Review of *Native American Drama: A Critical Perspective* by Christy Stanlake

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Understanding Native American drama requires a critical perspective often lacking in theater and academia. Christy Stanlake's book helps remedy this problem with a two-fold strategy. First, she identifies four Native-authored discourses generated in part by the study of American Indian fiction and poetry. Then she applies these discourses to readings from nine Native plays, showing how Native philosophies shape Native drama on the page and in performance. Stanlake explains that place, or “platiality,” in western theater assumes new dimensions in Native drama, expressing complex relationships among character, language, and landscape. She examines the historical and political aspects of Native storytelling and demonstrates how the practice of “storying” and “tribalography” creates relationships, identities, and rhetorical spaces for story-sharing. Finally,
Stanlake explores how Native playwrights deploy tactics of "survivance"—Indigenous concepts of time, motion, and Tricksterism—to survive and resist other-imposed constructions of Indianness from the dominant society or American Indians themselves.

Because so many of the playwrights and theorists she includes have Midwestern roots, these discussions have special interest for Great Plains Quarterly readers. A few slips of scholarship are present, however. Stanlake explicates a scene from Hanay Geiogamah's 1973 play Foghorn, depicting the 1969 landing on Alcatraz by Indian activists, without noting a key point regarding the Narrator's speech. Geiogamah borrows nearly every word from an actual speech given at Alcatraz, while skillfully adapting it for his own dramaturgical purposes. Another, more serious, example is the author's discussion of The Cherokee Night by Oklahoma Cherokee playwright, Lynn Riggs. Stanlake analyzes several of Riggs's characters based on clan descriptions from the Cherokee Nation's website. Tribal websites are excellent for certain kinds of information, but nuanced clan information is maintained through the oral tradition and carried by clan members. No evidence from Riggs's writing is offered to support the author's analysis, and she fails to emphasize sufficiently the fact that these are strictly her own suppositions. As a result, Stanlake momentarily replicates a traditional western approach to criticism and the kind of colonizing scholarship she seeks to overthrow.

Such lapses aside, Native American Drama: A Critical Perspective is an illuminating, eloquent book that ties together a rainbow of American Indian philosophies, theater practices, and texts. With such a valuable resource, no excuses remain for avoiding the study and production of Native drama.

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