

Direct audience address in Cliff Cardinal's *Huff*: Complicity, powerlessness, and sovereignty

THE COLONIAL GAZE

Direct audience address, widely known as “breaking the fourth wall,” is a mode of theatrical communication in which the performer addresses the spectator directly. This article lays out the mechanics of the direct address, and examines how Cliff Cardinal, in his play *Huff*, employs this convention to question/challenge the politics of the colonial gaze. The performative action of direct address seeks to overthrow and/or refigure the colonial relationship, which haunts relations between white settlers, non-white immigrants and refugees, and Indigenous peoples. This address is achieved within the performance encounter itself as well as through the infrastructural conditions of the performance, including its appeal to specific audiences.

Both dramatically and in a broader theatrical context, direct address is flexible and can serve a multitude of purposes. One purpose is to establish or attempt to create specific kinds of performer–audience relationships through what theatre phenomenologist Bert O. States calls the “collaborative” mode of performance (1985, p. 170). Hans-Thies Lehmann points to the device’s immediacy when he observes that it “reinforces the certainty of our perception of the dramatic events as a reality in the now, authenticated through the implication of the audience” (2006, p. 127). Lehmann also hints at subversive possibilities through “transgression of the border of the imaginary dramatic universe to the real theatrical situation,” a liminal space that may emerge through the device (p. 128). This recalls Australian theatre scholar Joanne Tompkins’s “heterotopia.” Tompkins, after Foucault and others, defines heterotopias as “imagined spaces in dialogue with real ones,”

BY SIGNY LYNCH

Signy Lynch is working on her PhD in the Department of Theatre and Performance Studies at York University. Her research investigates how direct audience address in contemporary performance can help audience members and performers to negotiate the complexities of inhabiting a 21st-century globalized Canada.

which reside in “the interstices between the performance and the real of today” (2012, p. 106). In this interstitial gap, Tompkins argues, is the “potential for (re)thinking theatre’s function in its social space” through “heterotopic dialogue” between the world of the actor and that of the audience (p. 106). Direct address in the plays I study facilitates this type of dialogue, tying the fictional world of the play and the audience’s “real” world through a foregrounding of the simultaneity of time, place, and space; the fostering of particular relationships between performer and audience; and the implication, or “participation,” of the audience in the performance.

THE POWER OF DIRECT ADDRESS

Michelle Olson discusses the power of the audience gaze in Indigenous dance performance. She says of the proscenium, the frame through which the fourth wall is created and maintained, “the rules of power are deeply embedded in its structure and informed by the historical context it was birthed from” (2016, p. 273). In a proscenium setup, Olson argues, “the audience sits in opposition to the performer, in a place of power and a place of judgment” (p. 273). She suggests that “out of this complete inequity in this audience/performer relationship ... a gaze arises. The gaze of the oppressor. The gaze of one in power” (p. 274). For Olson, this gaze

is, importantly, both institutional and individual: the gaze of the theatre and that of the non-Indigenous spectator. Olson’s response to its power is to find ways of “destabilizing the gaze” (p. 279), something that the playwrights and performers I study attempt to do through direct address. For example, in *Huff*, Cree/Lakota playwright Cliff Cardinal uses direct address to assert sovereignty, to challenge audience complicity in colonial violence, and to confront the erasure of Indigenous bodies through colonial occupation.

Huff is a brutal and powerful play that presents the effects of colonialism and the residential school system on a family, especially two young brothers, Wind and Huff. The play deals with what Cardinal calls “our most taboo subculture”: “First Nations’ kids abusing solvents, at high risk of suicide” (2017, p. iv), and Cardinal plays all of its 20 or so characters, including the narrator, Wind. The play is well aware of the power of the gaze as a violent act. At the reservation school, a disobedient pupil is greeted by the class with a “Care Bear Stare” (p. 39), a supposedly compassionate act that instead causes the boy to defecate. *Huff* also gives form to Olson’s assertion that “the colonial gaze upon the Indigenous body has been our inherited collective self-perception” (p. 278). When a high Wind fantasizes himself as the star of Hockey Night in Canada, the announcer reports, “What a performance, Harry! And he’s only an Indian!” (p. 15).

This awareness of the gaze’s power sets the scene for Cardinal’s return of the audience’s gaze. From the performer’s opening address—“turn off your fucking cellphone”—it is clear that in this show the audience will not be granted

Direct audience address in *Huff*, page 20

the pleasure of passive observation (p. 5). Cardinal confronts the audience at various points by swearing, unzipping his fly, and graphically simulating rape. At the same time, he also creates complicit, often convivial connections with the audience, such as asking an audience member to free him from a suffocating plastic bag over his head. After he is freed, he asks the spectator to keep the bag from him, no matter what, establishing audience complicity in the play's outcome.

CHALLENGING COMPLACENCY AND COMPLICITY

Importantly, Cardinal, as the storyteller, not only has the power to invoke close relations with the audience, but also to dismiss us. We are addressed as “imaginary friends”—an assertion that emerges from Wind’s hypoxic brain (p. 6), but also resonates with the Canadian government’s absence and silence during Indigenous crises. Cardinal’s dismissal subverts the powerful narratives by which Indigenous groups “have been largely rendered nameless in [Canada’s] master-narrative ... unimagined and legislated into silence by the settler-state” (Carter, 2015, p. 420) by allowing Cardinal to render *us* nameless (“they’re not even real,” Wind tells his brother

The performative action of direct address seeks to overthrow and/or refigure the colonial relationship, which haunts relations between white settlers, non-white immigrants and refugees, and Indigenous peoples.

(Cardinal, 2017, p. 50)). At the play’s end, after the accidental suicide of his brother, Wind pleads for the plastic bag to be returned to him. The spectator’s refusal, however, is ultimately frustrated as he pulls out yet another plastic bag and places it on his head. Wind ultimately survives, deciding to free himself through the aid of the spirit of his younger brother, in what Carter calls an “utterly sovereign act” (2015, p. 428), eschewing a narrative of victimhood (despite the disturbing content of the play) and denying the audience both the position of saviour and the notion that broken Indigenous-settler relations can be fixed by one reparative act.

Direct address is a device that allows marginalized groups to speak back to the colonial gaze of the theatre institution. In *Huff*, this device uses theatrical

conventions against the audience as it urgently asks them to challenge their own complacency and complicity within the settler-colonial state. My larger research builds on this work to investigate how direct audience address in contemporary performance can help audience members and performers to negotiate the complexities of inhabiting a 21st-century globalized Canada. 🍁

REFERENCES

- Cardinal, Cliff. (2017). *Huff*. Toronto, ON: Playwrights Canada Press.
- Carter, Jill. (2015). Discarding sympathy, disrupting catharsis: The mortification of Indigenous flesh as survivance-intervention. *Theatre Journal*, 67(3), 413-432.
- Lehmann, Hans-Thies. (2006). *Postdramatic theatre*. London, UK and New York, NY: Routledge.
- Olson, Michelle. (2016). She begins to move. In Ric Knowles and Yvette Nolan (Eds.), *Performing indigeneity: New essays on Canadian theatre* (pp. 271-283). Toronto, ON: Playwrights Canada Press.
- States, Bert O. (1985). *Great reckonings in little rooms: On the phenomenology of theater*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Tompkins, Joanne. (2012). Theatre’s heterotopia and the site-specific production of “Suitcase.” *TDR: The Drama Review*, 56(2), 101-112.

Canadian Studies Network

Réseau d'études canadiennes

The CSN-REC facilitates communication among Canadianists and holds an annual meeting to discuss issues of mutual concern and new developments in Canadian Studies.

<http://www.csn-rec.ca>

