

NightwoodTheatre ●●●●



# Inner Elder

By Michelle Thrush  
Directed by Karen Hines

Presented by Nightwood Theatre and Native Earth Performing Arts

## Resource and Background Material



Created by Sadie Epstein-Fine with help from Michelle Thrush  
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## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Based on an interview with Michelle Thrush**

*Inner Elder* is my life, it's my truth. Never really feeling like I fit in. Being the child of alcoholics, what that meant to me. This is an issue that many Indigenous and non-Indigenous people face. This is me learning how to create a new cycle for my daughters so that when they become parents they will have even less to deal with than I did growing up.

This is a vulnerable story to tell, but it's done through comedy. I transform from young to old, transforming into my own Inner Elder. We all carry our own inner elders, and she's part of that for me. She's the one who, when things get really crazy in my life, I try to find comedy in and things to be grateful for. I believe that when we come into this world we spend the rest of our lives building an elder inside so that we can answer those tough questions in life with dignity and grace, the way our old people do it.

## **THEMES**

Representation, Fantasy, Ancestors, Childhood, Identity, Alcoholism

## **CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS**

Drama; Indigenous Studies; Gender Studies; Family Studies; English; Equity, Diversity and Social Justice; Human Development Through the Lifespan; Psychology; Philosophy; History

## **CAST AND CREATIVE**

**Michelle Thrush:** Creator | Performer

**Karen Hines:** Director

**Sandi Somers:** Lighting | Scenic Design

**Sandy Scofield:** Composer

**JP Lord:** Sound Design

**Cimmeron Meyer:** Stage Manager | Lighting Director

**Grant Burns:** Producer

## **About Native Earth Performing Arts**

Native Earth Performing Arts is Canada's oldest professional Indigenous theatre company. Currently in our 35th year, we are dedicated to developing, producing and presenting professional artistic expressions of the Indigenous experience in Canada. Through stage productions (theatre, dance and multi-disciplinary art), new script development, apprenticeships and internships, Native Earth seeks to fulfill a community of artistic visions. It is a vision that is inclusive and reflective of the artistic directions of members of the Indigenous community who actively participate in the arts.

## **About Nightwood Theatre**

Nightwood Theatre is Canada's leading producer of contemporary theatre created by women. Founded in 1979 by Cynthia Grant, Kim Renders, Mary Vingoe and Maureen White, it is known as the oldest professional women's theatre in Canada. Since its founding, Nightwood has created and produced award-winning plays, which have won Dora Mavor Moore, Chalmers, Trillium and Governor General's Awards. Today Nightwood remains at the forefront of developing and disseminating new work by female playwrights in Canada, with a legacy of nearly four decades of propelling women's voice. As a feminist theatre, Nightwood creates a forum for a vital conversation about women's lived experiences to a broad and engaged audience. It brings together diverse female artists and provides them with unparalleled opportunities and essential resources to develop and produce widely acclaimed, provocative, entertaining and socially relevant theatre. Committed to artistic excellence, the avid promotion of gender equity in the arts, and the successful training and development of emerging female talent, Nightwood has become an established, nationally respected theatre.

## SYNOPSIS

### Part I: Growing Up

Michelle did not feel like she belonged when she was a little kid. She used to keep a suitcase packed, and would walk to the highway and wait for the aliens to take her away. The aliens never came for her. Michelle believes that she did this in order to survive growing up around alcoholics.

Both of her parents were alcoholics. She was mainly raised by her dad who one time, in the middle of the night, got her to pack her bags and drive away from her mum. She knows that her parents loved her, but they didn't know how to say it.

Growing up, Michelle didn't see anyone in the media who looked like her. She would fantasize about being on TV shows like *Little House on the Prairie*, but her fantasies would always collapse because she thought that people would point out that she was brown, not white. The only representation she saw of Indigenous women were white women portraying Indigenous Women. This forced her to make up her own stories in her imagination, a place where she would see herself represented.

During one of her games she noticed a homeless woman lying on the ground under a tree.

### Part II: School

Michelle went to a lot of different schools growing up because her and her dad were always moving. She experienced a lot of racism at school. She recalls one experience where a teacher made her feel stupid for not being able to spell a word. In that moment she fantasized about her grandmother, her Kookum, becoming "Super Kookum" and flying in to teach the teacher a lesson. While that did not really happen, her Kookum did make bannok for Michelle to share with her whole class. She told Michelle to be proud of being Cree.

