

Copper Thunderbird

by Marie Clements

an NAC English Theatre / urban ink productions (Galiano Island)
world premiere coproduction
with development assistance from
The Banff Centre and Playwrights' Workshop Montreal

Study Guide

**THE NATIONAL ARTS CENTRE ENGLISH THEATRE
PROGRAMMES FOR STUDENT AUDIENCES
2006-2007 SEASON**

**Peter Hinton
Artistic Director, English Theatre**



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This Study Guide was written and researched by **Jim McNabb** for the National Arts Centre, English Theatre, April 2007. It may be used solely for educational purposes.

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About This Guide

This study guide is formatted in easy-to-copy single pages. They may be used separately or in any combination that works for your classes. The two colour pages found at the end of the Guide are intended for display in the classroom but may also be copied for distribution.

Table of Contents	page(s)
About the Play: Setting; Plot Synopsis; Style; Themes.....	1
Who Helped Put the Production Together?	2 – 3
Creative Team and Cast	2
Marie Clements: A Bio	3
Norval Morriseau: His Life, His Art	4 – 7
A Glossary of Terms	8 - 9
First Nations, Métis and Inuit Artists: Their Visual, Literary and Performing Voices....	10 – 11
Contemporary Aboriginal Peoples Issues	12 - 13
An Excerpt from <i>Copper Thunderbird</i>	14 - 17
Suggested Movies, Books, and Websites.....	18
Activities Before and After Seeing the Play.....	19 - 23
Theatre Etiquette	24
Acknowledgements	25
Colour pages of Costume Designs for <i>Copper Thunderbird</i>	26 - 27

About the Play (see Activity #1)

SETTING: The set for *Copper Thunderbird* shows abstract spaces and forms allowing us to use our imagination in locating scenes and episodes. The play begins in a seedy hotel room where Morrissette has been living. In his imagination we are taken to remembered spots and dream-like locations under water and in the “House of Invention”. Watch for projections on screens to suggest Morrissette’s imagined worlds and inspirations for paintings.

PLOT SYNOPSIS: Recovering from a hangover while residing in Vancouver hotel Norval is visited by his younger, more innocent self. Together they explore the source of Norval’s strength and talent. They journey to an underwater world, a forest where the boy Norval encountered a bear and a tent where Norval relives his early home life interrupted by his residential school experience. He remembers his encounter while a young man with Jack, the art agent, to whom he tells the story of how he came to be given the name Copper Thunderbird. He remembers meeting his future wife Harriet in a sanitarium while recovering from tuberculosis, all the time receiving visions of his connections to the mythical beasts of his heritage. He remembers his life with Harriet, the children they produced, and the conflicting desire of young Norval to live his life as an artist. We travel in Norval’s memories to the Pollock Gallery, where in 1962 he becomes the darling of the Toronto art scene. Norval rejects what to him is an artificial world and consoles himself with alcohol. The failure of his marriage, the hold alcohol has on him and the frustrations of selling his art to white men who cannot understand his work lead to his incarceration in the Kenora jail. From the depths of despair we see the gradual strengthening as Norval embraces religion, both Christianity and traditional Aboriginal. The three Norvals ascend to the “House of Invention” and are visited by the great minds and mythical beings of the past. Norval the Grand Shaman, Norval the Thunderbird Warrior, and Norval the Artist emerge with strength and conviction to carry on.

STYLE: The play is presented in a non-realistic, dream-like style with magical transformations and visions of other worlds. The language is both earthy and poetic.

THEMES: Watch for themes like: searching for identity and strength; the dualities of strength and weakness; the conflict and complement of Christianity and the traditional beliefs of Aboriginal Peoples; the contrast between Aboriginal and European values; the trinity inherent in Morrissette as shown in the three embodiments – “the old man”, “the young man” and “the boy”, perhaps denoting the spiritual, earthly and artistic sides of Morrissette. Note that all three parts of this trinity are played by actors of approximately the same age. Look for parallels with the Christian trinity of The Father, The Son, and The Holy Ghost.

Watch for the “chorus” of actors who play many parts ranging from Dump Bears, to Art Gallery Patrons, to “Californication” Girls.

