know what a melting pot is? ... You put copper and tin into a melting pot and out comes bronze ... It’s the same with people!

Rita’s teacher represents the role educational institutions played in advancing a national policy of assimilation of Aboriginal people. The symbolic pun in the name Ryga gives her — Don-a-hue = put on a colour, i.e., become white — suggests the ultimate impossibility of this objective.

**infantilization:**
the process of treating a person (or group) like a helpless child (or children), or of projecting a state of childlike dependency onto a person or group.

**Mr. Homer:** [dispensing soup to the YOUNG INDIAN MEN] The do-gooders make something special of the Indian ... There’s nothing special here ... At the Centre here the quick cure is a bowl of stew under the belt and a good night’s sleep.

**Jaimie Paul:** [to YOUNG INDIAN MEN] ... Be men! [pointing after Mr. Homer] He’s got no kids ... We’re his kids an’ he means to keep it that way!

Without addressing the root causes of their failure to thrive in the city, the kind of well-intentioned volunteerism represented by Mr. Homer offers Rita Joe and Jaimie Paul regular handouts but no real hope. Worse, Ryga suggests that the personal fulfillment Mr. Homer derives from this “selfless” work with the impoverished urban Aboriginals gives him a vested interest in perpetuating their dependence on him.
Overview of *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* (page 4 of 4)

Characters/Themes (continued)

**dehumanization:**
the "Indian" as the Other*.

**The Magistrate:** [to Rita Joe as representative of all “Indians”] *You have a mind ... you have a heart. The cities are open to you to come and go as you wish, yet you gravitate to the slums and skid rows and the shanty-town fringes. You become a whore, drunkard, user of narcotics ... At best, dying of illness or malnutrition ... At worst, kicked or beaten to death by some angry white scum who finds in you something lower than himself to pound his frustrations out on! What’s to be done? You Indians seem to be incapable of taking action to help yourselves. Someone must care for you. ... Who? For how long?*

The Magistrate’s final judgment reveals the blindness and unacknowledged racism of the “justice” system he represents. “[With the rambling confidence of detached authority]”, he labels and condemns Rita Joe as a willful deviant as he dismisses her from his courtroom and his conscience.

Other characters include Rita Joe’s father David and younger sister Eileen, who represent the strength that can come from connection to family and heritage; young Aboriginal men and an old Aboriginal woman; a singer who comments on the action on stage as it unfolds; and three groups who represent varying degrees of non-Aboriginal hostility towards Rita Joe — Policemen, Witnesses, and Murderers.

*The Other* is a philosophical term describing a process whereby “another person or group of people ... are defined as different or even sub-human to consolidate a group's identity. For example, the Nazi’s internal cohesion depended in part on how they defined themselves against (strove to maintain distinctions from) their image of the Jews.”

**Style**

*The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* is a stylistic hybrid that combines elements of social realism, expressionism, and poetic drama. The details of Rita Joe and Jaimie Paul’s intense struggle to find a dignified way to make a living in the city are realistically portrayed, as are the shortcomings of the system that fails them. George Bloomfield, the play’s first director, also made films for the National Film Board; the documentary-style aspects of *Rita Joe* may owe something to his involvement with the production.

Other aspects of *Rita Joe* recall the expressionist theatre of the 1920s: its focus on the externalization of the protagonist’s inner turmoil in vivid, often disturbing, confrontations with characters representative of social types; its associative structure that seamlessly connects scenes from the protagonist’s past, present, and future through dream/nightmare logic; and its ultimate condemnation of the forces of complacent conformity that vilify difference and destroy the spirit of the individual.

The lyrical passages in the play — David Joe’s white geese and dragonfly speeches, Rita’s childhood memories of time spent with her sister and father, and her vision of her grandfather/God in the clouded city sky — add the poetic depth and grandeur that make up the third distinct element in this play’s unique combination of styles.
Biography of Playwright George Ryga

Controversial political playwright born in Deep Creek, Alberta, in 1932. Ryga died in Summerland, British Columbia, in 1987. His plays consistently present, in uncompromising terms, a class struggle — the underprivileged versus the privileged, the workers versus the management, the people versus the government.

