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An Analysis of Hanay Geiogamah's Contributions to Native American Ritual Drama

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An Analysis of Hanay Geiogamah's Contributions to Native American Ritual Drama

Abstract

The purpose of this research paper was to recognize Hanay Geiogamah's contributions to Native American ritual drama and how Geiogamah and his Native American drama incorporates the culture and rituals of Native Americans in the theatrical environment.

Hanay Geiogamah has a purpose in his plays to present and preserve living Indian traditions and to reveal the facts of Indian life in America today (Huntsman, "New" xi). This study refers to two plays written by Hanay Geiogamah: "Body Indian" and "49." In "Body Indian" Geiogamah explores dramatically the stereotypes that Euro-American society has established of the Native American as true and typical. "49" looks at the ritual and cultural aspects of Native American life.

Geiogamah represents the true Native American through the content of his plays and gives a true depiction of the Native American to his Native American audience. This research focused on the relationship between performance and ritualization, making art, play, shamanism, rites, and ceremonies.

Through studying Hanay Geiogamah and Native American ritual drama, we are more aware of the contributions each has made to twentieth century theatre. Furthermore, we are able to see the need to continue this cultural and historical theatre in our Euro-American society.

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Research Paper

June 11, 1998

**By
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Master of Arts Degree: Theatre

Research Paper

Monica L. Franzen

Research Committee

First Reader: 
Leonard Curtis, Chair of Committee

Second Reader: 
Gretta Berghammer

Department Head: 
Gretta Berghammer

Hanay Geiogamah, the first Native American to publish a collection of Native American plays about ritual drama, incorporates within his works the culture and rituals of many Native American tribes and the relationship they have with twentieth century theatre. Hanay Geiogamah, from the Kiowa tribe, is a playwright, director, and producer of Native American Theatre. He also formed the Native American Theatre Ensemble (NATE) in 1972, which was originally American Indian Theatre Ensemble. In addition, Geiogamah has served as artistic director of several theater organizations, including the Native American Theater Ensemble (NATE), Native Americans in Arts, and the American Indian Dance Theater (Author Unknown, Native 1-2).

Hanay Geiogamah was born in Lawton, Oklahoma in 1945. He studied journalism at the University of Oklahoma and earned a B.A. degree in theater and drama from the University of Indiana in 1980. He has taught at Colorado College, the University of Washington and the University of California at Los Angeles. In 1963, Geiogamah received the Charles Macmahon Foundation Scholarship in Journalism and in 1966-67, he received the William Randolph Hearst National Writing Award (Author Unknown, Native 1).

Geiogamah's plays include humor, reality, and stereotypical language that express native American feelings and reactions to the burdens contemporary American society places on them. Geiogamah presents characters through his

personal knowledge and places them in conditions that are socially and politically controlled by our environment today. Geiogamah's plays address the facts and historical happenings of Native Americans in a way that can be laughed at, looked at, and then taken seriously. It is as if he writes to make people aware, by first breaking the tension of Native American stereotypes, through humor, music, and dance. Then he very directly says that the stereotyping was a problem and still is a problem, and now that you have had your laugh, it is to be taken seriously!

The purpose of studying Hanay Geiogamah and Native American ritual drama is to note the contributions each has made to twentieth century theatre and how Geiogamah and his Native American drama incorporates the culture and rituals of Native Americans in the theatrical environment. In order to more fully understand Geiogamah's work, and its importance to twentieth century theatre, this study presents background historical information which will be used to develop a descriptive understanding of the playwright and two of his plays: Body Indian and 49.

It is important to demonstrate the purpose of Hanay Geiogamah's plays, which Jeffrey Huntsman has stated is to present and preserve living Indian traditions and, to reveal the facts of Indian life in America today (Huntsman, New xi). Geiogamah's style is very different from that of many other modern Native American playwrights, who focus on mainstreaming the Native Americans into

the Euro-American lifestyle. Through the use of his plays and the stories he tells, Geiogamah is direct in his exposition and description of the Native American lifestyles and characteristics. Murder, exploitation, misappropriation, and prejudice are represented in these plays (Huntsman, New xi). Geiogamah's intent is to present Native Americans to Native Americans in ways that are vivid and compelling and free from stereotypes of Native Americans (Huntsman, New ix). The intent seems to be to make stereotypes and injustices larger than life; to point out the absurdity of these accepted activities. Huntsman classifies Geiogamah's plays as "new art". However, the substance of the plays is ancient and essential to the theatrical contribution (Huntsman, New ix). It is Geiogamah's intent and much anticipated desire that the people of his plays will be able to regain their lives in a way that is true and symbolic to their heritage.

