Drew Hayden Taylor: A contemporary storyteller (transcript)
September 2020

SMB

So I'm Sam, I'm here with Drew Hayden Taylor. We're in the Brodie Library. Would you like to introduce yourself a little bit?

DHT

Uh, I'm Drew Hayden Taylor and I am what you might call a contemporary storyteller

SMB

Ok. Just for people who are maybe unfamiliar with you a little bit, do you wanna extrapolate what you mean by contemporary storyteller?

DHT

In the 21 century there's so many different ways of telling a story. It used to be uh, storytelling was done orally and around a campfire or kitchen table and then theatre was invented, print, television, radio, movies.. So many different ways of telling a story these days. And in fact, umm, I understand a lot of contemporary video games have long in detail narratives in them too so when I say contemporary storyteller, I mean somebody who tells stories in a variety of different ways, contemporary ways. So, I write plays, I write novels, television shows, documentaries. I did a graphic novel. I do creative non-fiction and so on, so on, and so on.

SMB

And uh, you're in Thunder Bay right now for a play that's playing at Magnus Theatre. Cottagers

and Indians?

DHT

That’s correct.

SMB

Do you want to share a little bit about what the play is about?

DHT

Well the play is basically an exploration of the conflict between native and non-native populations and it’s a contemporary play but it’s dealing with issues that have been around ever since contact. So it’s about a native man, Arthur Copper who basically spent the last 10-15 years soiling the lakes around his reserve with wild rice which use to be there a long time ago but died off due to interference in the waterways, the raising of the water levels or the boat traffic on the water levels, or pollution with in the water. And he is trying to reestablish them in the local lakes as a form of food sovereignty as a way of fighting diabetes but the problem is when wild rice grows, it grows about 2 feet above the water line and it inhibits boat traffic, swimming, fishing and can bring down property values so a lot of the local white cottagers and permanent residents are not that enthusiastic about it and go about trying to stop Arthur Copper from achieving his goal. So uh, that's basically what the story’s about.

SMB

That’s cool. I didn’t realize that he’d been doing that for 10-15 years.

DHT

The real gentleman on whom the play's based on, James Wheaton had been doing it for 20 years.

SMB

I'm curious, how like, between when he's first started it to when it escalated into a court conflict, how long did that take? Cuz when I was watching the play last night I was thinking that it happened within a year.

DHT

In the context of this, yes it did. In the context of the play but he's been doing it for a while and depending on the lake because some of the lakes are quite isolated. On some of the lakes, it didn't really matter and other lakes are major through fairs because for the sake of this play and the reality behind it, the events that are depicted in here happened on Pigeon Lake within the play it's called Starling Lake but it happened in Pigeon Lake and that is where the real life Maureen Pool lived who's actually a man named Woods and uh he'd been doing it for a while but he'd been doing it sort of in places that may have annoyed some people but it wasn't that much of a problem but Pigeon Lake, he was just covering it and there's a lot of affluent white people there. It's sort of a well known fact that a cottage on lakefront property within 3 hours of Toronto can be as expensive as a house in downtown Toronto. So these are wealthy ie, powerful people who are being inconvenienced. So um, this issue began to arise about 7, 8 years ago and has been an ongoing thing. Now I just encapsulized it into one year but it's been an ongoing thing.

SMB

OK, ok, that's yeah. Um, I mean it makes sense that it would be a conflict going on for a much longer time. Um, we were chatting earlier about how you've done runs of this play four times now? Like here in Thunder Bay, Toronto, and…

DHT

Twice in Toronto and this production started off before Christmas in Ottawa and then uh going back one of the two productions, the second production in Toronto they did a small tour of the Golden Horseshoe to sort of show it for one of 2 nights in Toboko, Burlington, um Kingston, places like that. And after it leaves here, it's going to New Brunswick.

SMB

Oh ok. Umm yeah, so we were chatting about how it's been in all these different places and how the audience responds to it has been different. Um whether they've identified more with the cottagers or more with the indians in the story. Can you speak a bit about that?