### Part III: Spirits

When things got hard for Michelle she would speak with the trees, and she could hear them whispering. Michelle realized that she could hear spirits, the Cree Grandmothers. It is the spirits of the Grandmothers who urged Michelle to get into acting in order to tell stories.

Flash forward to 2010. Michelle was cast as an alcoholic on a TV show. Though Michelle is not an alcoholic herself, she understands the shame and trauma layered into the generations of her family and other Indigenous women. When she filmed her character's "rock bottom" scene she asked for the grandmothers to come and join her, and she could feel every woman in her family join her to film the scene. She also remembered the homeless women under the tree. She remembered her own rock bottom moment with her daughters waiting at the welfare office. Just as the grandmothers joined her to film the scene she heard the word "action."

In this moment Michelle becomes the character from the TV show, who shifts into the homeless woman.

As Michelle creates a circle of flour around her we can hear the grandmothers' voices wondering if Michelle can hear them, if they are doing enough for her, etc.

Flash forward to 2011 when Michelle is nominated for and wins a Gemini award for her role in the TV show.

As Michelle speaks about the wisdom of the grandmothers, who always know the right way to say things, she begins to change her appearance.

#### **Part IV: Kookum**

Michelle becomes her own inner elder. She improvises with the audience, playing with them. She acknowledges the land that they are on with humour. She asks three audience members to join her on stage as backup dancers. She says she is going to sing a traditional song- it is "Respect" by Aretha Franklin. She puts on her "traditional" dancing outfit- a "Super Kookum" cape. She dances around the stage.

### **Questions for discussion:**

1. Reflecting on Michelle's experience of not seeing herself represented in the media, have you ever had this feeling? In what ways have you/do you feel not represented?
2. What do you think the homeless woman lying under the tree represented for Michelle?
3. Do you see differences between the time Michelle grew up to the time you are living in now? What are the similarities? What are the differences?

### **Suggested activities:**

1.
  - a. Based on the article below by Hayden King, research Canadian Indigenous news articles from the last five decades. How has the content changed?
  - b. Research new independent Indigenous media including websites, blogs, newspapers, instagram accounts, etc. What are Indigenous people able to express through these sources that mainstream media is missing?
2. Create your own character based on someone important in your life. Michelle created her Inner Elder based on her relationship to her Kookum and her ancestors. Is there an important elder in your life? Is there a young person in your life who inspires you? How can you exaggerate features or characteristics of this person to create a character?

# What works and what doesn't in the way the media represent Indigenous people?

Elysha Enos · CBC News · Posted: Apr 14, 2019 8:00 AM ET

How can the media shed stereotypes and tell a more honest story when it comes to Indigenous people?

Four Indigenous panelists involved in journalism, television and cinema discussed the topic live on the [CBC Montreal Facebook](#) page and to a packed house at the Casgrain Theatre of John Abbott College on April 8.

The panelists included:

- Jessica Deer, from Kahnawake, is a reporter and editor at CBC Indigenous, based in Montreal.
- Brittany LeBorgne, also from Kahnawake, is an actor and writer and the production co-ordinator at Resolution Pictures.
- Michelle Smith is a Métis filmmaker who teaches in the Cinema-Communications department at Dawson College and co-ordinates Journeys, the school's transition program for Indigenous students.
- Greg Horn from Kahnawake is a Mohawk storyteller and editor for *lori:wase*, a weekly print and online newspaper.

The host of CBC's *Unreserved*, Rosanna Deerchild, moderated the conversation. The following is excerpted from the panel.

## What are some of the problems in the representation of Indigenous stories in mainstream media?

Too often, Indigenous stories lack Indigenous voices because of deadlines or limited connections on the part of the reporter, said CBC Indigenous journalist Jessica Deer. Journalists go to the same Indigenous person for reaction all the time, she said.

"There's a lot of mistrust toward mainstream media, and I can understand because there's been years of misrepresentation in a lot of coverage when it comes to Indigenous people," Deer said.

