

RESEARCH NOTE

THE PLAINS CREE GROTOWSKI

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Abstract / Résumé

Is there Aboriginal theatre in Canada which clearly reflects Aboriginal culture? The author and the noted Cree actor Floyd Favel set out to create a theatre training methodology which would reflect Aboriginal performance principles and allow subjects to be explored and sustained dramatically.

Existe-t-il au Canada un théâtre autochtone qui reflète clairement la culture des Autochtones? En compagnie de l'acteur cri renommé Floyd Favel, l'auteur cherche à élaborer une méthodologie de formation théâtrale qui reflète les principes des arts du spectacle chez les Autochtones et permet l'exploration et la dramatisation de divers sujets.

As part of the Summer Institute of Indigenous Humanities at Brandon University in 2001 I invited Floyd Favel Starr to join the faculty of the Drama Program and offer a course entitled "Native Performance Culture". It was Mr. Favel's second summer at Brandon University; he had taught the "Introduction to Native Drama" class the previous summer. At that time we began discussions surrounding the issue of the cultural origins of actor training; it was these talks, which led to the creation of a course that would be both a training class and a research laboratory.¹

We both felt that no theatre training methodology currently exists that is rooted in the Plains Aboriginal cultures of Canada. Favel's intentions were to create a contemporary actor training methodology by utilizing and isolating performance principles inherent in First Nations storytelling, sign language, and pictographic and oral language. Pedagogical exercises would be developed based in the Indigenous culture of the participants by exploring particular areas. (Note that in this particular instance students were both Native and non-Native.)

The following items were selected for this very experimental course:

1. Research on narrative action in Plains Indian pictographic language.
2. Research on narrative action and image and gesture in Plains Indian sign language.
3. The Study of narrative image and action in dramatic classical text.
4. Research on action and image in the Cree, Dakota, and Anishnaabe dialects of the Prairie Provinces.

In the last century, the work of Polish director, Jerzy Grotowski, and his seminal work on image and action culminating in his book, *Towards a Poor Theatre* (1968), revolutionized the training of actors.²

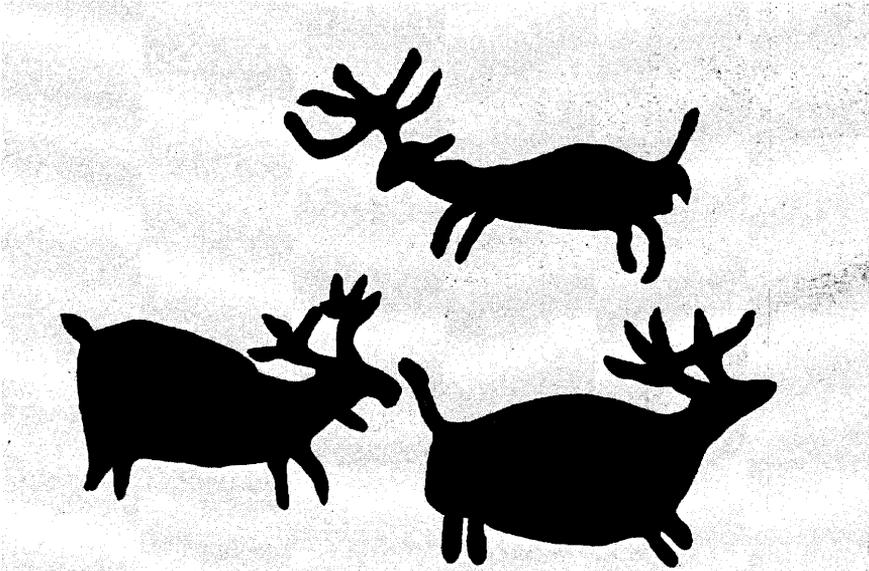
Floyd Favel was one of Grotowski's last students at his training centre in Italy. The intense nature of his work with Grotowski has made it the primary source of his theatrical technique. This course would be an attempt to create a metamorphosis of that training by combining it with rudiments of his "Native" culture. He described his connection with the work of his teacher:

In regards to my relationship to Grotowski's work. Some years ago I dreamt that Grotowski died and we buried him in the graveyard on my reserve, where is buried my grandparents and great grandparents. There was a white cross with his name on it... from this dream I felt that I was to bury the work of Grotowski in the land where my ancestors are buried. To plant the work like one drives a cross into the earth (Favel, Personal interview with the author 29 July 2001).

