OBITUARY

—RENE HIGHWAY—

Critics said his work reflected a "searing 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 Broteh 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 and the two boys began their careers in the acting 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 there that Tomson took Rene to see the Royal Winnipeg Ballet. Mr. Highway became so enchanted with dance that he would sneak out to take a few classes, hiding from his teenage friends. When he was 17, Mr. Highway studied at Toronto Dance Theatre for three years 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 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 dance, pageants and plays at native cultural festivals.

No matter how uneven the choreography, critics were always impressed by Mr. Highway's "expressive" 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. "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 Astors, as well as performing in the latter. Mr. Highway 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.