DHT

Well I was getting this from the actors who had been there and in a place like Toronto, the actors can automatically tell who is supporting who because of the laughter. You can get the vibe and in Toronto it would go back and forth depending on who was in the audience whether they were, you know, cottage supports or native people or people, white people who support native issues. When it was in Ottawa because Ottawa is just full of left leaning white people who have a certain amount of social guilt about things evidently the native character was, was automatically the hero and Herby, the actor playing Arthur Copper was just like, would say you

know, ok they're on my side, i'm going home now. Um, but based on the two or three performances they've done here, they're not as willing to embrace Arthur Cooper and his cause as easily as other audiences have. In fact, Herby says he has to work for it and the woman playing Maureen Pool, she says she even tries to get even more annoying to make the audience sympathize with Herby's character more than her. So yeah, so yeah, it's always interesting to see which way the audience goes.

SMB

Yeah it was interesting for me to think as an audience member because when I'm there as like a librarian, I'm, I sit on all sorts of committees and I'm in all sorts of meetings with people across the city so I'm there like, oh there's a lot of like, like Indigenous people here who are leaders in the city who work for the city or work in different spaces so I can see that they're there but there's still like a lot of white people that are there and I think in a place like Thunder Bay yeah, it's just white people are in a different spot than white people in Toronto or Ottawa. Um, yeah you can tell. [laughs] Um But yes. Yes super interesting um because I think parts of the play sort of move white people into a sort of discomfort

DHT

Well I think one thing also that's going to vary is the number of Indigenous people in the audience. In my own personal experiences with theatre, umm and, I do a lot of comedies, I don't really consider this play a comedy. But it's getting advertised as a comedy. But I've done what I refer to as full scale comedies that are just sheer celebrations of the Indigenous sense of humour and like a two act comedy like the Berlin Blues, the Busking Blues, whatever. Usually in a two act play, the stage manager times each act just to record it and to give you an example

it's not uncommon for the first act of a, of a play to be um, i'd say 52 minutes and the second act to be 48 minutes long. But with a Native comedy with lots and lots of laughter and if there's a native audience and this has been demonstrated. I remember one time a um, stage manager telling me that the show was actually 8 minutes longer with a native audience
SMB [laughs] from the laughter.

SMB

Ahh, I believe it.

DHT

And in theatre, in theatre time, 8 minutes is a long time

SMB

Yeah

DHT

Right? So for the play to be 8 minutes longer because of native laughter and I've been in situations where I've seen that and with a, with a non-native actors who are not familiar with that potential effect of a native audience it's like you have your blocking and your dialogue and the two are interacting and sometimes when something gets a joke there's a huge laughter you see the actor start then have to stop and wait for the laughter [SMB laughs] before they can continue doing their blocking in their next line and they're not used of that much laughter

SMB

Mhm. Do you find in Thunder Bay there is larger Indigenous audiences?

DHT

Um, I'm not sure. I uh, like I used to run a theatre company in Toronto, Native Earth, a thousand years ago and um 80 to 90 percent of people who go see plays in Toronto and I'm sure it's the same here are usually white and are usually older. So I, I don't know. Like I come up here every two years to see one of my plays. I see two performances so I really do not know what the make up of the audience is. I know like a lot of schools send their students in. Both high schools and the college and the university, make it mandatory. In fact, Magnus Theatre used to program the native play to um, make sure it fit within the curriculum.

SMB

That's Awesome. Yeah we were going to have you come do a lecture here at the Library and um, I emailed everyone in the city to tell them about it and I had an instructor at LU email me saying that she was going to encourage her students to go because they just read uh, one of your works. Um, yeah, have you ever seen uh, Salt Baby?

DHT

Yes. I did. Uh, Phalen. Phalen Johnson. Yeah I know Phalen

SMB

Yeah yeah that was like my introduction i think, to uh, going to see plays. [Laughs] I, when I first moved to Regina, it was playing at the Globe Theatre there. Um, and I went cuz it was something to do and I loved it. I think I really hadn't gone to see plays much at all. And then it was just super cool to see like an Indigenous play, especially with that subject matter.

