

## ***Brebeuf's Ghost* and the Influence of Shakespeare on Aboriginal Theatre:**

### **An Interview with Daniel David Moses**

Daniel David Moses's plays include, *Coyote City*, *Big Buck City*, *The Witch of Niagara*, *The Dreaming Beauty*, *The Medicine Shows*, and *City of Shadows*. Moses has also published a collection of poems entitled *Delicate Bodies and the White Line*. Other writing credits include, *An Anthology of Canadian Native Literature in English*, which Moses co-edited with Terry Goldie. Moses has an Honours BA from York University and an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of British Columbia. Recently, he was appointed professor of creative writing at Queen's University. Moses is also actively involved as both a board member and as an artistic director of the Native Earth Performing Arts Centre<sup>1</sup>.

I met Daniel David Moses in May 2003 to discuss his epic play - *Brebeuf's Ghost*. In the interview, Moses discusses the intricate relationship between *Brebeuf's Ghost* and Shakespeare. *Brebeuf's Ghost* is a historical drama that recounts the survival of a Huron tribe that travelled across the Canadian Shield in sixteen hundred and forty-nine to escape the Iroquois's warpath. Though there are no literal references to Shakespeare in *Brebeuf's Ghost*, the play is saturated with Shakespearean influences, mainly in relation to its structure, themes, and style. The Shakespearean influence on *Brebeuf's Ghost* is primarily evident in the play's plot structure, which was appropriated directly from *Macbeth*. There are also thematic similarities between the explorations of dark magic and sorcery. Susan Walker also notes that Moses' writing style is very similar to Shakespeare's in, "The Haunted World of Daniel David Moses." Walker writes, "He is a poet in the Shakespearean tradition of theatre, where the lines get refined so words are richly suggestive of emotions unspoken"(1). This style is evident in *Brebeuf's Ghost*, as Moses recounts his "tale of horror"<sup>2</sup> in rich poetic and evocative language.

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<sup>1</sup> Native Earth Performing Arts Centre is Canada primary professional Aboriginal theatre company. They are located in Toronto, Ontario. The website location is, <http://webhome.idirect.com/~natert/nepamap.html>

<sup>2</sup> In the play-script, the title reads, *Brebeuf's Ghost: A Tale of Horror in Three Acts*.

## **Interview With Daniel David Moses:**

**MM: There has been a debate in our Canadian Adaptations of Shakespeare office, as to whether or not *Brebeuf's Ghost* is a Shakespearean adaptation. How do you define a Shakespeare adaptation?**

DM: I guess I'd put it, as something that perhaps maintains more of the theatrical Shakespearean text than I do. I certainly look to Shakespeare for the inspiration. I drew the underlining structure of *Brebeuf's Ghost* from *Macbeth*. I actually stole directly from Shakespeare. Certainly, I usually say it was "inspired by" because I hadn't actually maintained the language specifically. I think I've gone *beyond* adaptation

**MM: Would you consider/ categorize *Brebeuf's Ghost* as a Shakespearean adaptation then?**

DM: I want to go back to my "inspired by." I mean the shape is there and I certainly think that a lot of the same energy is there. Maybe, it's a fierce influence, but I wouldn't directly call it an adaptation. I think I put too much of my self in there.

**MM: What was the source of inspiration for *Brebeuf's Ghost*? What research was entailed?**

I actually paid a visit to Nipissing University<sup>3</sup>. And before I did my scheduled meeting, I was given a tour of the campus. It was in the fall of year, so I saw the great colours of the Great Canadian Shield. We came to a lookout over the lake and there were islands out there. This is the only time I ever use this phrase, but I got "weird vibes" from those islands. So, I started asking questions about those islands and the history of the local community and I ended up going home with a couple of local history books. There were stories of shamans and histories of really dark magic happening on those islands. When I started to place them - they were in the era of first contact. I suddenly realised that they seemed to be symptoms of culture clash. So, I started gathering materials from the era. Actually, the shaman stories used in the play are from an anthropology text. This text is written by someone who talked to Aboriginal people who were into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but that were still experiencing life in that olden way. So, I just kept gathering material and then at a certain point I had an opportunity to write the play and know that I would be able to see it on stage.