He also stated that his work is not an imitation of Grotowski's and that Grotowski encouraged his students to find their own way based on rigor and clarity.

It became clear that the thirty-six hours of time allotted to a 3 credit hour course would allow for only one of the 4 elements listed to be researched. Because of the presence on the Brandon University campus of renowned Lakota artist, Colleen Cutschall, a plan was agreed upon to concentrate on Plains Pictographs as a starting point for our inaugural course offering with other elements being added in subsequent sessions. Professor Cutschall was available to assist in grounding the students in the history of this art form. My role was to record and document the classes and act as a trained objective eye that would provide a touchstone for the focus of the course for both instructors and students.

The first day of classes found Cutschall facing enthusiastic if somewhat confused students each of whom brought with them their own ideas of what "culture" and "art" meant in their community. She led them through a journey of her own creative process in which she detailed her internationally shown exhibition *Voice in the Blood* as well as her current work on tipi portals. Her emphasis, however, was on the methodology of the pictograph as device of literature as well as visual art.



Pictographs detail from Autumn Hunt, Colleen Cutschall, 1983.

According to Cutschall pictographic art is "A sacred text. They said, 'But it is not written'; I beg to differ it is written. It is written in the drawings. Our sacred texts are in visual art forms" (Cutschall, Class Lecture 31 May 2001). Favel concurred and added "pictographic system is an action system telling a story" (Favel, Class lectures 31 May to 19 June 2001).

They are symbolic representations of a people's mythology, ceremony and history. Pictographs use images to represent action.

One student asked, "But is it really art if they were just documenting what they did or something that happened?" (Wallace, Transcript of class 31 May 2001).

Favel:

Sometimes we look at these drawings and say, 'Why are they so childish? How come that horse doesn't look like its moving?' Then I thought that these are actual drawings and the style has to reflect what is beyond natural... Our life is based on stories, myths, legends and supernatural events. You can't express that with naturalism. Therefore it is logical to develop theatre systems that reflect supernatural realities, and to construct performances based on Native ways of montage, composition and structure... (*ibid.*).

How this related to theatre art in general and actor training specifically would be the focus of the next three weeks. The students would be applying the theory behind the imagery of Plains Indian pictographs to an adaptation of the text of Scott Momaday's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *House Made of Dawn*. It was, according to Favel, a pivotal book in both his own life and in his relationship with his mother:

What we will be doing is to devise a system, a methodology based on Indian art and applying it to this text. Why *House Made of Dawn*? Scott Momaday was one of the first Native authors to reach a mass public audience. What is interesting about him is how he managed to articulate in a contemporary format the story of Native Americans. In *House Made of Dawn*, ← are images, actions, scenarios that we can all find something that speaks to us today. It is also one of my favorite books and I read it to my mother after she suffered a stroke. She liked that book. The readings would bring me to tears as the story became about a life that had passed. I felt the contrast between the story and me and my mother's life and the urban surroundings we lived in. It is important to relate to your experience (*ibid.*).

This would become the key sentence spoken by Favel to explain what it was the student actors were about to do. The images from the novel were to become the starting points or catalysts for their own creativity. It wasn't to be a class about performing a novel. Rather it would be about what the process of interpreting that particular work of art gave rise to in each student.

Favel again, "Within the real story, that becomes the starting point for their own stories, personal stories, cultural stories, universal stories" (Favel, E-mail to author 8 June 2001). Pictographs to Favel represented a way of thinking and a way of telling stories in a stylized manner that reflected on who the tellers were and how they lived their lives.

The students were given the following assignments.

1. To tell a story from the novel.
2. To draw a pictograph of the story
3. To move and stage the pictograph.
4. To repeat the process with any images/stories that arise out of the original pictograph. (Note: this led to demarcations of 'big' and 'little' pictographs.)
5. To write a paper of the relationship of their individual work in this class and Native culture.

