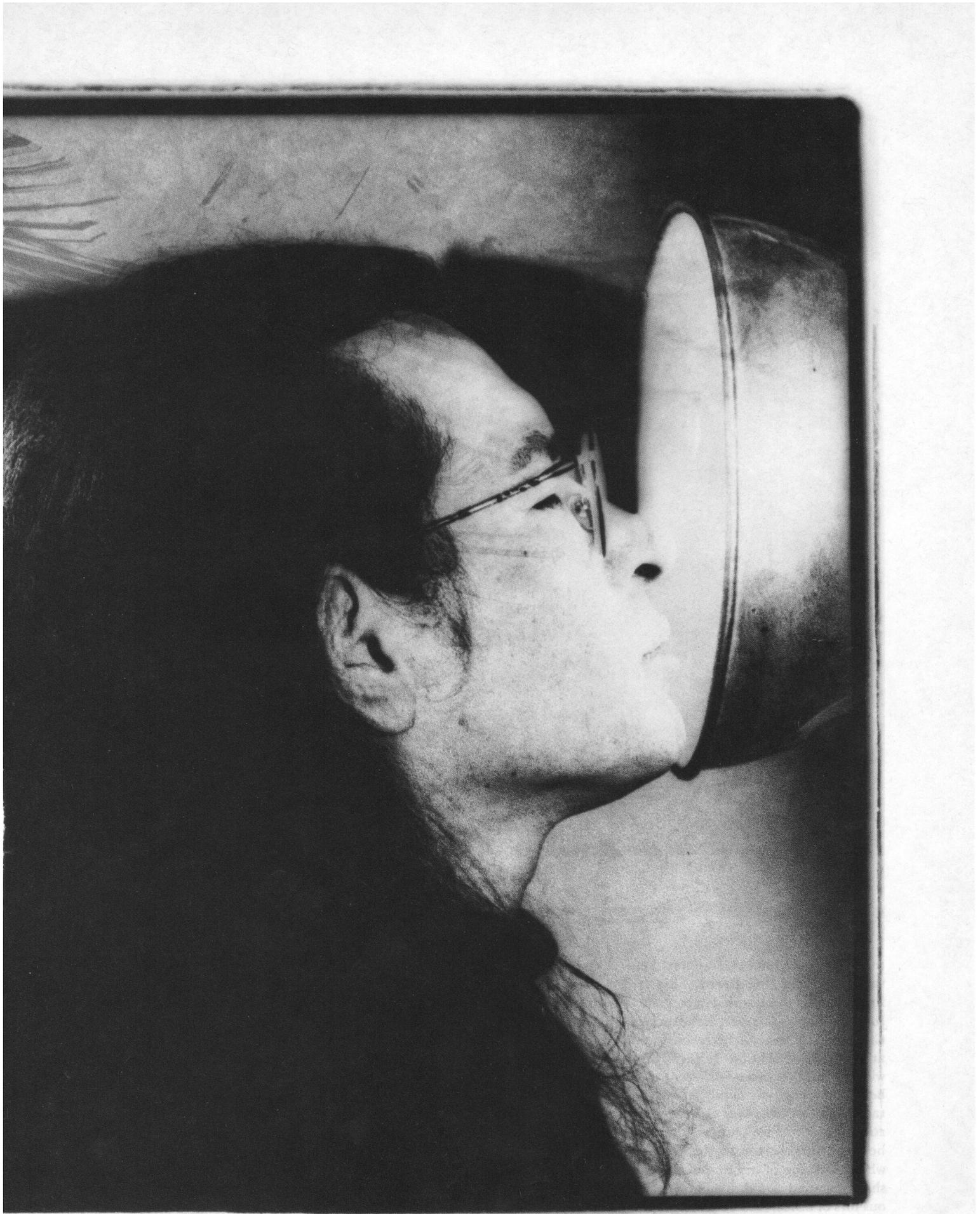


JUST OUT OF THE CORNER OF YOUR EYE. YOU CATCH HIM THERE. YOU CATCH HER. It. Maybe just it. A too-knowing bird, a flash maybe, a rippling of feathers, a brilliance in the shimmering air and you turn and suddenly you're not so sure. ▶ Something changes. Was that just a silly laugh? A loud juicy fart? A big pair of tits bouncing by? ▶ Meet the Trickster. Meet Nanabush. Sit back and watch Weesageechak begin to dance. ▶ Desperate for a familiar cultural reference? Imagine Aristotle—with a whoopee cushion. Or better yet, Jesus Christ—on a skateboard. Because if the Highway brothers have their way, the Trickster—Nanabush in Ojibwa, Weesageechak in Cree—will be seen and felt