He was raised, with little education, on a subsistence farm near Athabasca, Alberta, where his parents moved from the Ukraine in the 1920s. The farm bordered on a Cree reserve, and he often worked alongside Native labourers, witnessing the complete demoralization of a people who had nothing left -- not even their language. After leaving school at the age of 13, he did a series of odd jobs, taking correspondence courses in English. One teacher encouraged him to enter a creative writing competition run by the Banff Centre for the Arts. The work he submitted won, and he studied at the school on a scholarship sponsored by the Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire. The following summer, his scholarship was revoked due to an anti-war poem he wrote. He subsequently worked in radio but was forced to resign after he made speeches about the controversial trial and execution of Americans Julius and Ethel Rosenberg as Soviet spies.

In 1955 he traveled in Europe, and followed up an interest in the Scots poet, Robert Burns, whose anti-intellectual bias and use of local idiom appealed to Ryga. After returning to Edmonton, he again worked several jobs, including in radio, while he wrote poetry and prose. In 1962 his first play, Indian, was produced on television. He achieved a degree of national fame with The Ecstasy of Rita Joe (Playhouse Theatre Centre (Vancouver), 1967). This seminal play is regarded by many critics as the first distinctively English-Canadian play because it tackles a Canadian social problem hitherto ignored in the arts: the social degradation of Native peoples.

In most of his plays, Ryga provides explicit social commentary combined with vivid and thrilling theatricality. His other plays include: Grass and Wild Strawberries (1969); Captives of a Faceless Drummer (1971); Sunrise on Sarah (1972); Portrait of Angelica (1973); Seven Hours to Sundown, Ploughmen of the Glacier, and The Last of the Gladiators (adapted from his novel Night Desk (1976)); A Letter to My Son (1981); Two Plays: Paracelsus and Prometheus (1982); and One More for the Road (1985).

In 2004, Okanagan College instituted The George Ryga Award for Social Awareness in Literature, given annually to a British Columbia author who has achieved a high level of social awareness in a book published anywhere in the world.

From Canadian Theatre Encyclopedia, Anne Nothof, Athabasca University
Biography of Director Yvette Nolan

Yvette Nolan has been the Artistic Director of Native Earth Performing Arts (Toronto) since 2003. She is a playwright, dramaturg, and director. In 1996, she was the Aboriginal Writer-in-Residence at Brandon University, where she wrote the first draft of *Annie Mae's Movement*, which was then produced in Whitehorse, Winnipeg, and Halifax. It was produced by Native Earth in 2001 and again in 2006. Her other plays include *Blade, Job's Wife, Video*, the libretto *Hilda Blake* and the radio play *Owen*. Ms. Nolan is the editor of *Beyond the Pale: Dramatic Writing from First Nations Writers and Writers of Colour*. As a dramaturg, Ms. Nolan has worked as the Festival Dramaturg for Saskatchewan Playwrights Centre Spring Festival of New Plays. From 1998 to 2001, Yvette was the president of Playwrights Union of Canada and of Playwrights Canada Press from 2003 to 2005. She was also one of two National Arts Centre’s Playwrights-In-Residence for the 2007/08 season.

Her selected directing credits include: (co-director) *Death of a Chief*, an adaptation by Aboriginal artists of *Julius Caesar* (Native Earth, National Arts Centre), *Tales of An Urban Indian* (Native Earth), *Annie Mae's Movement* (Hardly Art, Native Earth), and *The Triple Truth* (Turtle Gals). In addition to her work with Native Earth, Yvette works with young women writers through Nightwood Theatre's Write From The Hip and Busting Out! programs, and has worked as a mentor for playwrights involved in Diaspora Dialogues. Ms. Nolan has acted as one of the moderators on a panel discussion of The Changing Face of Our Theatre for the Theatre Museum of Canada, and sits on Theatre Ontario’s Professional Theatre Training Program committee. She has been in a leadership role for the Indigenous Performing Arts Alliance, a national arts service organization for Aboriginal performing arts. Ms. Nolan also served on the advisory committee for the study Equity in Canadian Theatre: The Women’s Initiative.

Adapted from information provided on the Theatre Ontario website

http://www.theatreontario.org/content/news_releases2007.htm

About Native Earth Performing Arts

Native Earth Performing Arts (Toronto) is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to the creating, developing and producing of professional artistic expression of the Aboriginal experience in Canada.