DHT

Yeah

SMB

It was really like, I'm like, you understand my life? [Laughs]

DHT

Well, what I, what I, what I find is life is so cyclical. When I started writing 30 years ago, I was writing all about identity. Growing up on the reserve looking like this. So I did, I did, um, I had a very popular essay called Pretty Like a White Boy: Observations of a Blue Eyed Ojibway and it's on so many different colleges and university curriculum because it deals with Indigenous identity through humour and I ended up being asked to write more articles and I started writing a whole series of articles and I put them together into a book called, Funny You Dont Look Like One: Observations of a Blue eyed Ojibway and it was again, incredibly popular. So many people were reading it because they would say, "that's my story". And they would hear that term, "Funny you dont look like one" when they saw the title they would say, I've heard that. So I've dealt with all this identity stuff and a lot of my early plays dealt with identity. Toronto and Dreamer's Rock was

about 3 sixteen year old boys, one from 100 years in the future, one from now, one from 400 hundred years in the past all with different perspectives of what being native meant to them. Right? Again. Me dealing with that. Uh, I did a trilogy of plays about the scoop up. Someday. Only Drunks and Children Tell the Truth. And 400 Kilometres. Again about an adopted woman coming back trying to find out who she is as an Indigenous person. So I dealt with all this stuff. And to a certain extent it does still influence the work I do. Um, Motorcycles and Sweetgrass about the trickster coming back into contemporary uh, first nations community looking like a white guy so no one recognises him with blue eyes and riding a vintage 1953 indian chief motorcycle. So I'm still sort of fiddling around with that whole thing. So as i said, I was doing this stuff 30 years ago and now, so old that people are forgetting my earlier work and other people are coming and putting their own DNA on that exploration of identity.

SMB

Mhm, just for those listening to this podcast um, Salt Baby is a play about Haudenosaunee woman who has very fair complexion and so when she comes out of the womb one of her kookums says like, "Oh you look like a Salt Baby" [laughs] cuz you're white like salt. So yeah, identity is a huge part of that. Which do you feel like, you focus on that more in your earlier work because like wrestling out the tensions of Indigenous identity was something that is more something that people in their young adult years are figuring out?

DHT

Probably yeah. I mean it's less obvious or it's more subtly layered and in what I'm doing. Where back then I had a specific focus or function in my exploration. Now it's just a flavour and the larger uh, beef stew that is my life. Um, so I dont sit down and say, I'm going to explore the

Indigenous identity. It just may pop up organically as I said in Motorcycles and Sweetgrass, the fact that he's going in looking like a white guy is sort of my way of turning it around and turning it inside out and having fun with it. Um, so it's, it's, I just have also discovered there's other interesting things in the First Nations community I'm interested in exploring, dramatically then just that. I think I've milked that to death, for me.

SMB

Is Cottagers and Indians one of your more political pieces?

DHT

Yes it is.

SMB

Is it your most political piece?

DHT

No. I can't really .. I mean, (sighs) that's a tough way of deconstructing my work because as somebody once told me. I did a series of comedies that you know, Bootlegger Blues is about a 58 year old good Christian Ojibwe woman who, through a series of circumstances, finds herself in possession of 143 cases of beer that she has to bootleg in order to buy an organ for the church.

SMB [Laughs]

Amazing!

DHT

And I mean, as I said, it's just a sheer comedy based on experiences I've had on the reserve.

[SMB continues to laugh]

Ok yeah.

DHT

Right? And Buskin Blues is a comedy about an elders love story. Um, now I've had somebody tell me that the very fact that I am doing a comedy, Indigenous comedy, that's a political statement in itself. Uh…

SMB

Sometimes just being Indigenous is a ....

DHT

Yeah. Being born with a status card is a political statement in itself. So, almost everything I do has political or socio-political uh, ramifications within it.

SMB

Yeah. Absolutely. I guess what I was thinking about especially when I was watching the play was that one in comparison to maybe some of your other work would probably have the most potential to make white people angry or uncomfortable. Um, maybe it's quite different. It is quite different in Toronto and Ottawa where you have the white people who are going to plays will think of themselves as quite liberal and progressive.

DHT

Right

SMB

Um, but I don't know that many white people like that in Thunder Bay [laughs] I feel like, more likely what you might find in Thunder Bay is settler folks going to see a play like that who would be quite, quite startled and quite uncomfortable and then, and then respond in all the white fragile ways like defensiveness and anger.