TOMSON
and
the *Trickster*
SCENES FROM THE LIFE OF PLAYWRIGHT TOMSON HIGHWAY

and revered (sort of) in the land he fled when the white man came, a land she might even begin to redeem from the dolorous pieties of Christianity. ▶ The Highway brothers? Meet Tomson Highway, Cree playwright, Dora-award-winning author of *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*. Meet Rene Highway, his brother, dancer, choreographer, collaborator in the great project of creating a dancing space for the sometimes male, sometimes female, sometimes wise and sometimes foolish Nanabush. ▶ Rene Highway was alive when I wrote that. He died October 19, 1990, of AIDS-related meningitis. He was deaf and blind by then, and he lay dying to the smell of sweet grass burning in his room at Casey House, to the sounds and sweet smoke of the pipe ceremony, to the hands that drummed gently on his skin, speaking to him through the prison of his body. ▶ Rene is dead. His ashes lie waiting for the ice to break on Reindeer Lake. Tomson waits too for some long, hot, buzzing day in July, a day that seems right for the scattering of ashes over the waters of their childhood. Time present will meet time past then; death will circle back to beginnings. For Rene, all things written, all things spoken now are valedictory, a celebration of a life that had its beginnings in Brochet, on the shore of Reindeer Lake. Tomson's beginnings are in him still. Theatrical, marvellous beginnings. Call them, he says, The Kiss of the Fur Queen. ▶ The Pas, February 1951. This northern Manitoba town is in
by Gerald Hannon ▶ Photography by Deborah Samuel







the grip of the annual Trappers' Festival and World Dog Derby. This year first prize in the dogsled race goes to Joe Highway—trapper, fisherman, a Cree from the far northern reservation at Brochet, Manitoba. Indians often win the dogsled races—different members of the Highway family, in fact, will take first prize several years in a row—but the Fur Queen, the most beautiful girl in the world, is always white. And one of her first duties, after she is crowned and draped in the glorious furs of office, is to be photographed

kissing the winner of the race. Joe Highway, with his cash prize and his big trophy in hand, is regally kissed. The cameras dutifully flash.

"I think he went home and really celebrated," Tomson says, "because I was born almost exactly nine months later. And the earliest memory I have is this framed photograph sitting on the dresser of him with his trophy in one hand, being kissed on the cheek by the Fur Queen."

December 1951, some 150 kilometres north of the reservation. Joe High-

way and his very pregnant wife are dogsledding desperately back toward Brochet. Pelagie Philomene Highway is about to give birth to her eleventh child. They must cover the distance quickly—but travelling by dogsled you can cover only about forty kilometres a day. Suddenly, it is too late. Pelagie Philomene Highway goes into labour deep in the frozen Manitoba bush. On December 6, in a rough shelter built by her husband, she gives birth to a healthy, squalling baby boy.

"They had to stop there for four or

five days," Tomson recounts, "and while my father was chopping wood he axed himself in the foot and it developed an infection. My mother had to make this huge moccasin for him so he could get his foot into it with all the bandages. Then they ran out of food, and my father had to go hunting for caribou, so off he went with a dog, and with his foot like that." Joe Highway found and killed a caribou. The family ate, lived, stayed put for another week, made it back to the reservation.

As Tomson put it, "Under those conditions, it's survival of the fittest." Of the twelve children born to Pelagie and Joe Highway, only five are living now.

Rene was the youngest. Only 35 when he died, he was possibly the most beautiful—the coiled dancer in him under the control of something voluptuous and indolent. Tomson too has grace, but it is more sinuous and wary—he invites you close enough to hear his impossibly gentle voice, then stops you still. The great, dishevelled mane of jet-black hair confirms the cat in him, repels even as it invites a closer look. He can seat himself with something of the cat's fastidious disdain.

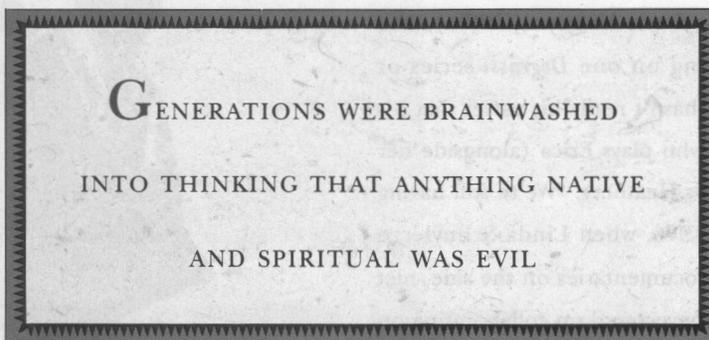
It would be easy to romanticize him as a gentle natural from the woods. In fact, he is an urban sophisticate—astute, career-driven, comfortable with success. Perhaps only the quietness in him echoes back to Brochet, to a childhood spent among the distant, sleeping splendours of northern Manitoba.

"It was tough," remembers Tomson. "It wasn't idyllic. It was beautiful, but it was harsh. We got up at 3 in the morning. There were two canoes—my brothers Daniel and Swanson would be in one and my dad and I in the other. We had nets scattered across the lake under the water—we'd set them one day and check them the next." They'd go from net to net, his father hauling in the fish and resetting the nets while Tomson rowed and gutted and cleaned. They would work till 7 at night. And the next day, they would do it all again.

"I loved it and I hated it. There were

moments of perfect happiness, and moments of difficulty and distress."

Perfect happiness often came when, each summer, they would live in a tent on a different lake—fish camps everywhere, the lake people visiting each other on the weekends, the liquid sounds of Cree and Chipewyan drifting across the water. Tomson tells me of one of the most beautiful memories he has, of the dogs tied up behind the tent, of the family going to bed late, late because the summer nights wouldn't even *begin* until 11, of hearing the distant wolves begin to howl and the dogs picking it up, one by one,



until the earth and sky and water all throbbed with the howling.

And still, during those brilliant short summers, when the work was done and the daylight would stretch on and on toward midnight, there was time for play, time for make-believe.