Success was to be measured in the students' ability to demonstrate an understanding of physical action and the pictographic system. But it was not only to be about, "If you are able to tell your story but also how well you are able to help your colleagues" (Favel, Class Lectures 31 May to 19 June 2001).

The theory established, it was on to the practical work, which, like most theatre classes meant grabbing a workout mat and finding a place in a circle on the floor. Favel did about thirty minutes of stretching exercises and yoga before moving on to some simple "Transformation" exercises. Movement and gesture were first shared and copied, and then transformed and changed before sharing. This was done first in a circle and then in two lines. In the last half hour of the class they drew a pictograph of their "favorite" moment from the novel. Their instructions were simple:

Try to think about the book. The story, *House Made of Dawn*. Remember some of the scenes that struck you. That made an impact on you. Take your time. You have to remember an image that attracted you for whatever reason. Think about it and pictograph it (*ibid.*).

At the next class and all subsequent classes the stretching and transformation exercises would be repeated, each time asking for a greater level of commitment. There was resistance but Favel kept encouraging them

both by example and by side coaching. In an acting class there is no place to hide and everyone participates multiple times. Once the students realized that their own creativity would bring the only energy and novelty to the repetitions the work improved. Evidence of the techniques practiced in the floor exercises started to appear in the movement improvisations. The class gradually came to a somewhat unified physical vocabulary based on the exercises and their common observation and participation in the movement improvisations.

According to Favel the justification of starting to research actor training methodology for First Nations in "body work" was natural. It was a return to the Plains Cree philosophy that:

Movement, in Cree, *waskawewin*, defines life. When somebody dies they stop moving, *aponwaskawecik*. If you asked "What is life?" A simple explanation using the Cree language would be that life is movement.

And

When you are not able to work with full energy, your full potential, Natives would say "Ah you are not connected to your spirit, so you are running out of energy." So basically it is a principal of you being not plugged in, right? (*Ibid.*).

The physical exercises were designed to focus the body's energy in its centre. According to Favel:

Because if you learn how to centre everything through this part of the body in everything you do it will give you strength. And you will need to be strong. This is an acting secret, a physical secret (*Ibid.*).

Work began on physical improvisations in pairs where movements would be shared, copied, transformed and shared again in a free flowing exercise. The students were gradually relaxing and beginning to allow intellectual judgments to be replaced by a "thinking with the body". This was then applied to the telling of the story of their pictographs. The first time they told the story they were to just stand and tell it. The second time through they began to interpret in a physical three-dimensional way the two-dimensional pictographs. The point of view of the storyteller was to oscillate, vocally, back and forth from first to third person, and physically from the presentational to the metaphoric or symbolic. At every step Favel coached them to increase the depth of their detail both emotionally and physically with their story's images. Stories were not so much to be told as danced or moved.

The next step was to delve into the emotional reaction of the teller to the story. He instructed them to meditate on their pictographs and to allow four other related stories to inspire them to create smaller drawings on the same page as their big pictograph. They weren't to purposefully compose anything, but to allow images to percolate. The same technique they had been using in the exercises of not "thinking what to do next" was to be applied to these next four pictographs. The question came up in class from a student, "You mean from the book?" Favel clarified, "Anything. Your personal story, from the book, or something you saw or remembered.

One student, led off the idea of personalizing the pictograph with the following:

It's more like to me, there was, a lot of love. But have to pick up the part of the story too, like, everybody has expectations eh? I think of the old man that went up to meet his bad son, and the expectations that there was when he came back. I believe I am in the same boat as this fellow. I left home too. Once you are taken away from home you expect to come back with knowledge. But there is a bad side of it. Like you pick up bad habits and I just want to show that there are two roads. One the old man is using resembles the old man and the other road is in the where the hills are, it's a winding road. What it means...it feels bad to see somebody coming back and say, "eh, that the way you gonna be, all drunk?" and I felt that way too. And that's why I changed my mind and got out (Wood, Transcript of class 6 June 2001).