DHT

Well one of the things I'm trying to do with this play is explore the issues but doing it through humour you know. Quoting uh, Mary Poppins song a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down and by poking at different issues within the native and non-native relationship spectrum, um, quoting some of them with humour I think makes them more palatable and interesting

rather than sitting there and just getting angry. You can actually laugh and when you laugh you sort of almost open up a door of understanding.

SMB

Yeah. I think it's also just interesting to me because I, I don't know if all the young natives start out more angry and then, and then mellow out or if it is something about your generation that grew up under different circumstances that that seems to take more conciliatory approaches and so this play from you feels like, oh that's quite the political statement...
Where I feel like maybe like people like millennial and gen z like indigenous people like people on native twitter [laughs] are quite like angry and direct and, and blunt about uh, the racism that they're experiencing.

DHT

I respectfully disagree.

SMB

Yeah?

DHT

One of the things I found interesting um, I personally like to think the contemporary native literary renaissance began in 1986 with the production of a play called the RezSisters in downtown Toronto.

SMB

That’s Thompson Highway?

DHT

Yes. And with that play and its effect on the larger Canadian theatrical community and publishing community and arts community suddenly there’s an explosion of native theatre and an explosion of native playwrights and theatre became the, in my opinion, vehicle for expression amongst a lot of native arts because theatre is the next logical progression of oral storytelling. You’re taking the audience on a journey using your mind, your body and your imagination. And for 20 years, if not longer, the vast majority of plays being produced by the native community were dark, depressing, bleek, sad and angry. Most of the characters were either oppressed, depressed or suppressed. And almost all of the story lines there were 3 narratives. There were historical narratives, victim narratives or the bi products of what I like to refer to as post-contact stress disorder. And that's basically because when an oppressed people get their voice back, they’re going to write about being oppressed. So those early years, a lot of the literature was angrier and I was the only person celebrating the Indigenous sense of humor in theatre. Tom King was doing Dead Dog Cafe on the radio. I don't know if you remember that …

SMB

I’ve heard of it.

DHT

And a lot of his books were kind of funny. Green Grass, Running Water, his short stories etc. So we were sort of celebrating the Indigenous sense of humour but the vast majority of native artist were focused on the dysfunctional aspects of the first nations community. So if anything, I have gotten darker as I've gotten older, more political.

SMB

That makes a lot of sense when you talk about that greater history of playwrights coming out in the 80's. That makes a lot of sense.

DHT

As you look at all the work of Lee Maracle, Daniel David Moses, Richard Wagamese, all of these other great writers, they're mostly dark.

SMB

Mhm. Yeah, I feel like what I'm seeing amongst Indigenous activists and artists who are my age, there's a mix of things. There's, there's like this pretty, pretty vocal and pretty blunt like political edge but there is at the same time, also this very vocal need to get away from trauma porn. And so I think about Leanne Simpson's short stories, Islands of Decolonial Love and This Accident of Being Lost and there's elements that are a bit dark in those. But for the most part there are stories of like native people figuring out love and figuring out relationships and friendships. I think about, for the past year I've been running this Indigenous book club, and I specifically

chose books that stayed away from that trauma stuff because I don't like trauma. And we've also like, we've survived it and so I don't wanna talk about it all the time.

DHT

For me, a lot of my direction as a writer came from a conversation I had with an elder on the Blood Reserve in Alberta. Who told me in his opinion for native people humour is the WD40 of healing and I really liked that. Humour is the WD40 of healing meaning it helps encourage, promote and facilitate healing. And I have been to 150 first nation communities in Canada and the States and everywhere I've been, I've been greeted with a laugh, a smile and a joke. And again, I wasn't seeing this in a lot of the literature that was coming out of our community. And I would look at my mother who raised me on the reserve. And my mother was not oppressed, depressed or suppressed. My mother was a very strong woman with that vibrant sense of humour and I wasn't seeing her on stage. So like, a lot of the work I do, in celebrating the Indigenous sense of humour is celebrating my mother, my aunts and uncles and everybody I grew up with who were just telling jokes nonstop. Not bitching about the world, though they did bitch about the world, but the thing about Indigenous humour is it's a form of survival humour. It's humour that's been filtered through 400 years of colonization. So a lot of our humour is the same as a lot of our bitching cuz we're often bitching about the world.