All kids playact, of course. But Tomson may be right when he says that few kids today have to rely so entirely on imagination as they did. "We had no toys. We made our own games out of rocks and sticks. And I remember once out in the bush we found this meadow and we made it into a theatre and it just so happened that somebody had taken a big shit at one end of the meadow and it was shaped like a spiral, like an ice cream cone. We made that pile of shit into a character—a queen, I think it was, and we were her court. And we'd pay homage at regular intervals to the shit-queen."

June 1989. The Royal Alexandra Theatre, Toronto. Smart City has turned out for the Dora Mavor Moore Awards. Tomson Highway is there. So is Rene. So is a whole cheering section of native artists and theatre people. The envelope, please. Best new play: Tomson Highway, for *Dry Lips Oughta*

Move to Kapuskasing. Best production: *Dry Lips*. Best male actor in a lead role: Graham Greene, *Dry Lips*. Best female actor in a supporting role: Doris Linklater, *Dry Lips*. Each announcement fills the auditorium with the melody of wolves as the tribe that is this city's native theatre community howls its satisfaction. Late that night, 3 in the morning maybe, the tribe is still partying, hiking a two-four up Jarvis, unable to stop. "Oh, we'd earned it," Rene told me. "It was time."

Doris Linklater earned it for weaving the bawdiest of magic—Nanabush with the big tits, Nanabush with the fat ass, Nanabush of the silvery dancing bustle, Nanabush taking a good long shit, sitting on the toilet dressed as God. Our God—white hair, beard, surrounded by little white puffy clouds. Our God in elegant, high-heeled pumps. Our God filing His/ Her fingernails. Our God seen by a people plundered in His name.

Rene and Tomson Highway remember that cultural rape. They remember the Roman Catholic missionaries as hard, unrelenting, xenophobic—men who would learn Cree or Chipewyan only so they could translate the Bible and preach the word. Tomson: "There are stories to this day about this one particular priest. He forbade all the old chants and dances. Whenever he heard that someone was having a clandestine gathering—even if he heard in the middle of the night—he'd get out of bed and he'd take a whip and he'd go over to that house and he'd whip the people home." Rene: "They brainwashed a couple of generations of people into thinking that anything native and spiritual was evil. My mom and dad would say their rosaries every night and read their Bibles every day."

The Bible, of course, in Cree. Mother and Father Highway had a marvelous command of languages—Cree, Chipewyan, even some Inuktitut—but English was not one of them. The children spoke only Cree until they went to school, and Tomson says that to this day, CONTINUED ON PAGE 35

even with the impact of television, his mother's only English word is "fuck."

The English language and something we would call civilization happened to Tomson and Rene Highway at the Guy Hill Indian Residential School in The Pas, Manitoba. There was nothing subtle about the school's civilizing strategies. The first step was the dismantling of language.

At the beginning of the week each student would be given about ten tokens. If a fellow student caught you speaking your native language, you had to surrender one of your tokens to him. As Rene put it, "The person who was the biggest spy got the prize at the end of the month."

Tomson remembers other, more direct, techniques. "Many of them were monsters. They would bang you against the wall; they would grab you by the throat and swing you around; they would shave your head. Even the girls' heads."

Did it work? Rene: "Every Sunday there'd be a movie and a lot of them would be old westerns. And even for us, the good guys were the cowboys and the bad guys were the Indians. The Indians would be attacking a wagon train and the cavalry would ride in and the whole room would cheer."

During my first interview with Rene, he told me of a dream he had just had. In it, he is flying above a priest, a handsome man stripped down to his underwear and white socks. And in the dream, they begin to fight and the struggle is charged with eros. Twenty-five years ago, it was not a dream. He spoke to me of the first time he heard a Beatles song—he was in a car, being masturbated by one of the teaching brothers from school.

Tomson does not want to talk about that. All he will say is that there was sexual abuse "all the time, and on a grand scale," and when the time comes to write about it, it will be written about by native writers.

Tomson wants to talk about the piano.

There were two of them in the school. Tomson lusted after music lessons, but though certain kids were chosen each year to take them, the choice seemed quite arbitrary. "I wasn't picked until I was 13, so I would sneak in there by myself and try to learn."

Tomson grabbed at music. Dance entered Rene's life through television. One show had a particular impact. "The first time I saw dance was on television—I remember a show called

Broadway Goes Latin. It seemed a very passionate form of dance and I remember thinking, That must be sinful!"

That world Rene saw on television, that world Tomson studied for—cramming English into his head, practising the piano hour after hour—slipped into their lives in Winnipeg, at the Churchill High School. That world, they discovered, was white. The other students were white. The foster homes they boarded in were white—they were facing the statistical reality of Canadian life. In the 1960s, there were only 250,000 native people out of a population of 20 million. They earned less money, lived shorter lives, killed themselves more often and were slowly abandoning their native languages in favour of English.

In Brochet, Rene and Tomson had been shielded from that world. It hit them hard in Winnipeg, and each boy developed a different way of coping. Tomson worked hard. Rene elaborated secrets.

Tomson played the piano, studied, read. Rene glimpsed a world he wanted. "Tomson would get tickets to the symphony and ballet and he'd take me along to this beautiful concert hall in Winnipeg. I remember going to a dance concert in this beautiful building where these beautiful bodies came on. Incredible sets, incredible costumes, beautiful music. I felt this sexual attraction to these bodies, these animals on stage, these creatures. I was 14 or 15 at the time and I don't remember feeling anything like it before.

