Fall 2019

Assiniboine Actor, Poet, and Playwright William S. Yellow Robe Jr.

Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D.
ASSIGNED IN NORTHEASTERN MONTANA, William S. Yellow Robe Jr. (b. 1962) is an enrolled member of the Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes of the Fort Peck Indian Reservation. He studied writing and performing arts at the University of Montana, including the Public Theater in New York City, Trinity Repertory Company in Providence, and the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C. In 2009 he published a collection of the American Indian in Washington, in Providence, and the National Museum including the Public Theater in New venues throughout the United States, venues that have been performed in more than 50 one-act and full-length performances at the University of Montana, and currently is an adjunct faculty member at the University of Maine, Orono, and the artistic director of the Inter-Tribal Playwrights’ Center of Arlee.

MRS: What is the relationship between playwriting and other forms of writing? Does your philosophy or method shift when you write a poem as compared to a play?

WYR: Both require different needs and attention. When I write something, it’s not as the spokesperson for all Native people, it’s just my voice or my relatives’ voices in my work. Playwriting is more difficult, because you have to visualize how it will look on stage. You start seeing characters, hearing their voices. But a Native playwright [will] have different responsibilities. If I write something, it’s not to applaud myself or glorify myself. When I write, in the end, it has to help the communities. It’s not about me. If you take, you give back.

Playwriting can be very powerful, more so than poetry, because to do a play you need a community. You have to be very careful about who you invite into your camp. Sadly, today we’re seeing an encroachment of would-be Indians, people who are self-proclaimed but have no tribal or community connection. What is really disturbing is that their roots are in American-Eurocentric styles and methods, and it’s very appealing to white people.

When I write, I don’t write for an audience. I broke the first rule of playwriting, which is “Do you think of your audience?” At one time I did, because I got a playwriting professor mad at me. He said, “Who is your audience?” I said, “Well, it would be my community. It would be an Indian audience.” He responded, “They don’t come to see your plays!” I told him, “You, I know, that’s a problem.” He was mad at me [laughs]. But it’s true.

I’m an older generation. When I was starting, you rarely saw Native people on stage. You rarely saw Native people direct or act or write. Now it’s flourishing. But because of its flourishing, we have more encroachment from non-Natives. It’s sort of the problem with this country; in that Indigenous people have always had these things. When they start applying them and using them and giving them life and moving fast, it’s nice to go outside and just listen.

MRS: There’s almost a spiritual dimension to listening.

WYR: Yes, there is. You have to listen to your heart, you have to listen to your mind, you have to listen to your soul, and you have to listen to your body.

MRS: I’m curious to know how you build your protagonists and other characters. More specifically, how much of your personal philosophies and imagination are imparted into them?

WYR: There are only three plays where I wrote a play that you need a community. You have to be a young person, to be quiet and let those around you talk. But also, you need to take your turn. What’s happening today is that no one really listens.

The other thing is important that you have to listen to the environment around you. You really do, because if you ignore it, you ignore a whole part of life. One thing that saved me this past two weeks is the river outside of our house. With all the rain and melting snow, the river was rising and moving fast. It was nice to go outside and just listen to it.

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WYR: Yes, there is. You have to listen to your heart, you have to listen to your mind, you have to listen to your soul, and you have to listen to your body.

WYR: What’s so amazing about humor, for me, is that it allows me to breathe. If it’s really funny I’ll laugh, and I actually can see the reality of what I’m looking at or what I’m thinking about. Laughter allows me to clear my system out so I can accept things. When you see a car wreck, you can make jokes about the car wreck, but the humor eases the tension and the fear so you can actually see what happened.

There’s a difference that we forget here because of the influence of Euro-American ethnocentrism. There’s a difference between hearing something
and judging something. In our society, we are too quick to judge; and we’re not seeing the full story. To give you an example, we have a problem of homelessness and alcoholism at Fort Peck. When I was growing up, men and women used to hang around in the streets and they were alcoholics. Some of them were war veterans. They had PTSD, but at that time they didn’t have that phrase for it. I was with my mother and made fun of this woman, and she turned to me and said, “That’s your uncle. Don’t make fun of your relatives, remember that. “That’s your uncle. Don’t make fun of your relatives, remember that.” I felt so ashamed for making fun of my uncle. These are your relatives, remember that. I felt so ashamed for making fun of my uncle. These are your relatives, remember that. I felt so ashamed for making fun of my uncle. These are your relatives, remember that.

MRS: What does writing do for you that nothing else can?

WYR: For me, writing is a healing component. It helps me grow. If there’s an incident in a play that’s based on my life, it teaches me to see all the elements around it, so I can get a more in-depth look. That’s what I like about playwriting. It sharpens my observations; not only to see the subject but the relations of that subject and their internal relations.

MRS: What is something that every writer should explore or examine?

WYR: I think that every writer needs to sharpen their skills of listening, so that they not only listen to the spoken word but the unspoken word. Not everybody and everything will come out and tell you what they think and feel. You have to develop some kind of empathy. You have to work toward being more of a human being. The other thing that is important is observation. When white writers say observation, they say, “What did you see?” But it’s not a question of what you saw with your eyes, but a question of what does your heart see, what does your body see, what does your soul see. Let that inform you as well because sometimes your eyes can mislead you. Within observation, don’t be judgmental. We’re in a process now that if we see something, right away we label it and we judge it. That’s really scary is that we discard those things that are bad. Tragically, for some, they discard their relatives that way.

Leg Ancestry

As my leg and stump dangled from the bed, Leg Ancestry told my stump that it has ‘leg ancestry’.

“Leg ancestry,” thought the stump. Yes, your leg, ankle, and foot are there. You sure? Yes, they are there and you can walk and run, why, you can even stand right now if you like. Phantom pain came for a visit about this time. Leg ancestry shivered back from phantom pain. Phantom pain reminded me, the stump, all of us, that we are missing some parts, Phantom pain reminds us of reality, reminds us not to lose focus, We had these things, but now, they are gone, so we mourn, we pray, we decide ‘leg ancestry’ is not like the real thing, we are happy we have us….

— William S. Yellow Robe Jr. (Assiniboine)