SMB

MM yeah, no yeah. It's so interesting to think about navigating trauma and humour and...

DHT

But in getting back to what you were saying about the fact that young people and old geezers like me. There's an old saying from the States. Or no, from, from Europe. I think it might've been

George Bernard Shaw who said once, you know, if you're 20 years old and you're not a socialist, something is wrong with you. If you're 40 years old and still a socialist, something is wrong with you.

SMB [Laughs]

Yes.

DHT

And it's a progressional thing you know.

SMB

Yeah I'm really interested to see where my generation will take the discourse of Indigenous-Settle relationships

DHT

Well the new trend now that I find very fascinating that I'm very excited about in fact I may write my next article about it is the concept of um, genre-fiction.

SMB

Genre-fiction?

DHT

Yes.

SMB

Ok.

DHT

My very first novel was a native vampire novel.

SMB

Ok.

DHT

And I was told there's no such thing as native vampires and I said there are now. My last collection of short stories was native science fiction. One of my novels was even a type of literature that I was, I did not even know I was writing. It was called magic-realism. Daniel Heath Justice has a collection of three books that are the equivalent of Lord of the Rings. There's swords, sorcery, dwarves, elves, magic all that sorts of stuff. Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm has a collection of International Indigenous erotica that she has put together. Cherie Dimaline has a book of science fiction. The most, one of the the most successful books in the States of science fiction was written by a pueblo woman named, Rebecca Roanhorse who wrote Trail of Lightening and uh, Tom King when he's not writing award winning fiction, non-fiction, his hobby

is writing murder mysteries. So we are, I think, beginning to expand and sort of culturally appropriate genre fiction.

SMB

Yeah.

DHT

And Indigenizing it. Making like, making it very, very interesting.

SMB

Yeah it makes me think of Waubgeshig Rice's Moon of the Crusted Snow.

DHT

Which is the dystopian sci-fi. Exactly.

SMB

Yeah it's post-apocalyptic but you're on a reserve so it's already post-apocalyptic story and um, it also makes me think of This Place: 150 Years Retold which is a graphic novel anthology. You should read it. It's so good. So it's 10 short stories in graphic novel format so it's like one book. Yeah. Then also like you mentioned, like Indigenous erotica like Tenille Campbell's Hashtag Indian Love Poems. Yeah so much happening in Indigenous literature. Do you have any stories about libraries?

DHT [Laughs]

Well actually when I was in school. I lived in the library. I loved the library. Couldn't afford books when I was growing up. No library in my reserve so uh grades, I think uh, 6 upwards to high school I used to live in libraries. I had personal relationships with the librarians. I actually had to be ushered out. During recess I would ask to stay in and read. I felt very, very comfortable and very much at home in libraries and I still have a fond affection when I walk in. Though even nowadays I sort of tell people, “Don’t go to the library. Buy my book”.

SMB [Laughs]

DHT

Um, I bumped into the librarian from my high school after 30 years, no 40 years practically. I mentioned that I have about 30 books published and I blame it on the fact that I used to sit in libraries and read. And she said, “Yeah, I know. I read that. It’s on my list of things to do. To read one of your books.”.

SMB [Laughs]

DHT

And I think I’m one of the only published authors that went to that high school. Small country and she just said, “it’s on my list of things to do” and I tweeted that out and I had about a dozen

librarians go, “What? If I had somebody like you in my library I would read all their books or whatever.”

SMB

Mhm

DHT

And I do remember thinking, am I taking this too personal? But I would just think that a librarian who I owed a lot of my fondness for books just never gotten around to reading anything I had written.

SMB

Ahh that’s funny.

DHT

Evil librarians.

SMH [Laughs]

Yeah. That’s good. That’s a good story.

DHT

Uh, let me end off with my favour joke.

SMB

Yes. Please

DHT

Why do native people hate snow? Because it’s white and all over our land.

SMB [Laughs]

Thank you for listening.

DHT

Thank you. Thank you. I’m here all week.

[Both laughing]

SMB

Amazing! Yes. Thanks so much for chatting today.

DHT

It was fun!