

OBITUARY



RENE HIGHWAY: Critics said his work reflected a "soaring imagination."

Rene Highway, 36, 'charismatic' performer

By Paula Citron

SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Rene Highway was a multi-talented dancer/choreographer who also had a career as a stage, film and television actor.

He died of meningitis at Toronto Western Hospital on Thursday at age 36.

The funeral is private, but there is a memorial service Oct. 28 at the Native Canadian Centre, 16 Spadina Rd.

The son of a Cree fisherman, Mr. Highway was born on the Brochet Reserve in northern Manitoba.

At age 5, like many other native children of the time, he was sent to a Catholic boarding school to receive a "white" education.

Later, many of Mr. Highway's original dance works would reflect the nine years he spent in this collision of cultures.

His older brother, playwright/musician Tomson Highway, also attended the school, and the two boys began their careers in the performing arts by making up fantasy plays and games as an escape from the strict regimen.

The brothers were sent to Winnipeg to complete their high school education. It was here that Tomson took Rene to see the Royal Winnipeg Ballet.

The younger Highway became so fascinated with dance that he would sneak away to take classes, a fact he hid from his teenage friends.

When he was 17, Rene studied at Toronto Dance Theatre and was a company member from 1976 to 1979.

Although Mr. Highway was the first to acknowledge that he did not have the perfect dance body, he was able to project an ease and grace on the stage that made him a charismatic performer.

He spent 1980 with Tukak Theatre in Denmark. Tukak is a company whose members are indigenous people, predominantly Inuit from Greenland and Lapland.

It was the Tukak experience that re-awakened Mr. Highway's interest and pride in his own cultural heritage and he subsequently travelled through Canada and the United States, performing in dances, pageants and plays at native cultural festivals.

No matter how uneven the choreography, critics were always impressed by Rene Highway's "soaring imagination" in such dance/performance art pieces as *Prism, Mirror, Lens* (1989) and *New Song . . . New Dance* (1988), in which he presented the native experience.

"There's a wonderful native Indian imagination which has been crippled along the way," said Mr. Highway, "so the message is to let yourself loose. Express yourself!"

Rene Highway also had a rich collaboration with his brother. He choreographed Tomson's *Dry Lips Oughta Move To Kapuskasing* and *The Rez Sisters*, as well as performing in the latter. Tomson wrote music for several of Rene's works.

Mr. Highway leaves his brother, his family in Manitoba, and his companion of many years, singer/musician Micah Barnes.