

Introduction

I hate to begin this introduction to a collection of plays by William S. Yellow Robe Jr. by breaking some bad news. Bill Yellow Robe is not a great Native American playwright. He is not even a great Assiniboine playwright. This will no doubt strike most readers as odd. Do not misunderstand me. He is unquestionably Native American, Assiniboine, and a playwright. But he is not a great Native American playwright. Bill Yellow Robe is quite simply a great American playwright.

In the nineteenth century, a common lament was, “Where is the African Shakespeare?” Albert Schweitzer famously called Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore the Indian Goethe. And Saul Bellow, in defending himself against charges of racial insensitivity, wrote in the *New York Times*, “There is no Bulgarian Proust. Have I offended Bulgarians too?”¹ In each case there is the clear implication that the writer in need of the adjectival modifier is inferior to the *real* Shakespeare, the *real* Proust, or the *real* Goethe. To label someone a great Native American playwright, as accurate as that identification may be, is to pigeonhole and limit him or her, again making that person less than a great American playwright—or better yet, simply a great playwright. Bill Yellow Robe is a great American playwright, in the company of other great contemporary American playwrights like David Mamet, Lynn Nottage, David Rabe, Wallace Shawn, and Pearl Cleage.

Yellow Robe has written over sixty plays in a career that spans nearly forty years. There have been two previous anthologies of his plays, *Where the Pavement Ends* (2000) and *Grandchildren of the Buffalo Soldiers* (2009). There has been none in the ensuing decade, which represents one his most creative and productive periods. Hence the need for the collection you hold in your hands.

He is the best Native playwright working today, in the vein of Hanay Geigamah and Tomson Highway. Birgit Dawes, in her entry on him in *The*

Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary American Playwrights, states, “Even though realism—in the tradition of Eugene O’Neill and Sam Shepard—is his signature format,” his plays often “also explore mythical, magic realist, and satirical strategies.” The entry also noted that he was one of the most visible and frequently produced Native artists.² Geiogamah, arguably the founder of contemporary Native drama, praises Yellow Robe for his “‘courageous determination to dramatize some of the harsher truths of American Indian life’—especially those that are not immediately visible: ‘His plots are often based on highly sensitive aspects of Indian life that are likely to be ignored or denied by tribal traditionalists and academic purists.’”³ The Methuen guide showcases only twenty-five playwrights between the sixties and the present. This puts him in the company of Edward Albee, Arthur Miller, Sarah Ruhl, and August Wilson, a personal hero to him.

All of this is undeniably true. One should not gather, however, that Bill’s plays are pity parties, presenting the “plight” of the tragic Indian that whites so love because it permits them for an hour or two to feel guilty and sad and then shower and wash it all off. Bill Yellow Robe—in person, on the printed page, and most especially on stage—is hysterically funny. The plays anthologized here display the full gamut of his emotional palette. They range from tragedy to satire to flat-out farce. Even within the most realist and grim depictions, there is a leavening of Native humor. Such humor for Yellow Robe, as for Gerald Vizenor and Native people in general, is a key tool of survivance, Vizenor’s neologism combining “survival” and “endurance.” Yellow Robe writes to declare that his Assiniboine/Nakota people are still here—that Indians and Native nations are still here—and, despite fearful odds, have often thrived. He is an optimist, not a pessimist.

Yellow Robe was born and raised on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation in northeastern Montana. He wrote his first plays when he was in the sixth grade. (In a 2014 interview with the National Endowment for Arts for its *Art Works Blog*, he describes them as rip-offs of movies he had seen on television: the first was about Cleopatra, and the second was about the Twelve Labors of Hercules.)⁴ He became involved in theater in junior high and high school. When he was in his mid-twenties, his parents asked if he was serious about being a playwright. When he said that he was, they both told him that then he had better leave Fort Peck because there was nothing for him on the reservation. He writes, “They were right. There were no professional theater companies, very few community theater productions, just the high-school drama productions. There was nothing to

support me as a playwright, actor, or director.”⁵ He took their advice. Since then he has moved back and forth between the reservation and the outside world.

Not that the process has been always easy. He developed an alcohol problem (now long in the past). He lost his first wife to metastatic breast cancer. For three years, as he cared for her, he withdrew from playwrighting. He taught at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, but was fired in 1996 when over half the faculty was let go because of a budget crisis.⁶ In 1998, he was homeless and broke. He was conducting auditions for a production of *Waiting for Godot* he was directing, and it was not going well. He thought of giving up on the theater. At this low point in his life, he encountered a woman he had met as a reporter when he and the other Native faculty were let go. She went on to become his second wife and helped him put his life back together.⁷

Yellow Robe’s plays often involve a return to home and tribal community and recognition that belonging is both a privilege and a responsibility. As Margo Lukens puts it, “The community system maintains the privilege of its membership, and when anyone questions it or threatens to break it down, those who have been comfortable within it naturally become fearful and angry.”⁸

Another recurrent theme in Bill’s work is mixed-blood identity and belonging. The plays selected by him and Lukens for *Grandchildren of the Buffalo Soldiers and Other Untold Stories* were chosen around this theme. In the title play of that collection, he tackles the issue of race. He himself is a descendant of one of those African American cavalymen of the title.⁹ It is an issue to which he periodically returns.

The plays we selected to be anthologized here are unified by supernatural themes or significant supernatural elements, hence the title *Restless Spirits*. Perhaps wanting to demonstrate that he was not limited to pure realism, the theme was Bill’s suggestion, and it proved a felicitous one. Lukens writes, “The characters in Yellow Robe’s plays are not simple, nor is his understanding of their situations throughout the play ever pat or formulaic. He shows the numerous aspects that make up one person—their guilt, their self-serving, their degree of maturity and their reflections on what they may have been or done in their youth, their flexibility or rigidity, the way they make sense of tribal tradition or history and use it to include or exclude people from their relationships.”¹⁰ He has said that one of his best-known and frequently performed plays, *Sneaky*, was a difficult one for him to write

because all three brothers in the play represent different lives he had lived.¹¹ The spirits in these plays are indeed restless—haunted by unspeakable acts, by homophobia, by racism, by identity politics, by foreigners who invaded, stole their land, assaulted their culture and way of life. These are attacks that continue to this day.