*lori:wase* editor Greg Horn said it's not uncommon to get calls from mainstream journalists for his opinions on issues impacting the community he covers, and he has to tell them that they need to dig deeper and find regular citizens to talk to.



"If you're looking to tell stories, talk to the people affected, don't talk 'at' them," he said.

Brittany LeBorgne said too few Indigenous characters are written into film and television storylines, and casting is often based on racial stereotypes, which she said can create a prejudice within a prejudice by excluding Indigenous actors who don't fit the stereotype.

"At what point will we be considered part of everybody?" LeBorgne asked.

"I think there's still this idea that Indigenous content doesn't sell. Or Indigenous stories don't matter as much, because it's kind of a subcategory."

Indigenous characters also have to perform Indigenous culture rather than be ordinary people in a narrative, she said.

Teacher and filmmaker Michelle Smith said the challenges of representation in the media are greater in Quebec than elsewhere in Canada.

She said that in Quebec, there is typically a greater lack of sensitivity around representation since often Quebecers believe French settlers had friendly relationships with all Indigenous people, which erases colonization from their perception.

"I've also heard French Quebecers as 'having been colonized.' They're the colonized," Smith said.

"I've seen this kind of discourse in education, in media, and there's sort of that sense that, 'Oh, we're Indigenous.'

### **How do we create change?**

LeBorgne said that it when it comes to sensitizing people to Indigenous issues, the burden often falls on people with Indigenous heritage to do that.

It can be "hard and exhausting and a bit of a burden at times. It shouldn't just be on us," she said.

She thinks the education system should step up to help sensitize the population and that representation in the media is important because it makes people feel that they matter.

She said filmmakers can cast Indigenous characters without writing them in a way which focuses on their Indigenous identity.

Horn and Deer agreed that journalists in the mainstream need more education to help them better understand Indigenous issues.

Horn said part of the problem is that the mainstream media tend to only tell bad stories and the choice of language used is sometimes negligent.

Smith wants to see more of a mainstream focus on positive stories in Indigenous communities — not just ones that fall into stereotypes around violence, homelessness and alcoholism.

"It's been too long that the story and the narrative have been dominated by others,"

Smith said.

There's still a lot of insensitivity in how Indigenous stories are told, but today, people can't get away with it the way they used to because people will speak out about it, Smith said.

To read the original article and access videos of the panel discussion please visit the CBC website: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/media-indigenous-stories-1.5095098>

**Questions after reading the article:**

1. When is the last time you saw Indigenous people represented in the media? How were they portrayed?
2. Have you ever seen a fictional character portrayed by an Indigenous actor whose main storyline was not about their Indigeneity?
3. Connect this article to *Inner Elder*. How did the issue of Indigenous representation affect Michelle growing up?

# Media's Indigenous coverage has always been slanted. And it's still scant, says writer Hayden King

By Hayden King

Published on Mon, July 31, 2017

There is an archive in the basement of the band office at Beausoleil First Nation. Its shelves overflow and crowd the narrow aisles. Among other things, the archive includes remnants of missionary and Indian Agent propaganda. Still, I have spent time there, friends and cousins, too. Excavating curious artifacts from those dusty boxes.

It was with similar interest that Les Couchi from Nipissing First Nation began his research at the Toronto Star's archive. While he discovered some community history, there was much more. Couchi found a collection of stereotypes and myths about Indigenous peoples promulgated by the paper.

After all the Toronto Star was a part of a zeitgeist among Canadian newspapers, a 20th-century consensus that cast Indigenous people — if they were covered at all — as savages to be mocked, excused or contained so the great promise of Canada could be realized.

This reflects what Mark Cronlund Anderson and Carmen L. Robertson recount in their book *Seeing Red: A History of Natives in Canadian Newspapers*. An exhaustive discourse analysis of national, regional and local newspaper coverage of key Canadian-Indigenous conflicts from 1869 onward, they chronicle common themes of "depravity, innate inferiority and a stubborn resistance to progress" in the representation of Indigenous people.

While times have changed, in some ways the news industry in Canada has not. There have been superficial shifts in the tone, of course. Papers no longer print the deeply offensive "squaw," the term "Indigenous" now rightfully merits capitalization, and there is a growing cohort of Indigenous writers appearing in these pages. Yet, coverage of Indigenous issues is still scant.