In order to note the contributions that Hanay Geiogamah has made to twentieth century theatre, this study refers to two plays written by Hanay Geiogamah: Body Indian and 49. The two plays will be analyzed and reviewed to compare and contrast Geiogamah's different writing styles. Using these plays, an art form both ancient and modern is examined through the analysis of the scripts, journal articles, and historical notes.

In Body Indian Geiogamah explores dramatically the stereotypes that Euro-American society has established of the Native American as true and typical. Geiogamah defends those stereotypes as unjust, misinterpreted, and

preconceived. 49 looks at the ritual and cultural aspects of Native American life. The play 49 depicts traditional dance, music, costume, and celebration. While both plays focus on the traditions and cultural aspects of Native Americans, each is distinct in presenting different perspectives to Native American lifestyles. In Body Indian, Geiogamah writes about Native American life and its symbolism, as well as stereotypes that exist in the Non-Native American community. 49 is Geiogamah's depiction of how the Native American people come together to rejoice in and celebrate who they are and their heritage.

Geiogamah represents the true Native American through the content of his plays and gives a true depiction of the Native American to his Native American audience. The characters in Geiogamah's plays are his neighbors, family, and friends with whom he grew up and with whom he experienced life. They are people who have been victims of injustices of the dominant Anglo society. They are people who have been forced to live in ways they were against and without choice. His plays allow for self-expression but also send a message to the community: stand up, recognize yourself and the conditions around you, and act on them. At the same time, Geiogamah alerts Euro-American society that what they believe to be factual may be only fictional ideas.

Native American language, cultural beliefs and heritage are important contributors to Native American theatre as represented in works of Hanay Geiogamah. The relationship between Kiowa cultural beliefs and values, dance

and song, art and folklore, sacred myths of creation and cosmic power, noncremonial stories and legends are the heritage and the source of dignity and pride that many Kiowa elders realize need to be preserved in a permanent record (Boyd, vol. 1 xvii & Boyd, Vol. 2 xxv).

The Kiowas have a very, very rich sense of humor, very complete, very satirical, very scatological, very screwball, loony, and yet somehow controlled. You go around Kiowas, like you go to our fair, and you get around a bunch of Kiowas, and they're always laughing, always laughing. - Hanay Geiogamah in an interview in Melus, Fall 1989-90.

Hanay's description of the Kiowa can be seen in two of his plays, Body Indian and 49, which will be examined later in this analysis. The buffalo dances are distinctive of the Kiowa. This type of dance is referred to in Geiogamah's play, 49 and is part of the traditional celebration "49".

The Kiowa Indians of southwestern Oklahoma were one of the tribes known as Plains-type tribes. These people were part of the buffalo culture. The Kiowa seem to be portrayed as a fighting, buffalo-hunting group of people. The Kiowa women made their homes, clothing, food, and supplies. The Kiowa men had special skills in weapon-making, tool-making, painting, and ceremonial things. The Kiowa women gathered herbs, vegetables, and fruit. The Kiowa children watched, listened, and learned (Author Unknown, Kiowa 1).

Native American Theatre focuses on origins and history; literature; personnel; relationship to the theatres of the homelands and of mainstream

America; social, cultural, and political roles in American ethnic communities; and the status of current research about them (Schwartz Seller 15).

My study focuses on the relationship between performance and ritualization, making art, play, shamanism, rites, and ceremonies, which are represented in two of Hanay Geiogamah's plays: Body Indian and 49. Based on my research while reading other Native American playwrights, I have concluded that Geiogamah represents the true historical, cultural, and ritual values in his plays. Ritual dance represents Native American values and historical experiences. Music and dance combined with culture, language, spirituality, and artistic expression are elements of Native American identity. Native Americans express a means of surviving culturally and an expression of that survival is through dance (Heth ix). This expression of dance is referred to in the play 49.