Once the opportunity arose to create this piece, the writing started to happen really quickly. I became very aware of how big of a story it was. Mainly, because of the actual material I had come across. It started as an exploration of the shamanic people that had inhabited the land. There seemed to be a kind of consensus that in this area [North Bay], these [the original habitants] were a great shamanic people. Later, (in *Brebeuf's Ghost*) it was about the stories of a number of communities from around that lake going on a great

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<sup>3</sup> Nipissing University is an Aboriginal University located in North Bay, Ontario. The university homepage is <http://www.nipissingu.ca/departement/native/native.htm>.

journey and running away from the Iroquois. And it was this incredible journey... The journey was north up through Lake Temagami up to James Bay and then up to part of the coast of Hudson's Bay. Then, it was back in over land. They ended up at Lake Nipissing - way above Lake Superior. And I just thought - to think of making a journey like that... It's one thing for hunters to be travelling in the wild, but to take the women, children, and old people with them? Maybe this is because I was raised as a Christian, but it was like Exodus to me. It's a big story. And I have to understand it. I have to know why it happened. That was part of the energy that compelled me to it. And of course the other thing is once you start thinking about time - how far from modern sensibilities these people would have been. These people would have been of the traditional shamanic religion, but they also were dealing with missionaries - who were basically zealots... you know, crazy people... spreading their religion to people who didn't want it. It's a time when the scary creative edge of religion would have been much more evident. I tried to accept the reality of magic in a way that a lot of our contemporary literature doesn't. So I found myself saying, "Okay I'm writing a genre play. It's sort of about sorcery, but with Indians, but okay. I can deal with that!"

**MM: I would like to return to the idea of adaptation. Are there any other main textual resources that influenced this play?**

DM: Just the raw materials. When I realised the size of the project, and I thought about the energies brought in - you know the sorcery, the play I knew that came to my mind that was similar to this was the Scottish play [*Macbeth*]. I actually went in and reread the play and sort of did a skeletal version of the themes and the action of the Scottish play. And, I actually used that as my guide when I began writing *Brebeuf's Ghost*. It was like, "Okay, something magic happens here and I am going to make sure that is where it happens in my play. Something violent happens here... I'll make sure to leave that." Once my own story got going, I wasn't as completely specific about mimicking the action in *Macbeth*..

**MM: So, *Brebeuf's Ghost* is more of an adaptation of *Macbeth* than of *Hamlet*? I assumed that it was an adaptation of *Hamlet* because it uses similar fatherly ghosts figures - these figures being *Brebeuf's Ghost* and the late *Hamlet's Ghost*.**

DM: No, I wasn't really thinking about that much.

**MM: In both *Hamlet* and *Brebeuf's Ghost* a ghost/spirit character serves to impart messages on other characters. Do you see similarities between European and Aboriginal uses of ghosts in literature?**

DM: I guess in the traditions of both, I do. Our central literature sort of doesn't allow the use of ghosts. In my work, ghosts have become central metaphors<sup>4</sup> that I can't really get

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<sup>4</sup> Moses often uses ghosts as metaphors in his plays. The ghosts generally represent the people that are "not seen" from the white North American colonized perspective. Through this metaphor, Moses examines how Aboriginal peoples are essentially invisible in society by comparing their voiceless, invisible state to the situation of a typically unseen ghost. These metaphors are explored in *Coyote City*, *Big Buck City*, and

away from. I remember one of the first directors that I ever work-shopped one of my earlier plays with. When the ghost scene came along, she was singing tunes from the Twilight Zone. I thought, “This woman will never direct Shakespeare. It’s too poetic for her.” In world literature, there are ghost stories all over the place. I have to assume that our current weariness of this kind of material is probably just a social blip.

**MM: *Brebeuf’s Ghost* has a very specific setting<sup>5</sup> in central Ontario. Your other plays are also set in fairly specific locations in Canada. Do you think that the geography written into a play helps determine whether an audience will identify with the characters?**

DM: It certainly does for me while I’m writing it. On the rare occasion when I try to write something without trying to get specific about it, I think it’s been a harder process. Certainly, my director complains about it. I’m sure a specific set helps him. So, in a sense, the awareness of those specifics would help myself in creating it and the director and actors in mounting it. The confidence and their own imaginations would make them stronger performance for the audience to experience.

**MM: In the *Director’s Note of Brebeuf’s Ghost’s* playbill (staged at the Centre for Indigenous Theatre), Carol Greyeyes writes: “*Brebeuf’s Ghost*, although subtitled “a tale of horror” contains a very positive message: in spite of great loss and tragedy, the spirit is strong and from the ashes of destruction a beautiful and strong future will rise up. There is hope always hope.”<sup>6</sup> How does your writing inspire audiences to hope?**

DM: I guess I’ve always had a bit of a battle with the tragic...with the sort of form that allows you to only experience despair. I guess to me it’s a little politically incorrect. I am just tired of it. So, coming from a Native perspective, it’s sort of becoming a manifestos. That’s what we found useful [the movement away from despair] - especially in my own community.