Through stage productions (theatre, dance and multi-disciplinary), new script development, apprenticeships and internships, Native Earth seeks to fulfill a community of artistic visions. It is a vision that is inclusive and reflective of the artistic directions of members of the Aboriginal community who actively participate in the arts.

For more detailed information on NEPA, see the Canadian Theatre Encyclopedia entry at
An Interview with Director Yvette Nolan (page 1 of 3)

1. *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* opened the NAC Theatre in 1969. In the four decades between that production and this one, do you see significant or lasting change in the relationship between Aboriginal communities and the dominant culture in Canada? I think in a lot of ways, the relationship has both strengthened and become more volatile. You have to remember that when *Rita Joe* opened, residential schools were still running in Canada. The dominant culture was in no way ready to acknowledge its role in the dis-ease or un-health of Aboriginal people. Since then, Aboriginal communities have started to work for healing, and insisted on visibility, and that can be threatening to a mainstream that is used to being “dominant”, when a certain sector rejects domination.

2. What is it about this play that resonates most strongly for you on a personal level? “When Rita Joe first come to the city, she told me... the cement made her feet hurt.” It’s something my mother and I always said to each other, because it is such an apt metaphor for everything we have lost: the connection to the land, a known and hospitable landscape, community. The city is hard, and it is easy to become lost and desperate, even though you have come from another place because there is no opportunity there.

3. What resources would you recommend to help teachers and students better understand the traditional Native values Rita Joe embodies, especially those that seem to be irreconcilable with the urban setting Ryga depicts? I guess I would ask students to look for what values Rita Joe embodies, and see if they are indeed “traditional” and “Native”, or if they can find those values in their own cultures, families, spiritual practices and communities. Rita Joe is connected to the land, to her family, her sister Eileen for whom she cares, and her father David, who is sick and dying.

4. Is it fair to see the reference to Rita Joe’s “ecstasy” in the play’s title as an overtly ironic allusion to the destructive imposition of Christian ideas and values on the lives of Aboriginal peoples? The designers and I have talked a lot about the term ecstasy and its meaning, starting from the dictionary, which defines it as:

1: The state of being beside oneself with anxiety, astonishment, fear or passion.
2: Any morbid state characterized as unconsciousness, as swoon, trance, catalepsy etc.
3: A nervous state in which the mind is absorbed in a dominant idea, and becomes insensible to surrounding objects.
4: [in mystical writers] The state of rapture in which the soul, liberated from the body, was engaged in the contemplation of divine things.
4 [b] The state of trance supposed to accompany prophetic inspiration.
An Interview with Director Yvette Nolan (page 2 of 3)

By those definitions, the very structure of the play reflects ecstasy; Rita is beside herself with anxiety, astonishment, fear, and passion. The events of her life swirl around her, without boundaries – her childhood, the courtroom, the city. She does contemplate the divine – clouds and light and god in the sky. Near the end, she articulates her vision “it was different where the women were... it’s different to be a woman”.

The idea of ecstasy is not an exclusively Christian one, of course. I like the idea of Rita’s ecstasy moving the whole audience to an understanding – a “prophetic inspiration”.

5. Ryga put the anti-Aboriginal biases of the justice system on trial in this play. What obstacles to legal and social justice for Aboriginal peoples does The Ecstasy of Rita Joe expose? The magistrate’s unswerving belief in the police over the woman is an obvious obstacle to justice. The assumption of negligence on the part of Rita Joe in regards to her child or children prejudices him. His assertion that the “obstacles to your life are ... in your culture” precludes any kind of fair assessment of her reality. His disdain for the very thing she is - the “accent that sounds like you have a mouth full of sawdust” – indicates a profound and unshakeable bias against not just her, but all Aboriginal people whose first language is not that of the colonizer.

6. How do you see Rita Joe’s status as a protagonist — is she a tragic figure, or is the lens of tragedy just another way for the dominant culture to avoid facing its complicity in the deaths of Aboriginal women?
I guess it depends on whether you view tragedy in the original sense, which is to say the character has a tragic flaw – hamartia - and so the tragedy is of her own making. If so, what is Rita’s hamartia? That she is Aboriginal? She does not fit the definition of a tragic hero, because she is not “highly renowned or prosperous” – quite the opposite. She is the poorest of the poor – as so many Aboriginal people are in this country. If you look at the play through the lens of Aboriginal theatrical scholarship, as the story of a community, not a single protagonist, and the community is the Canadian people, then it can be viewed as a tragedy; its fatal flaw is its relationship to that part of itself, its Aboriginal people, and Rita Joe and Jaimie Paul’s deaths are a result of that flaw.

