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Where the Pavement Ends Five Native American Plays. By William S. Yellow Robe Jr.

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complicates truth, knowing, and the difficulties of constructing an identity from vanishing fragments, it clarifies as well. In this gestalt of story, legend, myth, and history, Endrezze shows that it is still possible to understand, retain, and pass on to the next generation a sense of cultural heritage, no matter how mixed, difficult to recover, or complexly wrought.

*Philip Heldrich*

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**Where the Pavement Ends: Five Native American Plays.** By William S. Yellow Robe Jr. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000. 192 pages. \$24.95 cloth.

*Where the Pavement Ends* includes five of William Yellow Robe Jr.'s plays: *The Star Quilter*, *The Body Guards*, *Rez Politics*, *The Council*, and *Sneaky*. William Yellow Robe Jr., an enrolled member of the Assiniboine tribe of the Fort Peck Reservation in northeast Montana, is a prolific playwright and actor and artistic director of his own Wakiknabe Theatre Company. Four of his five plays included in the University of Oklahoma Press' American Indian Literature and Critical Studies Series Volume 37 could best be described as gritty, realistic short plays relevant to the contemporary Native American reservation experience.

*The Star Quilters*, *The Body Guards*, *Rez Politics*, and *Sneaky* deal essentially with the issues of racism, alcoholism, dysfunctional family structures, and other problems associated with life on the rez, which as Yellow Robe's book title claims is "where the pavement ends." *The Star Quilter*, a one-act play that covers some thirty years of time, concerns the ongoing relationship of Mona Gray, Indian and maker of the star quilts, and LuAnne Jorgensen, a white woman who obtusely and ignorantly over the years exploits the saintly Mona Gray for her star quilts. Both characters are blatant stereotypes, caricatures actually, who, never changing over the years, express themselves in ordinary hackneyed dialogue. As a drama, *The Star Quilters* unimaginatively bludgeons an audience with the issue of racism on the rez.

*The Body Guards* concerns two men who watch over the body of a dead man, and this very short play realistically and simplistically reveals to an audience the bleakness and injustices that exist on the rez. *Rez Politics* is a short play in one act, a conversation without action between two ten-year-old boys, which deals with racism, specifically the conflict between white and black mixed-bloods. *Sneaky*, another short play, tells the story of three brothers who steal the body of their mother from a funeral home and take the body out to the Plains for a traditional Indian tree burial. All of these plays are naturalistic, slice-of-life dramas in which contemporary Indian Country societal issues, such as alcoholism, racism, poverty, and dysfunctional family problems, predominate.

Plays are meant to be performed rather than read, and Yellow Robe's plays have received, with the exception of *The Council*, mostly small-venue staged readings rather than full-scale productions, and Yellow Robe himself

has performed in several of them. In an interview with Paul Rathbun in 1994, Yellow Robe stated, "You know everybody I've known on the reservation has a lot of horror stories in their life about something that happened to a friend or relative" ("Interview with William Yellow Robe, Jr.," *Native Playwrights' Newsletter* 4 [Winter 1994]). Apparently Yellow Robe took some of those stories and his own and gave them a life as plays, and by virtue of his Wakiknabe Theatre he was able to perform them on stage and in the process create acting roles not just for himself but for other Native actors as well. The authenticity of these reservation horror stories can and should not be denied. However, if real people and personal experiences added up to art, the craving for great theater could be satisfied by a \$1.25 ride on the bus or subway in any city in the country. Native theater has the capabilities of being more than the simple naturalistic expressions of reservation horror stories, and I suspect the lack of productions for these plays rests in their slight dramatic skills and their inability to meet theatrical demands. An audience enters the theater with a willing suspension of disbelief and will readily be drawn in and accept a play that conforms to its own rules of reality and specifics of time and place as long as it does not violate audience-held taboos.

Yellow Robe's *Rez Politics* is a realistic play set on a field in Montana on an afternoon in the early 1970s. The characters are two mixed-blood Indian boys of about ten years of age. One of the demands of the theater is that in a realistic play the actors themselves should be the approximate age, sex, and race of the characters they are portraying. In the two productions mentioned in the performance history of *Rez Politics* the boys were played by men and one of those men was Yellow Robe himself. In both *The Body Guards* and *Sneaky* a dead human body appears on stage. On December 3, 1998, at a Returning the Gift Native Writers Conference held in Albuquerque, I was one of a mostly Native audience who attended a staged reading of *Sneaky*. Witnessing the portrayal and treatment of a dead human body on stage violated some deeply held taboos by many members of that audience who, rejecting the experience of the play, sat there silent and unmoved.

There is a danger in criticizing plays dealing with crucial social issues, for the validity and importance of those issues tend to overshadow any discussion or criticism of dialogue, character development, dramatic technique, or potentialities for a life on stage. The four plays mentioned, all dealing with social issues of great importance, are seriously flawed theater pieces that have not and are not likely at any time in the future to be performed on stage. Frankly, the four plays are better read than performed and this anthology is the proper forum for their release.

The fifth play, *The Council*, is another story altogether. In the summer of 1998 I saw a production of the play by the University of New Mexico's Native American Studies Department and Wakiknabe Theatre Company performed at the University of New Mexico (July 25) and on the Civic Plaza in downtown Albuquerque (July 30). The performance met the challenge that Native playwrights face today: to give contemporary meaning to traditional values through the medium of theater. *The Council* is an exciting piece of theater that enthralled its audiences with humor and sentiment while forcing young view-

ers to use their imaginations in viewing the natural world from a different perspective. The play, an environmental parable, expands the idea that before the arrival of man animals shared the world's resources and that with man came problems that can now only be solved by a Native consideration of all life and nature. Through the pre-history adventures and struggles of man and woman, animals, and the forces of nature all struggling to accommodate one another, traditional Indian values of respect, sharing, and relatedness are seen.

What makes *The Council* such an effective piece of theater are its presentational style and imaginative use of dance, movement, costume, props, and music. Native actors from a variety of communities performed the play with skill and understanding and these talented players elicited a great deal of laughter and a not-so-small measure of thoughtful consideration from an appreciative audience of all ages.

In actuality, plays are essentially a written set of instructions for actors, directors, designers, and technicians. As such, plays rely upon the collaborative creative efforts of theater practitioners to successfully bring the play alive for the enjoyment and edification of an audience. While *Yellow Robe's* short naturalistic dramas are better suited for the solitary reader, there can be no doubt that *The Council* is an accomplished work that has and hopefully will continue to delight theater audiences.

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