"I began wondering where they trained. And the men were rumoured to be of a certain persuasion—and though that was something unspoken in me, there was a real emotional pull to be like those people.

"It took a lot of willpower to go up the stairs and ask about dance classes. I was petrified—being a native, being a man, starting late. But I just fought against it all and burst through and the reaction was, 'Wow, where did you come from? An Indian boy wanting to learn ballet?'"

Rene Highway was accepted for dance classes at the School of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet. And he began to construct the secret worlds that gave him back some sense of power and control. There were his native friends—"I mostly hung around downtown with them." They didn't know about his dance lessons, and they were kept very much apart from his white high school friends. The high school friends

Jerry
Butler
wanted
to make
something
perfectly
clear.



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Tomson and the Trickster *continued*

(including a white girlfriend) didn't know about the dance lessons either, and never met the native kids. And then "there was my whole sexual preference life which was a whole new world for me in Winnipeg. I desperately wanted a relationship."

It was not easy in the '60s to acknowledge your homosexuality. It was not easy for Tomson, though he says he was experimenting "in a very clandestine fashion from the age of 13." There weren't many people you could tell back then, but each felt, it seems, that he could tell his brother.

"It was difficult," Rene told me. "Very, very difficult. I guess I was about 15 then, and Tomson 17 or 18. I told Tomson...we told each other at the same time and that made it so much more painful. The day it happened we just cried and cried and cried, finally revealing that secret. But some bond was made stronger—it just bonded us that much closer together."

June 1990. The auditorium of the Native Canadian Centre, Spadina Road. I am attending a rehearsal of *A Ridiculous Spectacle in One Act*, a piece by Tomson due to open in Newfoundland July 2. Rene is directing. He is ill, feverish, gulping water from an Evian bottle. (He will miss the Newfoundland trip—diagnosed with the meningitis that will finally kill him, he will spend the next six weeks in hospital.) I am impressed by what I see—the actors are unruly and rambunctious, but Rene quietly prods them on, making them do it again and again, adding a step here, a half-turn there, a raised arm that pulls the scene together. Tomson comes in later, sits quietly to one side, begins to change his clothes. Out of shorts and a shirt, into eveningwear. He half-watches what is going on, seems more interested in spritzing his long, long hair with hair spray. Occasionally he exchanges a quiet word with Rene, sometimes in Cree, sometimes in English.

"We don't communicate everything to each other because we don't have to," Rene would tell me later. "And it leaves a bit of mystery about how we do communicate. It's better that way—it leaves some room for surprises. Something can get created that neither of us thought of."

Tomson: "We work really beautifully together. He has such a good handle on movement, and sometimes I envy his ability to relate to performers. But my contribution to the partnership is the intellectual part of it."

Rene acknowledged that. In fact, he was intellectually insecure, and frequently referred me to Tomson when he caught himself floundering with a question. "Do you think you've coasted on your good looks?" I asked him. "Yeah," he told me. "And I think that's made me not as strong as him."

The brothers were very different in the way they talked about personal matters. There was a sunny openness in Rene—he would sit on one of my dining room chairs, stretch one leg out in a dancier fashion onto another chair, lust openly after a bit of porn I had lying around, laugh easily and answer any question I asked. Tomson sits properly, in a haze of cigarette smoke. There are certain things he just doesn't

Tomson
was tortured by
the condition
of native people in
this country, and
came to a decision
that had been
simmering in him
for four years

want to talk about. He is an artist, and the process of shaping the raw material of his art—and, consequently, of his life—is so wrenching that he must be strong, that he must create sheltered inner worlds.

"Art is taking the chaos of the universe...the artist takes chunks of that chaos and puts it into a form where it makes a temporary and perfect kind of sense. But handling that raw experience is like handling a red-hot coal—it will scar you." What is important to him, then, about his homosexuality is not the domestic trivia of relationships—though he lets me know grudgingly that he has been with the same man for eight years. No, "what I appreciate about my sexuality is that it gives me the status of outsider. And as a native, I am an outsider in a double sense. That gives you a wider vision, a more in-depth vision into the ways of human behaviour, into the ways the world works.

"But I want to write about it *myself*. I want it to come out in a way that's natural but at the same time metaphorical. The issue deserves that kind of treatment. It was simultaneously too beautiful and too horrifying to talk about in any way other than the poetic, the metaphorical, the symbolic."

Winnipeg, the early '70s. Relationships—one sexual, one not—eased the next transitions in the lives of the Highway brothers. Rene met a man he would name only as a theatre director from Toronto. While studying music at the University of Manitoba, Tomson met William Aide, a professor he describes as "one of the best music teachers in the country."

Rene first. He was beginning to wonder whether he was good enough to make a career of dance. "I was told I was good, but part of that may have been that I was this exotic, nonwhite person doing dance. I learned early on that I didn't have a classical body for dance—no feet, legs not straight. I began to think, What am I going to do when I finish high school?" Then he started hanging out with a group of men—"a downtown crowd, the most open, welcoming people in my life up to that point. They made me feel wanted, different."

Among them was the man who would become his first lover—"the theatre person I came to Toronto with." Rene was 17; the other man about ten years older. He persuaded Rene to audition for The National Ballet School in Toronto. "So off I went for a private audition with Betty Oliphant. It was very scary. I had on tons of leg warmers because I knew my legs weren't the right shape." Oliphant was kind, but she made it clear that he would not have a career with The National Ballet. She suggested he try The Toronto Dance Theatre, which he did, and which he found very much to his liking: "It was much more earthy."