7. What role does gender play in the work?
The weakest are always the most at risk. In the hierarchy of the dominant culture, Native women are at the very bottom, so Rita Joe faces so many challenges. She is victimized by men, the johns, the cops, the murderers. She is seen as a whore right from the start, which puts her at a disadvantage, making it almost impossible to get out of “trouble”. The only other women in the play are the teacher (a tool of the system that is trying to assimilate Aboriginal people), an old woman who connects her to her community, and her sister who could not make it in the city either but safely hitchhiked home. The world for women in Rita Joe is a dangerous place, different than the one she envisions near the end of her life: “it was different where the women were... it’s different to be a woman”.

The Ecstasy of Rita Joe Study Guide – page 10
An Interview with Director Yvette Nolan (page 3 of 3)

8. When *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* made it on to the *Literary Review of Canada*’s list of the Top 100 Canadian books, Malcolm Page described the play’s style as “an unusual blend of realism, lyricism and expressionism.” Will your production preserve Ryga’s blend of styles largely unchanged or adapt certain stylistic elements to reflect your own directorial vision? I think a play has its own internal life, and Ryga’s play is crafted in such a way that it moves. That fluidity of realities and of scenes demands a certain kind of production. It would be foolhardy to try and impose on the piece a style that does not serve the play. Certain things I am changing I think will actually serve Ryga’s vision even more truly than the original production did. For instance, the singer is now an Aboriginal woman, essentially singing the spirit of Rita Joe, rather than commenting on her.

9. What would you want a young audience to take away from their viewing of *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*?

One should always be transformed by theatre. I would hope that the young viewer would develop some understanding of the privilege of the dominant culture, and where he or she stands in that culture. I would hope that seeing *Rita Joe*, the young person would empathize with her, and maybe see Aboriginal people in a new light.
**Rita Joe in Context: Stolen Sisters / Sisters in Spirit** (page 1 of 2)

“Statistically Vancouver has an average of 20 Rita Joes every year, and everything within the play has its foundation in actual happening.”

from director David Gardner’s program notes for the Playhouse Theatre Centre (Vancouver) 1969 remount production of *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*

Four decades have passed since David Gardner wrote these words. What has happened since that time to deconstruct the root causes of discrimination and sexualized violence against Aboriginal women in Canada? Two programs that came into being in response to this problem are Amnesty International’s Stolen Sisters Campaign and the Native Women’s Association of Canada’s Sisters in Spirit initiative.

1. Background Information from Amnesty International’s Stolen Sisters website  

   **How many Sisters do we have to lose?**

   Helen Betty Osborne was a 19-year-old Cree student from northern Manitoba. She dreamed of becoming a teacher. On November 12, 1971, four white men abducted her from the streets of The Pas. She was sexually assaulted and brutally murdered. A judge said later: “... the men who abducted Osborne believed that young Aboriginal women were objects with no human value beyond sexual gratification ... Betty Osborne would be alive today had she not been an Aboriginal woman.”

   The murder of Helen Betty Osborne — and her family’s long search for justice — is one of the nine stories of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls told in *Stolen Sisters: Discrimination and Violence against Indigenous Women in Canada*, a report by Amnesty International.

   These stories represent just part of the terror and suffering that has been inflicted on Indigenous or Aboriginal women and their families across Canada.

   This violence can be stopped. But only if Canadian officials take concerted action to protect the lives of First Nations, Inuit and Métis women and girls.

   On March 25, 2003 — three decades after the murder of Helen Betty Osborne — her 16-year-old cousin, Felicia Solomon, went missing in Winnipeg. The first posters seeking information on her disappearance were distributed by her family, not the police. Parts of her body were found three months later.

   **Lives at risk**

   According to a Canadian government statistic, young Indigenous women are five times more likely than other women of the same age to die as the result of violence.