Journalists for Human Rights has found that in any given year between 2010 and 2016, less than half of 1 per cent of news stories in Ontario focused on Indigenous issues. There is something to say about the quality of that half-percent, too. Last year Environics found that while 73 per cent of Canadians are paying attention to news on Indigenous issues, 34 per cent have never read about residential schools. The defining

issue of our relationship over the past decade has been the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's work and one-third of the public has no idea?

More, we still see the undertones of that depravity narrative in reporting, whether the subject is that [reoccupation teepee](#) on Parliament Hill during Canada 150 celebrations, youth suicides in the [Nishnawbe Aski Nation](#), or violence [against Indigenous women](#) and girls in Thunder Bay. The media often frames this tumult as resulting from the community's own anger or dysfunction but rarely the structural conditions of ongoing colonialism.

In my decade of contributing to newspapers, I've watched these trends persist. Correspondingly I read my colleagues taking familiar defensive postures, making similar counter-arguments, calling out the exclusion and misrepresentation over and over again. Despite a campaign against deceit we are somehow Sisyphus, successfully rebutting that offensive column or op-ed only to do it again tomorrow.

But the routine of pushing that rock may be nearing an end. There is a fragmentation in the Canadian media landscape.

While the decline has a variety of explanations, from an Indigenous perspective, the rise of social media, independent magazines, podcasts and fearless commentary and writing on blogs is increasingly preferred. In fact, racialized people generally seem to be devoting their energies towards mediums in which they can control their own representation. This is how the Toronto Star will die.

Is there salvation in the waning days of the newspaper?

Perhaps a brave mainstream publication will hire the first Indigenous editor. Or privilege Indigenous perspectives on their own experiences. Context can be included in stories, just a sentence or two to prevent Canadians from filling the vacuum of their ignorance with stereotypes.

Accountability to Indigenous communities could be nurtured. Even the notion of objectivity might be reassessed. As long as papers are striving to find "balance" in cases of injustice they will remain an institution that serves power instead of challenging it.

To its credit, by featuring Couchi's research and considering past reporting, the Star is engaging in critical self-reflection. Maybe this is the beginning of a new trend. Otherwise what remain of today's newspapers may be mere dusty boxes in crowded aisles and archived digital files that the next generation will read as a regrettable era and cautionary tale.

*Hayden King is Anishinaabe from Beausoleil First Nation. He is a writer and educator based in the Faculty of Arts at Ryerson University.*

**Questions after reading the article:**

1. When is the last time you saw an Indigenous news story represented in mainstream media? What was the story about?
2. Do you feel the news you receive is truly reflective of our country? Hayden speaks of the “waning days of newspaper.” If the paper press is waning, what should papers do to maintain/increase relevancy/responsiveness to a multitude of perspectives?

### Excerpt 1

I was sitting in my desk day dreaming when I hear the teacher call my name. Oh I know this isn't good - the only time she asks me to come to the front of the classroom is when I'm in trouble. It takes every bit of courage I have to get up out my desk. Yes, Ms. McCain?

She asks me to stand in front of the class, look at everyone and spell the four syllable word ARITHMETIC I said that I could.

Arithmetic. A...RI... TH... MA M A?

Wrong?

She then proceeded to walk up to the chalkboard and spell the word ARITHMETIC

### **A RED INDIAN THOUGHT HE MIGHT EAT TOBACCO IN CHURCH!!**

As I was walking back to my desk she then decided to give me another teaching and I heard her say "Consider yourself lucky that our people came across and taught your people these things, or you might still see savages living in the woods."

Savages? **Did she just say savages??**

Just at that moment my grandmother busts in through the glass window wearing her super hero cape, and her magic moccasins and carrying a loaf of freshly baked bannock in each hand. She walks right up to my teacher and said. "Savages?? You calling us savages??"

She whips out a knife attached to her belt, throws the bannock onto Ms. McCain's desk and chops the bannock into 24 even pieces. Then she looks my teacher right in the eye, with the knife still in her hand, and she says

"I want YOU to look at all the kids in this classroom and explain to them that if it weren't for *our people* feeding *your people* and sharing everything we had, your white asses would have died of starvation a long time ago!

Awass!!!