And then "a whole new era in my life began." He'd been accepted into The School of The Toronto Dance Theatre; he had the distinction of being the only native person in the city doing modern dance; he had a lover. All the careful compartmentalizing of his Winnipeg life broke down: "There was just the dance world and the gay world, open for me. And in the early '70s! Wow!"

For Tomson, the early '70s seemed considerably less promising. Although he was doing well in his music studies at the University of Manitoba, there

were times when all that Chopin and Bartók and Scriabin just seemed *wrong*—when passing a drunken Indian unconscious on the street, maybe, or getting panhandled again and again by people who were *his* people.

"I think Winnipeg was a period of great unhappiness for him," William Aide told me. "He felt a great tension between the artistic forms of white civilization and his native roots. I think he was glad to escape Winnipeg." Aide helped him escape. They had met as teacher and student in 1971, got along well, and, when Aide took a sabbatical year in England in '72-73, he invited Tomson to join him and his family there.

Tomson travelled to the heart of the Western civilization he had been patiently rehearsing year after year since the age of 13. With Aide as his guide he attended operas, concerts, plays. They travelled on the Continent, went to the cathedral at Amiens together. They saw a rare production of Prokofiev's opera *War and Peace*. Tomson talks fervently of the glories William Aide introduced him to—the hieratic splendours of Gothic art, the transfigured domestic interiors of Dutch paintings, the Rembrandts. He remembers nights and days swimming through the culture that had given him the books he read, the paintings he loved, the very music he played.

Perhaps that did it. Perhaps it was the simple knowledge that Europe was conquerable—its challenge met, its beauties seen and seen through—that gave final authority to a decision that had been simmering in him for four years. "I was tortured by the condition of native people in this country—the political, cultural, economic, social and spiritual situation.

"At the age of 23, I quit music. Cold turkey."

Would he have had a brilliant career as a musician? Aide tells me that he had "a powerful stage presence. He was a good pianist—I don't know what his future would have been like, but probably not as exciting as it has been in the theatre."

Aide told me something more. "I think he *respects* the person of Christ. But he *believes* in the native religion, believes that it will restore his people."

He had to begin the restoration, though, with himself.

Tomson wound up his musical studies—completing, after his return from Europe, another year at the University of Manitoba, and then, having followed Aide to the University of Western

Frieda ran to Eda for something to take on her trip.



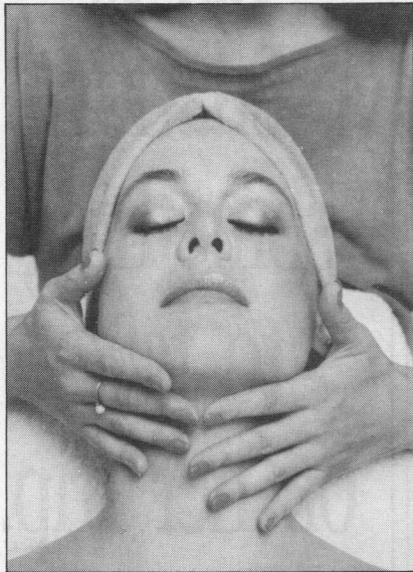
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Tomson and the Trickster *continued*

Ontario in London, graduating with a bachelor of music honours in 1975. He stayed there one more year, taking the English courses that would win him a bachelor of arts degree as well.

But all that was peripheral now, a mere tying up of loose ends. What mattered was his deepening involvement in native student associations, and his decision, after graduation, to take a job with The Native Peoples' Resource Centre in London. He also heard that playwright James Reaney was planning to dramatize *Wacousta*, a sprawling gothic novel by Canada's first native-born novelist—a man who happened to have some Indian blood in his veins. Tomson offered his assistance.

"He came to my office," Reaney remembers, "and asked if he could help. He struck me as delightful, somewhat shy. I was really glad to get help, especially from someone who could speak Cree. I think it took about four years to get *Wacousta* off the ground, and Tomson came faithfully to everything."

Tomson also saw Reaney's Donnelly trilogy, and was struck by the way it used mythology and legend. "We had a lot of discussions about that," Reaney says. "A lot of people don't think that way, in terms of myths and legends. He was also the first person to tell me that my play has a sonata structure. He's so clearheaded about how to organize dramatic material."

He was also becoming very clear-headed about how to organize his life. The next seven years, in fact, would be devoted to labour in native organizations—first with The Native Peoples' Resource Centre in London, then with The Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres in Toronto, and finally with the Native Community Branch of the Ministry of Culture and Recreation, again in Toronto.

He was also doing a lot of reading, much of it in world mythologies. "I studied Greek mythology, Christian mythology in the Bible, native mythology here and in other native tribes down in the States—Navaho and Hopi. I began to uncover this incredibly vital character, one that had been considered so dangerous by the missionaries that he had to be destroyed."

This figure, of course, was Nanabush. The name would differ from tribe to tribe—Raven, Coyote, Nanabush, Weesageechak—but the same characteristics kept popping up. There was the ambiguous sexuality (he makes much of the fact that the Cree lan-

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guage, unlike Romance and Germanic languages, is not gender-based), the wisdom in the midst of nonsense, the nonsense in the midst of wisdom, the unpredictability. "I realized the importance of this character to the spiritual vitality, to the survival of an entire nation."