"Native American" is a descriptive term used in formal and legal contexts for the indigenous people of North America. It is the preferred term most commonly used to define people formerly called indigenous and includes members of such tribes as Kiowa and Delaware. Native American people referred to in the context of this study are the indigenous people of North America. Kiowa/Delaware are the Plains people or the people originating in the Plains area.

Ritual drama includes participant involvement through observances, rites, and ceremonies (Huntsman 356). It can be sociological through personal, collective, or institutional practice and sanctioned by the people, by an official

body (governing council), or by societies or clans (Huntsman 357). It may be psychological with intense respect and unwillingness to alter or question the intent. Also, the presentation may be structured as personal meditation, addressing others, or a dramatic event, and include elements such as dance, song, or impersonation of gods (Huntsman 358).

Shamanism is the oldest technique of Native American theatrical performance and constitutes a fundamental type of religious practice among Native Americans. It is an out-of-body journey to the spirits, especially those of the dead (Huntsman 367). The Shaman power is for curing and drawing on the spirit directly. Out-of-body journey is the contact with spirits for religious and ethical purposes usually for curing or divination (the art of telling the future) (Huntsman 368). Shamanism techniques are singing, dancing, chanting, costuming, and storytelling. Transformation into other beings or struggle among beings represents the shamanistic journey (Schechner 123).

There are as many Native American dramas as there are cultures in the different Native American tribes. The dramas are distinguished by languages, material and economic cultures, religions, sociological and geographical relationships.

The first play examined is Body Indian, a play in five scenes, which was first produced in New York City in 1972. The play focuses on issues of alcoholism, poverty, unemployment, no financial support from the government; no

state welfare, and the stereotype of Native Americans being deceitful. The characters in Body Indian are members of different tribes. As mentioned earlier, Hanay Geiogamah writes for all Native Americans and he purposefully draws on many cultures for the music as well as traditions - "Ute, Caddo, Salish, Navajo, Taos, Apache," and others (Huntsman, New xxiii). It is logical to assume that these same cultures are represented in Body Indian.

The main character, Bobby, a cripple in his mid-thirties, suffers from alcoholism and is determined to solve his disease by admitting himself into a rehabilitation program for alcoholics. Rather than take assistance from the government to pay for his treatment program, he accepts his responsibility to pay the fee. Other characters in the play, friends and relatives of Bobby, are concerned with getting booze to keep drinking and assume Bobby will join in on the plan.

Within the play, each scene signifies different stages of the development of the plot and the regression of the lives of the characters. The first scene introduces the relationships between the characters and the actions they use to define who they are. The second scene shows the men and the use of alcohol as an escape from misery and inappropriate behavior. The third scene is about the women and their drinking as a way to gain support from each other to outweigh their life of not enough money, too many children, and inadequate

labor opportunities. The fourth scene is dominated by the youth with their carefree and energetic outlook on life, even though their situation is similar to that of their parents. The final scene brings together all the characters and their hopelessness, desperation, immoral actions, and shallow attempts at getting ahead. When they are out of the money that they stole from Bobby, they take Bobby's artificial leg to pawn for more money to buy more booze. The vicious circle comes to an end when Bobby wakes up and realizes that his money and leg are both gone. Geiogamah indicates by a flashback sequence the time when Bobby sees the train that is fast approaching him and ultimately causes him to lose his leg.

At a crucial point, when Bobby passes out, his "friends" and relatives search him to try and find money to buy more booze. The money his friends take is the money Bobby intended to use for his treatment. The depiction of desperation and deceit is represented by the unloyal actions of Bobby's friends. The play shows that Bobby is not the stereotypical Native American. Instead, he is a man who is willing to admit his shortcomings and take action to improve his situation.