   Indigenous women have long struggled to draw attention to violence within their own families and communities. Canadian police and public officials have also long been aware of a pattern of racist violence against Indigenous women in Canadian cities — but have done little to prevent it.
**Rita Joe in Context: Stolen Sisters / Sisters in Spirit** (page 2 of 2)

**The pattern looks like this:**

- Racist and sexist stereotypes deny the dignity and worth of Indigenous women, encouraging some men to feel they can get away with acts of hatred against them.
- Decades of government policy have impoverished and broken apart Indigenous families and communities, leaving many Indigenous women and girls extremely vulnerable to exploitation and attack.
- Many police forces have failed to institute necessary measures – such as training, protocols and accountability mechanisms – to ensure that officers understand and respect the Indigenous communities they serve. Without such measures, police too often fail to do all they can to ensure the safety of Indigenous women and girls whose lives are in danger.

*To read a 19-page summary of this report, go to [http://www.amnesty.ca/campaigns/resources/amr2000304_summary.pdf](http://www.amnesty.ca/campaigns/resources/amr2000304_summary.pdf)

To read Amnesty International’s “Six Ways to stop violence against Indigenous women,” go to [http://www.amnesty.ca/take_action/actions/canada_stolen_sisters_6ways.php](http://www.amnesty.ca/take_action/actions/canada_stolen_sisters_6ways.php)

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The Native Women’s Association of Canada (NWAC) launched the national Sisters in Spirit (SIS) campaign in March 2004. Its primary goal is to conduct research and raise public awareness of the alarmingly high rates of violence against Aboriginal women in Canada.

There is a need for Sisters in Spirit because we are in an urgent state of affairs with regards to the safety of Indigenous women in Canada. Although Indigenous women represent only three percent of the Canadian population, they are over represented as victims of racialized, sexualized violence. Indigenous women are victimized because of their gender and their Indigenous identity. They are not respected because they live on reserves or are part of an Indigenous community. Sadly, many Indigenous women are seen as less than human or not as human beings at all.

The current status of Aboriginal women can be traced back to several historical realities:

- Until 1985, marrying a non-Indigenous person resulted in Indigenous women losing their status as “Indian”, as well as their right to live on reserve and their ability to access other programs and services.
- Thousands of women were forced off reserves and suffered cultural isolation.
- The legacy of the residential school system resulted in a cycle of trauma and abuse that has impacted multiple generations of Indigenous women and men.
- Government policies in the 1960s allowed the removal of Indigenous children from their communities and placed them in non-Indigenous homes. This resulted in the break-up of families, loss of cultural identity, and in many cases, trauma and abuse.
Focus Questions for Post-Show Discussion (page 1 of 2)

1. Considering the Set Design
In his notes for the premiere production of The Ecstasy of Rita Joe, playwright George Ryga called for the following minimal elements in the set:

- a circular ramp that began at floor level stage left and continued downward below floor level at the front of the stage before rising and sweeping along the back at an elevation of two feet;
- a magistrate’s chair and court desk with a small attached platform for the singer enclosed within the sweep of the ramp stage right;
- two cycloramas, one to suggest mountains and one the maze-like confusion of a cityscape.

Before seeing the Western Canada Theatre / National Arts Centre coproduction, take a few minutes to consider these questions: What possible symbolic value can you find in each of these elements? How do they work to reinforce the action and theme of the play?

In post-show discussions, revisit the issue of set design. How faithful is Phillip Tidd’s set design to Ryga’s original plan? How would you describe the distinctive vision the design elements in this production convey?

2. Is Ryga Still Relevant?
In a review of the 2007 production of The Ecstasy of Rita Joe (Firehall Arts Centre), critic Colin Thomas had this to say:

“Ryga’s analysis doesn’t speak strongly to the present…. The play’s Native characters lack understanding and agency ... so they are lost in victimization, unable to take responsibility for their own lives.”

In post-show discussion, evaluate Thomas’ criticism of the play’s portrayal of First Nations characters. Do you agree or disagree that Ryga’s presentation of First Nations’ characters is dated? What specific scenes in the play would you offer as evidence in support of your point of view?
Focus Questions for Post-Show Discussion (page 2 of 2)

3. The Role of the Singer
Ryga envisioned a rather distanced, Brechtian* quality to the role of the Singer in the original production:
The Singer sits [on a small platform adjacent to the Magistrate’s chair], turned away from the focus of the play. Her songs and accompaniment appear almost accidental. She has all the reactions of a white liberal folklorist with a limited concern and understanding of an ethnic dilemma which she touches in the course of her research and work in compiling and writing folk songs. She serves too as an alter ego to Rita Joe.