Who Helped Put the Production Together? (page 1 of 2) (see Activity #14)

The Creative Team

Director: Peter HINTON
Playwright: Marie CLEMENTS
Dramaturge: Paula DANCKERT
Set/Costume Design: Mary KERR
Lighting Design: John WEBBER
Sound Design: Noah DREW
Video Design: Tim MATHESON
Voice and Movement Coach: Nancy BENJAMIN
Stage Manager: Louise CURRIE
Assistant Stage Manager: Stéfanie SÉGUIN
Apprentice Stage Manager: Richard WILSON

Cast (alphabetical listing)

The Boy (Norval): Herbie BARNES
Frog, Bear, Wife and others: Reneltha BOURQUE
Frog, Bear, Wife and others: Byron CHIEF-MOON
Jack and others: Jonathan FISHER
Auntie and others: Margo KANE
Young Man (Norval) and others: Kevin LORING
Old Man (Norval): Billy MERASTY
Frog, Bear, Wife and others: Paula-Jean PRUDAT
Harriet and others: Michelle ST. JOHN



Peter Hinton - Director



Marie Clements - Playwright

Who Helped Put the Production Together? (page 2 of 2)

Marie Clements: A Bio

Marie Clements (born 1962) is an award-winning Métis performer, playwright and director whose work has been presented on stages across Canada, the United States and Europe. She is the founder of urban ink productions, a Vancouver-based First Nations production company that creates, develops and produces Aboriginal and multi-cultural works of theatre, dance, music, film and video. Her plays include: *Age of Iron*, *Urban Tattoo*, *Now look what you made me do*, *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*, *Burning Vision* (Finalist for the Governor General's Award; 2003) and *Copper Thunderbird*. Clements was invited to the prestigious Festival de Théâtre des Amériques* in 2001 for *Urban Tattoo* and in 2002 for *Burning Vision*, a remarkable work for which she won the Canada-Japan Award in 2004. *Burning Vision* was also part of the inaugural Magnetic North Theatre Festival held at the National Arts Centre in 2003. In 2002, she worked in the writing department of the television series *Da Vinci's Inquest*, and, in that same year, a fellowship award from the BC Film Commission enabled her to develop the film adaptation of her stage play, *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*. She is also a regular contributor on CBC Radio. Clements writes, or, some might say, composes her scripts like musical scores, with an urbane, incisive and sophisticated intellect. She lives on Galiano Island, BC.

*(Le Festival de Théâtre des Amériques (FTA) is an annual international festival of contemporary theatre and dance held in Montreal.)

Other Plays by Marie Clements

Urban Tattoo

A one-woman show in which a young Métis woman in the 1940s adopts the persona of Hollywood pin-up girl Jane Russell and embarks on a journey from a small town in the Northwest Territories to the bright lights of Edmonton.

Now look what you made me do

A one-act play in which the responses of women to their sexuality within the context of domestic violence are expressed poetically.

The Unnatural and Accidental Women

A surrealist dramatization of a 30-year-long serial murder case involving the mysterious deaths of Native women in the "Skid Row" area of Vancouver. All victims were found dead with a blood-alcohol reading far beyond safe levels, and last seen in the company of Gilbert Paul Jordan. Yet the coroner's reports listed the cause of death of many of these women as "unnatural and accidental." The play reconstructs the lives of these women as shaped by lost connections -- to loved ones, to the land, to a way of life.

Burning Vision

Clements traces a chilling line of death and destruction caused on both sides of the Pacific as a result of the atomic bombs the U.S. dropped on Japan during the Second World War. From the uranium extracted from mines on Dene land in the Northwest Territories by unprotected and unsuspecting miners to the weapons used on the residents of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the trail of inevitable death, either instantaneous or lingering, is powerfully drawn.