At first analysis, the play seems to focus on the stress that modern society puts on Native Americans and the vices (alcohol) that they resort to as an out or solution to their problems. However, with further analysis, there seems to be a message about how Native American people abuse, degrade, and inhibit each

other. Body Indian depicts the characters as heartless and selfish. I believe this is Geiogamah's way of representing the Euro-American through Bobby's friends and relatives. Geiogamah seems to say that we are laughing at this situation and making light of it, nevertheless, this is the way the Euro-Americans really treated Native Americans; cold and cruelly. This message by Geiogamah is a way for Native Americans to express their feelings and retaliate indirectly towards Americans as their only means of showing how they truly feel.

Each scene ends with the sound of a train. First there is the rumble, then the whistle, followed by bright lights. The train sounds are mixed with drums and rattles. The reoccurring sounds of the approaching train at the end of each scene is a time for each character to freeze and ponder the situation and their actions. Clearly the message Geiogamah is conveying speaks of the way Native American people need to stick together to work through problems and difficulties and not turn on the ones that are part of your heritage and suffer from the same injustices.

The second play, 49, was first produced in 1975 at Oklahoma City University. Huntsman describes the play, 49 as the most "traditionally Native American" of Geiogamah's works (Huntsman, New xx). Huntsman's viewpoint is due to the inclusive traditional music, dance, movement, mime, songs, whistles, flutes, bells, and drums. "49" is a Native American celebration which has a specific formation, pattern and time. It commences after formal activities of the

powwow, Indian fair, or tribal celebration. It is a time to gather for a night of singing, dancing, and conversation with much drinking and sex. "49" is a time for meeting and enjoyment as a way to renew strength and identity. The celebration, "49" begins at midnight and continues until sunrise or after. More young people than old participate.

The setting for 49 is a ceremonial ground circa in the present which is the same ground circa from 1885. There is a traditional timetable for a "49" celebration: at midnight there is a gradual formation; 1 A.M. - singing and dancing; 2 A.M. - the singing and dancing intensifies, fringe activities begin; 3 A.M. - singing becomes very strong, dancing drops off, fringe activities are at a climactic point, traffic jams begin and police raids; 4 A.M. - singing at irregular intervals, fighting, police threats; 5 A.M. - singing stops, groups disperse, cars leave; 6 A.M. - sunup, some stragglers, diehards begin to depart (Geiogamah, New 87).

Night Walker is the spiritual leader (a traditional Kiowa holy man). He talks to his people about the spirits of the dead and the spirits to be born which are his ancestors and future generations (Huntsman, New xx). These spirits are the basis of how their nation will survive. Change must take place in order for their people to survive. Night Walker tells his people that they must remain strong and show the white man that they have a purpose, "a time of

understanding when a man will not hurt a man by killing his way of living” (Geiogamah, 49 132).

In the play, 49, the police patrol the area and wait to put youth in jail. A patrol officer firmly orders, “All right, people, let’s break it up! Let’s go! Let’s get these cars outa here. Ever one of you drivin’ one of these cars get out your driver’s license. Come on! Let’s go! Ever’body else get out your I.D. Let’s go” (Geiogamah, 49 128). Other characters in the play are referred to as singing man, weaving woman, boy, girl, and all others. Reference to the music is described as drumbeats, flutes, bells, rattles, with fans and feathers as special dress. The woven blanket is a symbolic part of the celebration as well as nonverbal signals during the event. The control factor of the police is parallel to the control the white man has had over the Native American. A patrol officer states, “Don’t let any of ‘em through, not a car. We’ll bottle ever damned one of ‘em up in there” (Geiogamah, 49 125). It is control that must be overcome by the Native American people. The Native Americans must build pride and believe in who they are, keeping alive the sacredness of their ancestors and renewing that spirit for the next generation.

Over thirty years ago, the development of Native American theatre started in the United States. During this period of time, theatre companies have been founded and closed. There are many reasons why the few who have pursued

the goal of Native American theatre have been forced to disband (Geiogamah, "Indian" 12).

Prior to the upheavals dealing with Native Americans and their rights as human beings in the 1960s and '70s, there was very little known about Native American drama. Native American drama was basically nonexistent in theatres and usually not even a consideration in the production process. Before the 1960s, theatre incorporating Native American drama was not a consideration in the United States (Geiogamah, "Indian" 12).