It also became clear to him, he says, why the Europeans felt Nanabush had to go. "What happened was the clash of two distinct theological systems—and more specifically the clash of two pivotal hero figures: Jesus Christ and this clown, Nanabush. One mythology states that we're here to suffer; the other states that we're here for a good time. What happened historically is that this clown, this good-time guy was told he had no business laughing."

Toronto, mid-'70s. Rene studied dance, and from 1976 to 1979 danced with The Toronto Dance Theatre. Tomson worked as a cultural bureaucrat. Both became increasingly immersed in the vanishing culture of their forebears. And Tomson began to write.

He found time by using the secretary's typewriter during coffee break at work. He started, as does almost everyone, with poetry. And he wrote, as does almost everyone, bad poetry. "It just never worked for me."

"Then," he says, "I tried theatre work. The first thing I did was called *New Song...New Dance*—it wasn't a play; it was a theatre piece that incorporated music and poetry in both English and Cree. We put it on down at Harbourfront and I paid for the whole thing myself—paid the dancers out of my own pocket. The whole thing cost me about \$8,000." The results? "Not a raging success. But I saw that I could do it."

That happened in 1981. Tomson Highway turned 30 in 1981. It was the year he decided his apprenticeship had come to an end. "I said it's either do or die. I've turned 30 and I'm going to go out there with *all* my training—the native, the spiritual on the one hand, and the 'high' art on the other. And come up with something new, something unique to this country."

And what did he come up with? *The Sage, The Dancer and The Fool* was another many-layered performance piece, one that charted a day in the life of an Indian man, following him from his home at Queen and Bathurst to his office at Bay and Bloor. When it was revived in 1989, *The Globe and Mail* called it "another triumph for Highway," but in 1982, Tomson remembers it was just



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Tomson and the Trickster *continued*

"another horrifying experience."

"There was no money—I produced it out of my pocket again. I was one of the actors. I was the playwright. I was the composer. I was the piano player and the producer. Two nights before it opened, I just couldn't take it—I felt we were heading for a major mess. I had to be dragged back to rehearsal."

The god of show biz took over from there. Opening night, he says, "was stunning. The piece was stream of consciousness, but it made sense. It was beautiful. It was exciting. And I came to realize that I might just have the ability, with the flick of a pen, to write something that lives and breathes on stage."

The Sage, The Dancer and The Fool lived and breathed something of his own life. He says that no piece of his has been purely autobiographical, but back in '82 he worked near Bay and Bloor and lived near Queen and Bathurst, sharing loft space with Rene and their nephew, Billy Merasty—an up-and-coming actor who would one day play Donald Marshall in *Justice Denied*, the National Film Board dramatization of that famous case. A frequent guest was Micah Barnes—musician, actor and, most recently, the newest addition to the a cappella singing group The Nylons. He met and fell in love with Rene in March of '83 (and was at Rene's side when he died), and gave me some insight into the feverish bohemian atmosphere in "that famous loft" as he calls it.

"Basically it was just a big empty space you could play in. Rene and I slept on the floor on blankets—My God, I thought, this is camping out. I'm living with the Indians. And late, late at night sometimes Tomson would come in after he'd been out carousing and then he would write. I'd wake up and he'd be there, writing.

"It was pretty intense and always a little hyper. It had the hustle-bustle of downtown—there was always someone coming to visit. Tomson knew a lot of very special native people, and these guys love to party. It was a revelation to me to see the breadth of native experience and culture. No matter how liberal you are, most Indians you meet in Canada are desperate, unhappy people. Suddenly I was meeting these wild, creative Indian men and women."

Rene was certainly reaching a peak of creativity. He'd danced with The Toronto Dance Theatre from 1976 to 1979, but in 1980 he spent ten months in Denmark as a guest teacher and dancer with the Tukak Theatre, a



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Tomson and the Trickster *continued*

Greenland Inuit company. He accepted his first film role that year, and over the next five years would teach in Toronto, Sioux Lookout and Arizona; dance in Toronto, Edmonton, Regina and Banff; study in New York City; appear in an episode of the TV mini-series *Frontier*; be involved in a TV commercial; and take a lead role in two films, *October Stranger* and *City Blues*.

Tomson didn't seem to be as busy. He wrote a one-woman show called *Aria* for Greenland Inuit artist Makka Kleist. He made a living freelancing his piano and music skills. He wrote "a horrible piece" called *Jukebox Lady* for an alcohol- and drug-abuse group. "It was badly written. I do badly with commissions."

And then he wrote *The Rez Sisters*.

It premiered the night of November 26, 1986, at the Native Canadian Centre on Spadina Road. The cast was all native, and included Rene in the role of the spirit Nanabush. It was, as even the modest Tomson Highway will affirm, "an instantaneous hit." Audiences, mostly native at first, grew whiter and whiter as word got round. The critics loved it, and a year later it went on a national tour, again entirely produced by Tomson. It would go on to win a Dora for best new play in the 1986-87 season, and would be one of two productions representing Canada at the Edinburgh Festival.

The "rez" is native slang for the reservation, and Tomson calls the play "a combination of the magical and kitchen-sink realism." The characters have names like Pelajia Patchnose and Emily Dictionary, are all female (except for the magical Nanabush), are all related, all live in the mythical reservation of Wasaychigan Hill—and are all obsessed with travelling to Toronto and winning the biggest bingo game in the world.

