



What Means This Shouting?

When work on this short film began, there were so many (perhaps too many) starting points from which to explore Aboriginal adaptations of Shakespeare. Central to these was the complicated relationship between Canada's Nicholas Flood Davin—nineteenth-century journalist, politician, and architect of the profoundly damaging residential school system—and Shakespearean texts.

Sorouja Moll, the film's co-producer, had written a paper called *The Davin Report: Shakespeare and Canada's Manifest Destiny*, available on the Canadian Adaptations of Shakespeare Project website <www.canadianshakespeares.ca/essays/davin.cfm>. The essay studies Davin and the myriad connections between his work in public policy and the colonial imperative of the time, a directive that not only devastated a culture, but also virtually erased Aboriginal women from Canadian public policy. In painstaking detail, Moll shows the links among Davin,

What Means This Shouting? is a short documentary film, co-produced by Marion Gruner and Sorouja Moll, that explores contemporary Aboriginal adaptations of Shakespeare. Its focus is *Death of a Chief*, an adaptation of *Julius Caesar* in which many of the male character roles are cast as female. *Death of a Chief* is co-adapted and co-directed by Yvette Nolan and Kennedy (Cathy) MacKinnon for Native Earth Performing Arts.

LEFT Film stills from *What Means This Shouting?*

From L to R: (still 1) Clifford Cardinal, Monique Mojica; (still 4) Jani Lauzon, Michaela Washburn; (still 5) Michelle St. John, Michaela Washburn; (still 6) Jani Lauzon, Monique Mojica; and (still 8) Cheri Maracle-Cardinal

Shakespeare, and colonization. Her work shines a new light on the current state of Aboriginal women in Canada—particularly the epidemic of disappeared women and the judicial and police inaction that has accompanied it. The paper’s conclusion offers a strong female voice: Yvette Nolan, a Toronto playwright and director who uses Shakespearean adaptation to confront present-day Native issues in Canada. Both Sorouja and I kept returning to Nolan’s work as the early ideas for the film unfolded.

And then there was the Bard himself—the iconic yet troubling Shakespeare—the jewel of the English literary canon. What did it mean for artists who had been deprived of their own language and culture to take a 400-year-old English text and make it their own? The answer was, of course, as straightforward as any definition of adaptation, since with great love for the Bard, these First Nations artists were turning the canon on its end to explore the realities of their communities in complex ways.

So: a very rich vein to mine and distill into six minutes.

In the end, what spoke most clearly was one concrete, living, and ongoing experience: Yvette Nolan’s *Death of a Chief*, a work-in-progress with female directors, female writers, and a predominantly female cast. Using *Julius Caesar* as the source text, Nolan and her actors explore dysfunction in Native governments and the roles their communities play in it. As Nolan says, “We’ve lost our land, we’ve lost our language ... I don’t know what the answer is. And I guess that’s one of the things we’re pushing against with *Death of a Chief* ... with such flawed systems, and such pitiful tools, how do we create a new way of going forward? Because what we’ve picked up—the tools we’ve got—are picked up from the colonizer, you know? We’ve lost track of what it was we were doing.” From Native Earth Performing Arts’ perspective, they are not merely reviving a play by a dead white male, but are also grappling with the story of their people as it is being “played” out now.

Adaptation-in-process is where the most important questions are asked, and it was fascinating to see personal histories meld with political and communal ones to create a truly collaborative work. Moreover, I wanted to know how those creative decisions got made, what informed them, and where the artists found inspiration. At the film’s completion,

MARION GRUNER

Death of a Chief remains “in progress,” due in part to financial shortfalls that have come about, ironically, because Nolan is consistently questioned by funding agents who wonder about the need for an Aboriginal theatre company to do Shakespeare.

THIS FILM IS THE RESULT of many collaborations: co-producer Sorouja Moll has been integral to carrying out the vision; Native Earth Performing Arts opened their process to me; Dawn Matheson and Jennifer Moore of the Pidgeon Collective made for acute guides through difficult and compelling terrain. I thank the Canadian Adaptations of Shakespeare Project for the research impetus and the ongoing support without which this film could not have been made.

Marion Gruner is a producer and multimedia artist who focuses on documentary. She has lived and worked in Guelph since arriving to study English literature at the University of Guelph in 1992.