And my instincts are just to say that the tragic world is not the world I see. I guess when I heard the précis description of what the existentialists were about and when I heard people were rejecting it because their [the existentialists] world seemed so empty, my reaction was like, “Why say it’s so empty? Why not say it is has all these possibilities?” Somewhere in my upbringing, I just learned to take that route.

**MM: How would you categorize *Brebeuf’s Ghost* as a genre?**

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*City of Shadows*. For further discussion on the use of these metaphors consult, “Daniel David Moses’ Decolonizing Optics” by Ric Knowles.

<sup>5</sup> The setting is described as follows, “the rivers and lakes, rocks and shores of the forests of the Canadian Shield between Georgian Bay, Lake Nipissing, and Lake Temagami in central Ontario, first in October 1649 and then in April and then June 1650” (2).

<sup>6</sup> This quote can be found in the playbill for the original production, which was staged at the Centre for Indigenous Theatre under the *Director’s Note* by Carol Greyeyes. A photocopy reproduction of this document is archived at the Canadian Adaptations of Shakespeare Project at the University of Guelph.

DM: Well, the larger characters in the community/play survive and it's a story of survival. I don't actually know where the idea of the horror story stands anymore in academia. My impression is that if you get through a horror story...it's something good. So, I'm tempted to stay with my original genre – the horror story.

**MM: Carol Greyeyes (in the same playbill) also describes your writings as, “explorations of a new theatrical aesthetic based on traditional cultural and western dramatic techniques.”<sup>7</sup> What is your background training in writing and in theatre, and how does it influence the structure, style, and content of your plays?**

DM: Well, I went to school<sup>8</sup> to be a writer. I wrote poetry, essay, and sometimes stories. So, I come to the theatre I guess with that larger bandage. So much of what is being done is by people that are performers or directors and who have knowledge of the theatrical tradition, rather than the proper writing and language traditions. I've always wanted to bring that larger thing in.

The main focus in literature is Shakespeare and we read his play. But, he was also a poet. He is the basis of literature in whatever genre you write in. I wanted to bring in as much as I could to *Brebeuf's Ghost* in the broadest sense that I could. On the other hand, despite all this time I've spent with written literature, I tend to write plays in words to be heard. And more poems are with that intention as well. I write for performance.

And coming out of ... I almost want to say a cliché of oral literature...of a traditional knowledge always being transmitted in a spoken way, I think I am influenced by that. A lot of the first Native writing people I encountered were very engaged with that tradition. I found it very inspiring. I've done a lot of work in that type of performance myself.

I think there's something very helpful in oral tradition, even just for an individual's psychology. I really want to encourage people to get over their jitters about performing. I just think it's good for society when there are fewer people that are unafraid to speak their minds. Theatrical skills are social skills.

**MM: *Brebeuf's Ghost* is written in English, but it contains many scenes with Huron and French characters who would not necessarily have known the English language. Why did you choose to write the play in English, as opposed to using several languages throughout the play?**

DM: Well, I don't have the skills to do it in other languages. I mean I could see it being done in other languages. The play uses the convention where we know that the characters are from another time and place, but we can still understand them. It's one of those nice things in watching where you've established the fact that when *this* character speaks no one can understand him. I mean you are always being reminded that this is a

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piece of theatre and that you are suspending your disbelief. It's not naturalism or realism or whatever term you use. It's a piece of art. And we're [the artists] playing a game and you [the audience] know what the rules are and so do the actors. And this game keeps everything focused.

In a of my couple plays - actually only one is coming to mind. In *Almighty Voice and His Wife*, I have a couple of sequences where I use Cree – that's the language of the characters. But, that is partly because it is part of what that play was about: the force of the frontier and under the surface - the culture of language. The contrast between Cree and English was part of the subject matter of that play. In *Brebeuf's Ghost*, the play is dealing more with spiritual matters, so I didn't necessarily focus on the use of language in the same way.

**MM: In the last few decades, many powerful Aboriginal voices have emerged: Lee Maracle, Jeanette Armstrong, Marilyn Dumont, Drew Hayden Taylor, Thomson Highway to name a few. These peoples writings not only use the “King’s English” to write back to the colonizer, but these writers also stress the use of “proper” English, often writing about the syntax, grammatical perfection, tone, etc of words. Why do you think this pattern has emerged?**

DM: Probably just to show the listener that these voices can be taken seriously. They purposely don't use proper English, but then you know that it is a choice - not a problem. In our society, one of the things that we don't talk about is class. You know, we'll always look at England and say, “Tut, tut, tut,” about their class system. We have that system here and most of the time we don't look at it. I was teaching at Brock this year and one day I get off the bus in downtown St. Catherines and I could see a line between the kids who were going to university and the kids who were going elsewhere. And you could hear it in their speaking voices and see it in what they were wearing.