The women squabble, sing, dream, laugh, talk dirty, despair, hope. And through it all dances the elusive figure of Nanabush—sometimes in white feathers, sometimes in black, sometimes a hovering figure of consolation and beauty, sometimes a terrifying, belligerent guide into the spirit world. What struck me when reading the play was its staunch refusal to embrace the central tenet of so much contemporary film and drama—that individual agonies can be redeemed through romantic love. The women of Wasaychigan Hill are vividly realized and individuated, but what echoes through their private dreams, their bawdy raucous laughter, are the agonies of a *collectivity*.

The conventional romantic embrace can do nothing to redeem that.

I spoke to Robert Wallace, chairman of the English department of Glendon College at York University, and author of *Producing Marginality: Theatre and Criticism in Canada*. "Tomson's not interested in individual psychology so much as in group dynamics," Wallace says. "The question becomes: How do we keep a culture alive? Individual concerns and problems become secondary."

"In *The Rez Sisters* he represented a class that's highly local and oppressed, and did it with authenticity, integrity and humour. I had a sense of privilege as a white man being introduced to a way of life I knew nothing about. And the Nanabush character—it's a marvelous restoration of a myth that has so much potential to subvert convention. The figure is an agent of death and provocateur of life. It breaks down so many dualities that are constructions of patriarchal thought—a character that's neither good nor bad, male nor female."

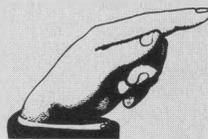
It is not ironic at all that Nanabush has got Tomson into trouble. After all, she is the Trickster.

She appears in Tomson's next play, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, and this time, she is a she—in a play where virtually all the other characters are male. She is a she with huge prosthetic tits, with an equally huge fake ass; a she who, at one of the climactic moments of the play, gets raped with a crucifix. She also gets to fart a little "poot" flag and take a shit in public.

Dry Lips strikes me, at least in reading, as bigger and clumsier than *The Rez Sisters*, with a greater dependence on the grand melodramatic moment. Women who have seen both plays were struck by the different treatments afforded the Nanabush figure—magical, beautiful and *male* in the first play; bawdy, helpless, grotesque and *female* in the second. Gloria Miguel, a native actor from the States who played Pelajia Patchnose in *The Rez Sisters*, told me

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Pull out and
save our *Homes*
supplement,
opposite



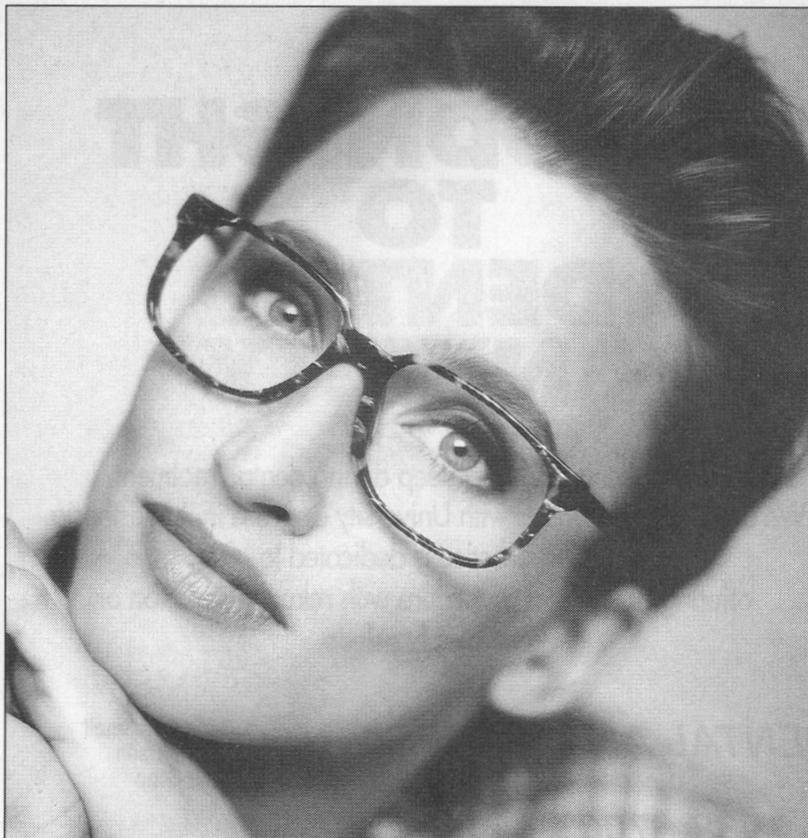
that she was shocked. "The hate the men felt was shown in a degrading way. They took the beauty from her. I don't mind shock—but that was hate personified." Lenore Keeshig-Tobias, an Ojibwa writer, storyteller and activist, thinks *Dry Lips* is frankly misogynist. "I'm sure I'm not the only one who feels that way. But we're awed by the passion in the play and we hesitate to talk about it. A lot of women ask me what I think of *Dry Lips*, and it turns out we're all uncomfortable with the prospect of this big fat woman flying through the Royal Alex this spring." (*Dry Lips* opens in Mirvish land on April 16.)