This book brings together one full-length play and seven one-act plays. The two-act, *Wood Bones*, is a major work. It begins the volume. It had a recent successful production, which Yellow Robe directed, at the University of Maine, where he currently teaches. The anthology concludes with his most recent one-act, *One Step In*, a hilarious farce, which had a staged reading with Yellow Robe directing and acting at the Returning the Gift Literary Festival at the University of Oklahoma in 2017.

Wood Bones involves a house where horrific acts were committed. The house itself retains memories of them, as subsequent occupants discover.

In *Frog's Dance*, the deracinated mixed-blood nephew of the title character moves from the city to the reservation to live with his uncle. Initially resistant, he learns where he fits in and how to be an Indian. Throughout the play, Frog communes with the spirits of his dead sister and his wife, who was the love of his life. It is a touching and poignant piece.

In *Wink-Dab*, Death and the Trickster provide a humorous counterpoint to an earthly tragedy. A gay Indian youth is brutalized by the bigoted white father of his lover. This sets in motion a series of events that will destroy all three. (An example of the comic relief comes when Trickster challenges Death to a game for the fate of his friend; Death produces a chessboard, a clever reference to Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*, presumably the last time Death played someone over a person's fate.)

Falling Distance involves two young lovers, separated from each other by different planes of existence. They will be reunited through the magic of a very special mirror.

To Cross takes place at the border between two worlds. It involves reincarnation, as the lead character makes the passage from the spirit world to ours with an ageless Indian as his guide. It tackles issues of identity and assimilation.

It Came from Across the Big Pond is inspired by 1950s science fiction films like *It Came from Outer Space* and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. It also bears a resemblance to Philip K. Dick's short story, "Adjustment Team." In it, the reservation is invaded by a team of "Assimilation Processors" who practice "social gentrification," turning Indians into whites.

Tiger Lily Two-Step is a satire of cultural appropriation and representation. Wannabe powwows are cursed by the appearance of a “little person,” who turns out to be Tiger Lily, the leader of the Indians of Neverland in *Peter Pan*.

Finally, *One Step In* is a farce that deals with identity politics and those who wield them as a weapon against those they deem less “authentic” than themselves. It is set in the waiting room of heaven where a full-blood is having trouble gaining entry.

Yet another recurring theme in Bill Yellow Robe’s work is tribal national sovereignty—territorial, economic, cultural—and those who defend it, manipulate it, or would extinguish it. In *It Came from Across the Big Pond*, one of the processors touts the benefit of assimilation, saying, “In a way, but you won’t have all that difficult business of being sovereign. Something you people wanted long ago, and when a little of it was given to you there were so many problems created by it. Treaties, agreements—it was a huge legal mess. Now we have something new that will help you become better situated in our society.” A few minutes later, evoking the cultural genocide of forced conversion and the boarding schools, he says, “We wanted you to be a part of us a long time ago. Your people were baptized, inducted, educated, cleaned up, but it didn’t do a lot for your development of assimilation. These two new processes will help you regenerate a new interest and move the process along. It isn’t going to be painful, a little difficult for her [a full-blood character], but we’ve designed this, again, specifically for your people.”

His commitment to tribal sovereignty explains why, of all the numerous performances of his work—at New York’s Public Theater, at literary festivals, in national tours, at Yale and other universities—the one that Yellow Robe is perhaps most proud was a production of *Sneaky* staged by Water Protectors at Oceti Sakowin Camp during the Standing Rock Sioux’s standoff over the Dakota Access Pipeline crossing under the Missouri River. That protest was particularly significant to him because the Missouri flows near his home in Wolf Point on the Fort Peck Reservation.

Bill considers his plays the gift he has to give to Native communities and Native people. In the NEA interview, he states, “One of the things that really amazes me is that it has a tremendous healing element. It can heal an individual, it can heal a community, but it has to be set up so that there’s a sense of security, trust, respect, and patience. And you know what’s really the problem now is that, in my career with my plays, I’ve

always been put in that position: am I doing this for community, or am I doing it for a career? And I've never seen my writing as a career; I've always seen it as a responsibility."¹² When performed in Native community, it might be an audience member's first experience of theater. Even if it was not, it was probably the first time they had seen people who looked and thought like them represented affirmatively and accurately on the stage. He says that when he staged his works in communities, people would inevitably ask him where they could get copies of the script to share with others. He began to carry photocopies of his plays with him, to give to those who asked—an expensive, and muscle-taxing, process. In his preface to the Lukens anthology, he writes that it is exciting for him to see his plays published and anthologized, writing, "It isn't for the sake of money, fame, or prestige; it is for the sake of helping the community."¹³ With this volume, they have access to eight previously unavailable plays—for those who have the wherewithal to purchase it.

Yellow Robe has been the recipient of numerous awards. Most recently he received the 2018 Lifetime Achievement Award from the Native Writers' Circle of the Americas.

If I may be permitted to end on a personal note, I must say that of all my projects this has been the most pleasurable and gratifying. Bill Yellow Robe has, in the process of editing this volume, become a dear personal friend. Already widely performed and studied, it is my hope that, if this volume is successful, it will lead to further collections of his work. After all, less than a third of his output has been anthologized and published.

I have deliberately kept this introduction brief. I want to permit Bill's words to shine on their own.