A distinct change occurred in Native American drama in the 1960s and '70s. What was formerly known as "Indian" theatre became dedicated to developing not just plays, but Native American theatre companies. Also, Native American drama was developed not just for Kiowa, but for other tribes, in other parts of the country, as well as non-Native American audiences. What had once been the theatrical product of an individual tribe became a movement dedicated to the interests of Native American issues, multi-tribal cooperation, and, perhaps the highest priority, an instrument with which to enter into a dialogue focused on Native American culture with the outside world (Geiogamah, "Indian" 13). In order to achieve this sense of growth, progress and contact with the wider contemporary American theatre audience, there was a need for a social and political revolution among Native American artists.

During the 1970s there was a series of realistic Native American plays written by Native Americans, addressing Native American issues, and intended for a primarily Native American audience (Geiogamah, "Indian" 13). This emergence encouraged Native Americans to define their own identities and offer accurate reflections of contemporary Native American life (Geiogamah, "Indian" 13). For example, in the 1970s, a Kiowa Indian writer, N. Scott Momaday was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his Novel House Made of Dawn. This novel eventually was made into a film version starring Larry Littlebird; director, painter, and graphic artist. The emergence of contemporary Native American authors; including playwrights, novelists, and poets began to grow in the 70s. Even today there is still a rarity of works available and the need for more from the Native American perspective.

There was limited financial resources in the seventies to help Native American theatres survive. This was and continues to be, the major roadblock for Native American playwrights, actors, and theatre companies. Production concepts and skills as well as marketing techniques were limited because of the lack of financial support for experimentation and implementation. Euro-American society did not provide the much needed help or interest for a successful Native American theatre movement to survive (Geiogamah, "Indian" 13).

In order to re-establish and continue Native American theatre, young

Native Americans must be trained in all aspects of theatre. They must learn its history, technical aspects, acting, speech and movement (Geiogamah, "Indian" 12). The young Native American must examine Native American culture and transpose that into the theatrical environment, while interpreting for the contemporary audience those unique aspects of ritual drama. Therefore, Hanay Geiogamah is the role model that young Native Americans should look to for inspiration and support. Before the plays of Geiogamah, there were no true theatrical representations of the Native American culture in North America. Through Geiogamah's work we can share in the experiences collectively and observe the importance of the rhythms of the singer, dancer, and in the costumes. It is important that his works be used to further Native American Theatre in the United States.

Today, there is also a need for the Native American community to stay on top of the changing demands of contemporary theatre. The new generation of writers will need to develop a business sense and public relations skills. The Native American playwrights of this decade must know every aspect of the theatre to prosper (Geiogamah, "Indian" 13).

The first step is to create good plays. Secondly, there is a need for more Native American actors, directors, designers, technical personnel, administrators, and producers. Without this important criteria, there will be no Native American theatre.

The poetic verse and traditional tales seem most preferred by most Native American playwrights. In addition, Native American fictional stories and legends are rising to the surface as dominant genres. Possibly this is due to innovating a traditional concept into a contemporary non-Native American world. Each playwright, director, poet, novelist, actor, and technician needs to continue to deal with the dichotomies that surround the Native American in the non-Native American world.

Native American authors need to keep writing, no matter what the difficulties they may encounter. Their thoughts, memories, desires, and dreams are the truths that the American public must allow to be shared. The feelings and emotions in the minds and hearts of Native Americans are best told by Native Americans themselves. It is a major part of America's history. We owe it to ourselves to listen, observe, and indulge in the spirit of the Native American and their heritage.

Through studying Hanay Geiogamah and Native American ritual drama, we are more aware of the contributions each has made to twentieth century theatre. Furthermore, we are able to see the need to continue this cultural and historical theatre in our Euro-American society. As Hanay Geiogamah said in his article, "Indian Theatre in the United States", "Wonderful artistic traditions were developed and nurtured in the past, when the tribes and their artists all lived and

worked together in the community. I know it can be like that in the future”
(Geiogamah, “Indian” 14).

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APPENDIX

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