The transformation of the pictographs from the page required the students to suspend their ingrained desire to be both naturalistic and illustrative in terms of the telling of a story. Favel countered this with a combination of pointed coaching and encouragement:

Whatever you do you have to make a clear choice. You have to make an artistic choice. You own body will create a pictograph. You need to start to isolate different parts of your body. Maybe this part is a cloud and this is a human person (pointing to his left arm and right leg respectively). Different parts of your body can be different things at different times. Then your pictograph is going to move. You create one picture that is one scene. The next scene you move into another picture. So they move, moving pictographs. There is just you and your body doing it. And that is what I want you to start thinking about, your scenes and start composing them with your body, in narration and also first person, inside and outside the picture. Everybody is very good. But I want you to think in details. Whatever you

do is right because it is you doing it in your story OK? We accept what you are doing because it is you doing it (Favel, Class Lectures 31 May to 19 June 2001).

And later, in his remarks after a student's presentation, he said:

His blood is almost black and congealing, right? Detail! So talk about that how it looks, how it feels, what it reminds you of, all those things. It is a very physical thing that's going on there. So be in it!" (*Ibid.*).

In an e-mail at the half way point Favel summed up his analysis of the students' progress to me this way:

I am happy with the work, one of the reasons being that I feel we have approached a way of working that breaks with naturalism. I have sat on a lot of grant juries where people mention they want to be experimental and work in a "stylized" manner. What does that mean? I have heard it many times! I feel we have mapped a concrete way that takes the body to a style that is based on and uses the pictograph method. The students are using opposition and balance in a way that is quite advanced (Favel, E-mail to author 8 June 2001).

The transformation of the students work from hesitancy to confidence was based on two main roots, exercise and repetition. From the very first the class had been about freedom in body movement. The frequency and quantity of the "transformation" exercises had liberated and increased everyone's movement vocabulary. Gestures were bigger and contained more changes of dynamic and rhythm. Isolation exercises where different body parts do different things at the same time gave rise to the students being able to represent several images in the story at the same time. For example, the movement of a right arm is the morning dew while the legs are those of an old man going to meet his son. The exercises created a "technique" and then repetition made it "natural".

This is the pivotal element to any theatrical style; you take a movement or vocal method and repeat it often enough that it becomes the "way things are done". The student actors no longer think they are behaving in a unique way. The use of the body to express both metaphoric and actual images is now done without thought.

One student, story involved both description of terrain and of Abel's emotional, psychological state and provides an example of the techniques of body isolation as her legs become a river beneath the canyon walls of her arms but also the switch from being outside to inside the story as she adopts the first person:

You watched the sun rise today. The town was dead with only the wind for life. There was a horrible accident. There were curved roads lying in the mountains. There was a huge canyon. The walls were very tall and there was a river running at the bottom.

I can't think straight right now. My mind isn't very clear because I had too much to drink. My fingers are all twisted and I can't seem to bend them straight (Tsal, Transcript of Class 9 June 2001).

It became natural for Ms. Tsai, so that if she was talking about the wind in the town, her body would tell us whether it was a lonely wind or a warm wind; and if her body twisted and contorted she would communicate to us Abel's tortured state of mind in a half-conscious dream state.

The final step in the process was for Favel to put the stories together into a montage or collage that could be viewed as a performance on the final day of classes. To do this he used Grotowski "Collage", which layers different and sometimes disparate images in a single scene. He also adapted elements of the similar fugue-like work of Joseph Chaikin's "Montage", where key images of a story are repeated both physically and vocally. While students presented their stories, the rest of the class was asked to choose a particular phrase and gesture from the performance. The story would then be repeated with the "chorus" of students entering when their phrase appeared and repeating it until the end of the story. The effect was dramatic in both cumulative volume and energy. Favel then allowed the pictographic system to inform the montage and composition, he selected actions and phrases to create emphasis and focus. He often asked three or four students to form a unison chorus of a particularly effective action. Sensitivity was in play as the central storyteller still had to maintain the focus. The chorus was directed in repeating the action to, "Try to do everything she did, even her quality. Don't just repeat it" (*Ibid.*).