Doris Linklater, an Ottawa actor and filmmaker, played Nanabush in the original production, which opened April 21, 1989, at Theatre Passe Muraille. She has known and worked with the Highways for years, and says that Tomson wrote the Nanabush part with her in mind.

"It was the hardest role I've ever played. When we workshopped it in Montreal, I didn't really understand why Nanabush would portray the other characters so harshly [Nanabush acts out the roles of several women who are talked about but do not otherwise appear]. And then I began to understand why she did that. The Trickster is someone who shows you hard human character traits, and when you see those sides you don't hate them for it. You learn. The Trickster—he, she—can be very hard or very funny. I know a lot of women felt bad about Nanabush—but she had a hold on all these men. Whenever the men talked about this incident where Black Lady Halked gave birth, she exaggerated everything they did. The men became her puppets."

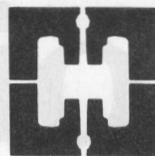
And the bawdy, sexual stuff? "White people might see it that way. We don't think of sex as dirty."

I can tell that, under the silkily smooth exterior, Tomson is ruffled by the criticism. "To me," he says, "*Dry Lips* is about the return of God as a woman. I wrote it as a hymn—of pain, yes—but a hymn to the beauty of women and the feminine energy that really needs to come back into its own if this world is going to survive." And the rape? "I wanted to represent the rape of a matriarchal, female-based religion by a patriarchal, male-based religion—seen through the specifics of a little Indian reserve in Northern Ontario." He refers to the presence of a character called Hera Keechigeesik at the end of the play—Hera, the Greek goddess, and Keechigeesik, Great Sky.



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Tomson and the Trickster *continued*

"It's the return of the goddess. That's what it was."

He adds, a little lamely: "A lot of people missed it, I think."

It's always hard to get inside someone's head, particularly if you don't even share the same cultural baggage. Perhaps one does think differently about the sexes if one's mother tongue is not gender-based. Still, I can't help but wonder whether Tomson isn't after the cheap laugh sometimes. He knows that everyone knows fat women are funny.

It was almost a relief, though, to hear *something* critical about at least *one* of the Highways. While Rene was alive, the two of them seemed like candidates for canonization—partly because they were native and successful, and that's unfortunately still rare enough that they were bound to be lionized. But mostly, I think, it's because they have given us genuine talent, passion and probity. James Reaney tells me he doesn't think he had *that* much influence on Tomson's development—but also tells me that Tomson credits him in every interview he gives. Tomson, in fact, freely credits everyone who's ever had an influence on his work—from Michel Tremblay to Pasolini. Robert Wallace tells me it would be unfortunate to overlook his work at Native Earth Performing Arts, the city's only professional native theatre company. Tomson has been artistic director there since 1986, and Wallace says he has been "very generous in seeding other people's work, including giving seed money. Other talents are emerging now because of him."

I spoke to Celia Chassels, a performers' agent with Gary Goddard and Associates. She represents several native actors, and says that Native Earth is a "strong and visible support space," particularly since Tomson took over. "He is so diligent about encouraging other native writers. And Rene had been looked up to for a long time as someone who had really done well."

Herbie Barnes, a 20-year-old native actor and director, talked to me about working with the Highways. "Rene could put across power with just a movement—he made each of my steps more powerful. He was always so loose and easy; he would never get mad at you if you didn't get it right the first time. You could fool around and joke with him." Tomson is more forbidding: "He's very high status. He's always in complete control and he's completely professional. And he puts an expecta-

tion on you that *you'll* be professional too. After work, he's your friend. But during it, he's a professional."

I could go on. Everybody loves these guys. How could you *not* love these guys—I mean, Tomson was practically born in a manger. Rene lived, taught, danced brilliantly and seductively, and died with immense dignity. His beautiful body in ruins, he was still able to whisper, "*Katha moygasin; kwayus p'matsi.*" *Don't mourn me*—rasped out in a voice dying back to the language of his childhood, *be joyful*.

They came to us as time travellers—born to the nineteenth century, masters of the twentieth. They came as Horatio Alger's boys, noble savages, freedom fighters who refused the gun. Tomson seems both incorruptible and commercially astute—he's planning five more plays in the Wasaychigan Hill cycle, the first two timed to appear in 1992, the 500th anniversary of Columbus's "discovery" of America.

And they have given us Nanabush.

"The storytellers say the Trickster disappeared with the arrival of the European," Lenore Keeshig-Tobias told me, "but he's been popping up all over the country lately. People say, 'Oh, I've seen the Trickster, up in Northern Ontario or out in B.C.'"

Just out of the corner of the eye so far, an unexplained rippling brilliance maybe, an unexplained rippling fart. That is so seductive—a spirituality that redeems itself from nonsense by being, at least in part, frankly nonsensical. And how attractive that can seem to the rest of us, to a people half-sick of our own exhausted deities, consumed by self-disgust for our plundering of an earth that is merely, as one native actor told me, on loan to us from our children.

The Highway brothers tell of such things, through art that empowers. Writer Robert Wallace says that work with such cultural vitality and integrity "forces us to give over power. The logical conclusion of Tomson's work is that the people who hold power have to relinquish power."

Native peoples have known that all along. Kenneth Charlette, a young native actor who has appeared in two of Tomson's works, told me many things about native spirituality. He told me the old prophets said that when the white man came, the sacred hoop was broken. But one day, one day, they said, the white man would come to *us* for help to put it back together.

That is happening, he said, now. ■

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