Our culture has this underscored class system, and until very recently most Indian people were definitely on one side of that divide. I think we are continually aware that this is part of what we need to do to be listened to.

**MM: The role and characterization of Caliban in *The Tempest* is often adapted to suit contemporary situations and voices. How can Shakespeare be used to assert an Aboriginal voice? Can the colonizer's voice be used to talk back?**

DM: I did see the production about a decade ago where they use an Aboriginal dressing up of the piece and had Aboriginal characters playing the parts of Caliban. But, they maintained the actual action of the play and they maintained the actual language.

I know *The Tempest* was supposed to have been *the* Shakespeare play because the language is so lovely and it seems to reach a certain conclusion in Shakespeare's poetics. But, don't you really find it under-matted? That Prospero has all this power and is totally in control of everything? There are no surprises in the darn thing! On a certain level, it is kind of boring.

I mean if we [an Aboriginal theatre company] were to actually try to adapt it – I guess we would try to put more surprises into it - like Prospero not always being in control! That is more like what we have to deal with - individuals can't always have control. I guess Shakespeare was writing for royalty and they might always think they want control. Theoretically, we are more democratic.

**MM: The preface page to the play-script contains a quote from Jim Morrison and a quote from *Angels in America*. The play (supposedly) originates from a Shakespearean idea and it recounts a significant part of Canadian history. How is this play reflective of your identity?**

DM: The various characters that are seen in this play are from a repertoire of characters that always seem to come up in my work. I guess I have a set of voices that arise.

One of the odd writer-type experiences that I had with writing the piece was that the first act, I would say took me about ten days to write. It fell together very easily. And then suddenly, I lost it after the first act. I mean, I knew what was going to happen, but I couldn't find a way to emotionally direct the text. I realised that I just spent a couple years getting ready to do this and then ten days to create this and now I knew I had to start killing my characters off. I had to start cutting back from my own repertoire to deal with the dramatic situation. It was like I had to make the solid decision to do this and to do that. And then, I was able to write the rest of the play – you know a couple acts [two and three], probably in less than it took me to write the first act. Once I got ruthless ...it just went.

Once I am engaged with the material, I become very much a part of it in terms of the way my mind puts it together. Coming on the bus to Guelph, I opened *Brebeuf's Ghost* up again and read a couple scenes. Every change of words is so right for the story. And it's very intriguing. There are many actions going on at different places on stage and there are all these lines coming in - in almost a musical way. I really want to produce it, but it is a bit hard to do.

**MM: Shakespeare often used his plays as vehicles for his own voice. I'm thinking specifically of Prospero's final monologue in *The Tempest*. Do you include personal testimony in your plays?**

DM: Probably the only place I have ever gotten autobiographical at all is in *City of Shadows*. There are sequences in *City of Shadows* where some of those characters have my specific personal experiences.

**MM: How do audiences react to *Brebeuf's Ghost*?**

DM: Well, you have to warn them that it is a *three* act, so that they know that they have to come back after the second act! I mean we are so trained to leave at a certain point.

But, if they know that it is a three act going in, then they are prepared. Also, they always seem to leave wondering...

**MM: What kind of Canadian theatre inspires your work? In what direction would you like to see the Canadian theatre industry heading in?**

D.M.: Well, I wish we actually had money to play with and to supply actors with. I mean *Brebeuf's Ghost* hasn't really been done in a professional theatre. Because most theatres think that if a show has more than three actors in it, then it is a big play. I guess I wish people had more money, so performances could happen more. I don't think it can actually work, unless you're doing something like *Momma Mia*. I've had three different friends see it this year and it's mindless, but it sells.

I don't think I have seen much theatre this year that has really blown me away. I think that some productions have lots of potential, but they're not quite where they should be – they're not quite developed. In terms of the quality of the shows I've seen, well, critics keep saying, "It's brilliant" and I keep thinking, "Well, it could have used one more draft."

Certainly people in Toronto only get one shot and then they can be easily knocked out. I am very afraid that Thompson Highway's most recent piece (that was done at a workshop at the U of T) will not be redone. The papers reviewed it! And they trashed it. And now, I don't know if we will ever see that work perfected. I thought it was very unfair of the papers to do that. I just think it is more useful to develop work over time.

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