A connection was drawn back to the original exercises of the session and to Favel's new role of editor or master storyteller:

Those exercises we've been doing, working together, listening to each other. This is where we start to apply them, now we are trying to construct images. Sometimes might want a particular actor to shine so we give them room. And so working together, we create sound scapes and movement scapes. Don't hesitate and don't be scared. We are working fast and we're working on the spot. We are improvising and in a creative state. Move here, move there, you have to react quickly and listen to each other. It's a bit like conducting. Don't be afraid just do the action. We're not asking for more (*Ibid.*).

Favel elected to emphasize different moments in the combined stories from the "big" and "small" pictographs of each student, and then arranged them into a running order that would constitute the final project. This was an onerous amount of work on the students as they strove to create a new montage, as they were essentially memorizing lines and choreography from an evolving production. The result was a marvelously entertaining and visually evocative distillation of several essential moments from *House Made of Dawn*. Actors flowing across the stage featured one moment in the chorus the next. Gender, age, race didn't matter as the narrative unfolded in image and action. The young actors had an excellent sense of focusing on the task at hand as several moments truly lifted off the page and took us out of the theatre and into Momaday's world. It was a result of the successful synthesis of the work of Grotowski, Chalkin and the pictograph system.

Floyd Favel summed up the work in a rare address to the students where he talked and they just sat and listened. Portions of that talk follow:

I have got a little lecture on what we have done and its relationship to First Nations culture. It depends on what you think that culture is. It depends how you understand it. If you want to learn in depth any aspect of Native culture you have to learn it on your own. No one can teach you anything beyond the basic steps. *No one can give you a gift*. They can perhaps indicate that you have one. Often you get little signs. Even, for example, the gift of speech. I didn't understand that my speech was a gift for a long time. I dreamt that a voice told me that whenever I talked, my mother would live through my voice. You do learn to talk at your mother's breast after all. So then there must be a responsibility for what you say. Misusing a gift means not using it properly because in your voice there will be ancestors. When we say traditional information what we're saying is that we are part of a link that goes all the way back to whomever, you are connected (*Ibid.*).

Transformation in Cree means to "change or switch quickly", *kamaskocipiho*. If you put it in perspective of First Nations culture this is very common practice amongst our people. First Nations people have been transformed some at will and some suddenly. My mother, speaking of our home said that when you are from here you have access to spiritual beings. When you are talking about theatre every Native artist gets into spiritual elements, which always get into culture (*Ibid.*).

When asked for some final words he said:

I would talk to you about balance, right, in your body, harmonious balance, balance in your mind, in your body, emotions right, your spirit or your soul. You are always struggling to balance conflict and equilibrium (*Ibid.*).

And as for the continuing work of the theatre:

Two things. First thing is to take an image and explore it. One way is we... very often it's a superficial not saying... scratching the surface, emotions scratching the surface. So by repeating it let's find where else it could go, what else it could be. Find out how this image stirs your life and you moved into action, and the second thing is how to sustain this for tomorrow. (*Ibid.*)



Scenes from the final presentation of *House Made of Dawn*. Students, left to right: Karen Cook, Hector Spence, Sija Tsai, Lila Wallace, Patricia Jackson.

Notes

1. The author wishes to thank the students of Native Performance Culture for their willingness to allow this paper to be published and Floyd Favel for his invaluable assistance in proofing and editing my drafts.
2. Grotowski, Jerzy 1933-1999. Polish director, teacher and theoretician of the theatre. After studying at the State Drama School in Cracow and in Moscow and directing in Cracow, he established the Theatre of 13 Rows in Opole, where from 1959 to 1964 he staged poetic works

played against the texts as arguments with past cultural monuments and designed to transform traditional actor-audience relationships. In 1965 he moved the group to Wroclaw, adopting the name Laboratory Theatre. In this phase he eliminated from theatre everything but the essential relationship of actor to spectator and developed training techniques stressing gymnastics, yoga and mime. His final teaching took place at both the University of California at Irvine and at the Centro per la Sperimentazione e la Ricerca Teatrale in Pontedera, Italy.

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