

## Unique voice, powerful native theatre

The Peterborough Examiner · 13 Oct 2009 · Bea Quarrie



Cast from left, Gloria May Eshkibok, Nicole Joy-Fraser, Cherish Violet Blood, Patti Shaughnessy, Reneltta Arluk, Pamela Matthews and Susan Newman during a scene for the *Rez Sisters* production at Market Hall Theatre Saturday night. *CLIFFORD SKARSTEDT Examiner*

In 1987, Tomson Highway's *The Rez Sisters* put native theatre on the map for many Canadians. Saturday night, local thespians Patti Shaughnessy and Bill Kimball brought this seminal piece to Market Hall through O'Kaa-denigan Wiingashk and Public Energy.

Playing to a packed house, this current production features local talent as well as some native performers from all over the country.

*Rez Sisters* is a connected series of vignettes that give us a glimpse into women's lives on a reserve.

Irreverent and raucous, it chronicles the events that lead up to the women venturing off to Toronto for a Gigantic Bingo where they hope to win the prize and be set free from their troubled existence.

Each of the "sisters" has a dream. Veronique (Susan Newman) dreams of finally getting a stove that has all the bells and whistles.

Pelajia (Pamela Matthews) hopes she can stop having to work at roofing and other heavy duty jobs while her sister Philomena (Gloria May Eshkibok) fantasizes about having the whitest toilet this side of Espanola.

Annie Cook (Cherish Violet Blood) admits she just wants to find a man, while Marie-Adele Starblanket (Patti Shaughnessy) dreams of keeping her family of 14 children together after her imminent death from cancer.

Zhaboonigan Peterson (Reneltta Arluk) has big dreams too, wishing people did not make fun of her because she is "different".

All these women bear huge burdens of family responsibilities, broken homes and relationships, prejudice from the outside world and the consequences of negligence and irresponsibility of their own male leadership.

Highway's characters give an authentic voice to the plight of the ignored and neglected aboriginal women.

The figure of Nanabush (James Whetung) ties together the fate of these women with this sometimes menacing, sometimes comical allegorical character.

Visually, this production's set and costume design rises to another level with inspiration drawn from Norval Morisseau's unique works.

Choreography by Bill James adds greatly to the rhythm of the piece. Susan Spicer's direction keeps the flow of action at a frantic pace sometimes sacrificing clarity.

This may have been partially due to opening night jitters, but sometimes the characters speak too fast and there is a lot of information for the audience to absorb first so the somewhat convoluted relationships can be understood.

The pointing of ends of scenes aside, the ensemble filled the Market Hall auditorium with such gusto and commitment that it is a joy to watch their antics.

There is no mistaking Gloria May Eshkibok's intentions, however.

She is clear, her performance filled with gusto and kickapoo juice. She is spunky and her timing is acute.

Reneltha Arluk's seamless portrayal of an emotionally disturbed young woman is engrossing, heartbreaking and evanescent.

She glows with an ethereal presence, something that James Whetung's Nanabush could aspire to. There is a seriousness to this event that must be addressed.

Eurocentric theatre is not a medium that is natural to native cultures.

Theirs is a storytelling culture, so when Tomson Highway makes this elusive art form speak to audiences the way that this production speaks to Peterborough and beyond, it must be noted as important.

It enriches everyone's understanding of the very basic human need for compassion in the daily struggles that are common to us all no matter what our backgrounds.

*Rez Sisters* speaks in a unique voice, one that must be paid attention to.

*Rez Sisters* continues at Market Hall, 336 George St. N., from Thursday to Saturday at 8 p.m. Tickets can be purchased through the Showplace Peterborough box office by calling 7427469. Tickets cost \$25 adult, \$22 for groups of eight or more; \$17 senior/student.