

MEDICINE SHOWS

What I'm convinced of is this: the simple act of taking that first step on the highway with your father and best friends beside you, the tension of the fast-moving river through your paddle, the radiant heat in the moose's rib cage as you reach your arm to cut out its heart, the sound of Canada geese honking as they stretch their necks for the south, the tug of the pickerel as it takes your hook, the sickening grind of the outboard's prop as it touches submerged river rock—it's these simple experiences that contain medicine strong enough to start some healing, to start closing that door.

—Joseph Boyden, "The Hurting"

Medicine, in my community, is not about curing, not even really about healing. Medicine is about connection, about health. Many of the First Nations attach teachings to the Medicine Wheel: a circle that embraces the directions, the seasons, the ages of a human being, the grandfather teachings. The Medicine of the Wheel is that it endeavours to teach us to apprehend the interconnectedness of all things. When someone talks about bad medicine, I understand the phrase to mean that someone is breaking something, a

relationship or a rule or a social contract. Good medicine, on the other hand, makes community.

Medicine, in Indian country, also refers to the four traditional medicines of many First Nations: tobacco, sweetgrass, sage, and cedar. Like everything in Indigenous worldview, they are connected—to teachings, to directions. Tobacco connects us to the spiritual world, carrying our prayers to the Creator; sweetgrass reminds us of kindness, as it bends when it is stepped on; sage is for purification, cleansing our minds and hearts of bad feelings; and cedar is similarly for cleansing, and I have been taught that it is associated with strength and protection.

The drum, the same drum that Hollywood immortalized and bastardized with its *BUH-buh-buh-buh* rhythm, is also medicine. Our people talk about bringing back the drum, its circular shape the reminder of all the circles that we hold sacred: cycles of seasons and of life, directions, and equality (for no point on a circle is closer to the centre than any other). The drumbeat is the heartbeat of Mother Earth, and her heart beats like ours, not as Hollywood would have it. Bringing back the drum, then, is an acknowledgement that we have become disconnected from our ways, from our histories and our values, and we must work to become reconnected.

I had been working on this book about Native theatre in Canada for about eighteen months, thinking about the theatre I had seen, the theatre I had helped to create, and writing articles and essays and papers for specific conferences and publications. I had read many books about theatre in general, and Native theatre in particular, and read and re-read many plays. After eighteen months, I still did not know what the central question of the book was. Nonetheless, I wrote, emptying what I knew onto the page,

remembering, writing down what I remembered so that others who came after me might remember too.

In March of 2013, I went to hear the Anishinaabe author Joseph Boyden speak at the University of Saskatchewan as part of the university's Aboriginal Achievement Week. In a daytime address, he spoke to an audience of mostly students about the high rate of suicide in First Nations communities and his own near-successful attempt at sixteen. He spoke about how every act is an act of medicine. He spoke about how he came to be a writer, and read from his yet-to-be-published novel *The Orenda*. Later, I found myself replaying Joseph's speech, turning over in my mind his assertion that all these acts are acts of medicine. So if all those acts are medicine, I thought, then the act of making theatre must also be medicine. And suddenly I saw the whole thing. I have described the moment as spiritual chiropractic—a small adjustment, and everything fell into place. I could see the spine of the book clearly.

Indigenous theatre artists make medicine by reconnecting through ceremony, through the act of remembering, through building community, and by negotiating solidarities across communities. The act of staging these things reconnects who we are as Indigenous people with where we have come from, with our stories, with our ancestors. The things we know and the values we hold that are manifest in the contemporary work that we put upon the stage make the Indigenous artist a conduit between the past and the future. Ceremony. Remembrance. Making Community. Survivance. Each play that I looked at could be slotted into one or more of these chapters.

My intention had always been to write in a non-scholarly way—in plain language. I wanted to write in an Indigenous way.

Instead of a chronology or a survey, I thought about writing from the centre of what I knew and allowing what I knew to take me to the next place. I thought of it as dropping stones in a pond, watching the ripples move outward from the point of entry. I knew much about the Turtle Gals Performance Ensemble, from outside and from within. Turtle Gals were in production with their first show, *The Scrubbing Project*, when I became artistic director of Native Earth Performing Arts, the company that was co-producing the show. I served as the director on the next two shows, *The Triple Truth* and *The Only Good Indian* . . . I could write about Turtle Gals' work, and the ripples outward from there would carry me to Marie Clements, who works often with Turtle Gal Michelle St. John, whose company urban ink had supported the development of *The Only Good Indian* . . . The ceremony of *The Scrubbing Project* would ripple outward to other works that embody ceremony, like Margo Kane's *Moonlodge*, Waawaate Fobister's *Medicine Boy*, and Monique Mojica's *Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way*. *The Only Good Indian* . . . and *The Triple Truth*, about uncovering history, would lead me to other unearthings: *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* by Marie Clements, *Almighty Voice and His Wife* by Daniel David Moses, and *The Hours That Remain* by Keith Barker. Each work I looked at revealed its connection to other works, to other artists.

In April of 2014, twelve Indigenous artistic leaders and eleven listeners gathered at the Banff Centre to participate in The Summit. Over a year in the planning, the ostensible purpose of The Summit was to guide the National Arts Centre English Theatre in its selection of work by First Nations, Inuit, and Métis theatre artists for The Study, which would follow in 2015. As co-curators of The Summit, Sarah Garton Stanley and I used the gathering as

an opportunity to address much bigger questions and disseminate more widely the answers.

The Summit allowed me to sit in a room with many of the artists who have influenced my work—Margo Kane, Monique Mojica, Jani Lauzon, Michael Greyeyes, Daniel David Moses—people about whom I had been writing for the past three years. Over the course of two and a half days, these artists discussed the last thirty years of Indigenous performance in this country. They talked about works that had been created, and processes that had been developed, taught, and passed on to some of us now in the room. They remembered artists and performances into the air, and for the benefit of the listeners in the room—a dozen artistic directors, funders, and institutional leaders—they generated a list of works that can be found in Appendix 2 at the end of this book. After some discussion about the definition of canon and gatekeepers, the assembly agreed to eschew labels and simply called the list the body of work.

The Summit was an act of medicine too. Sitting together in circle, we could trace the connections between the artists, name our artistic ancestors, and bring these ancestors into the room with us. The younger artists could begin to see their position in the continuum, and be buoyed by the knowledge of the body of work that existed and by the understanding that they were neither alone, nor starting over, but part of a plethora of traditions. The senior artists who so often have felt isolated and alone could see the fruits of their labour: their works had not disappeared, but existed in the scripts and photographs and stories and memories and bodies of their colleagues.

This book, then, is an effort to create a bundle where some of these things can be kept. It is in no way meant to be the definitive

book on Indigenous theatre performance in Canada, but rather a way to remember so much of the work that has happened, and remind us all how we are connected. That is the medicine I crave for this community of mine.