Non-Aboriginal folk singer Ann Mortifee played the Singer in the original production; in this production director Yvette Nolan has cast Aboriginal performer Michelle St. John.

In post-show discussion, consider the role of the Singer. How do music and song function in the production? Does the Singer provide distancing commentary on the action or an engaging expression of the inner life of the main character? What specific moments benefited most from the addition of music and song?

*Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) German dramatist and poet best known as the developer of “epic theater” in which narrative, montage, self-contained scenes, and rational argument were used to create a shock of realization in the spectator. Brecht strove to give the audience a more objective perspective on the action by promoting a style of acting and staging that created a distancing effect. Songs played an important part. Adapted from The Free Dictionary by Farlex.
http://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/Bertolt+Brecht

4. The Power to Name
The Preface to this study guide briefly sets out the controversy over the use of the word “Indian”.

In post-show discussion, consider the power words have in the play and in the world. How does the naming of Rita Joe’s person and actions by the non-Aboriginal characters compare to her own sense of who she is and what she does? What is suggested by the stark contrast between the Magistrate’s way of speaking and David Joe’s?

For the classroom: Compile several of the brief speeches of the Magistrate and David Joe into separate “monologues” and do a comparative analysis in terms of their style. What do the differences in content, diction, pacing, sentence structure, imagery, etc. suggest about the values of each character and the culture he represents?
Theatre Etiquette

Please take a moment to prepare the students for their visit to the National Arts Centre to explain what good Theatre Etiquette is, and why it will enhance the enjoyment of the play by all audience members.

1. *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* will be performed in the Theatre of the NAC. Matinées at the NAC are for students and the general public. It is important for everyone to be quiet (no talking or rustling of materials) during the performance, so that others do not lose their immersion in the “world of the play”. Do not unwrap candy, or play with zippers, or your programme. Unlike actors in movies, the actors in live theatre can hear disturbances in the audience, and will give their best performance when they feel the positive involvement of the audience members. The appropriate way of showing approval for the actors’ performances is through laughter and applause. For the enjoyment of all, people who disturb others during the show may be asked to leave the Theatre.

2. Do not put your feet on the back of the seat in front of you. If someone needs to pass you in the row, it is courteous to stand and allow that person to pass you. Do not climb over seats. Avoid wearing scented products such as perfume or cologne or aftershave, as many people are sensitive or even allergic to these.

3. If you plan to make notes on the play for the purpose of writing a review, please do not try to write them during the performance. Seeing you do this can be distracting for the actors. Wait until intermission or after the performance is finished to write your reflections, please.

4. It is important that there be no electronic devices used in the Theatre so that the atmosphere of the play is not interrupted and others are not disturbed. **Cell phones, pagers, and anything that beeps must be turned off.** Cameras and all other recording devices are not permitted in the Theatre.

5. Tickets with assigned seats will be distributed by your teacher, and to avoid problems it is important to sit in your own assigned seat. In the Theatre all even-numbered seats are on one side and all odd-numbered seats are on the other. This means, for example, that seats 10 and 12 are actually beside each other.

6. Programmes may or may not be distributed at this student matinée. Information on the artists who put this play together, however, can be found in this Study Guide for those who wish to use it in writing a review. Some programmes can be made available to teachers if desired as a teaching aid, to show how a programme is put together.

7. The running length of the play is currently estimated at 2 hours including one 15-minute intermission. It is advisable to make a trip to the washroom before the performance starts, as anyone leaving while the play is in progress runs the risk of not being allowed back into the Theatre.
Endnotes


Photo from 1967 Playhouse Theatre Centre (Vancouver) premiere production

L-R: Henry Ramer, August Schellenberg, Frances Hyland, George Bloomfield (director), George Ryga (playwright)
Costume Drawing for 2009 WCT/NAC coproduction

“Rita Joe”
Designer: Catherine Hahn
Costume Drawing for 2009 WCT/NAC coproduction

“David Joe”
Designer: Catherine Hahn
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