Norval Morrisseau: His Life and Art (page 1 of 4)

"I go to the inner places. I go to the source. I even dare to say, I go to the house of invention where all the inventors of mankind have been." – Norval Morrisseau

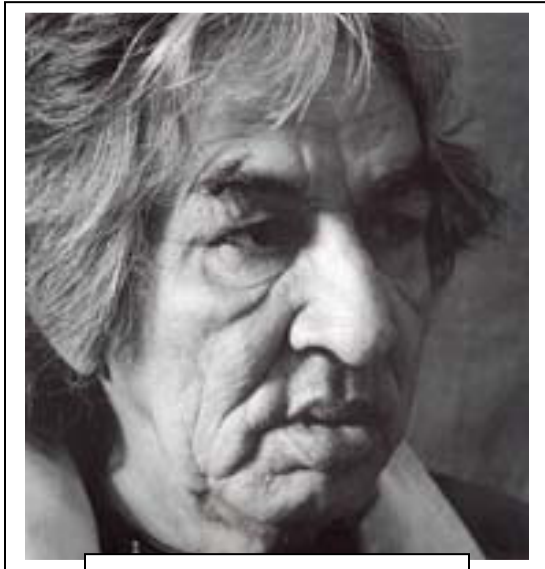


photo of Norval Morrisseau
by Louie Palu.

Norval Morrisseau, an Ojibway (or Anishnaabe), is considered by many as one of the most important, and certainly the most original, artist, native or otherwise, that Canada has produced. Morrisseau was the first to paint the ancient myths and legends of the eastern woodlands' native people, stories previously passed down by the oral tradition. Morrisseau has been a "larger than life" figure living in the extremes of physical, emotional and economic states. His claims of "soul travel" taking him to other dimensions have given him inspiration for many of his paintings. He is a Grand Shaman and a member of the Order of Canada but has also lived on the streets. In the early days he sold drawings and paintings for alcohol, food, and to support his family. Now, the best of his works command over a hundred thousand dollars from avid collectors, and hang in all of the most prestigious museums in Canada, as well as around the world.

Born 1931, Norval Morrisseau was raised on the Sand Point Reserve in northwestern Ontario by his maternal grandparents. His grandfather, Moses Potan Nanakonagos, introduced him to Ojibway shamanism and told him the stories and legends passed down amongst the Ojibway people. The young boy began producing images to illustrate these stories by drawing on the sandy beaches of Lake Nippigon with a stick and then letting the waves take the images away. He was told by some that it was taboo to relate these stories. His grandmother, Vernique Morrisseau, was a devout Catholic and indoctrinated him into the Christian religion. The contrast and balance between these two religions became an important factor in his intellectual and artistic development.

At the age of six, he was sent to a Catholic residential school, where students were educated in the European tradition, native culture was repressed, and the use of native language was forbidden. After two years he returned home and started attending a local community school for several more years.

When he became severely ill as a young man, his mother took him to a Medicine Woman who, as a last resort, gave him the powerful Ojibway name Copper Thunderbird to give him strength. Many elders in the tribe were outraged that such a young man was given such a powerful name. However, he miraculously recovered and now signs all his work using his native name Copper Thunderbird (Miskwaabik Animikii in Ojibway) using Cree syllabics taught to him by his Cree wife.

In 1957 Morrisseau married Harriet Kakegamic whom he met while undergoing treatment for tuberculosis. He worked for several years near Red Lake in northern Ontario at a gold mine refinery, all the while sketching and painting with whatever materials were at hand – birchbark, mill filter paper, hide, plywood scraps. Although he lacked formal training in art he developed his own style often imitating ancient pictographs and petroglyphs from the area. By the early 1960s, Morrisseau was a full-time artist and developed his pictographic style. An early advocate of Morrisseau was the

Norval Morrisseau: His Life and Art (page 2 of 4)

anthropologist Selwyn Dewdney who became very interested in Morrisseau's deep knowledge of native culture and myth. Dewdney was the first to take his art to a wider place.

He was introduced to Toronto art gallery owner Jack Pollock while Pollock was traveling through Northern Ontario in 1962. Pollock took him to Toronto where Morrisseau's first one man show sold out very quickly. He passed on his techniques to like-minded aboriginal friends and is considered The Founder of The Woodland School of Art which has also been called Medicine Art as the images, especially their colours, are agents for healing. The Woodland School is sometimes referred to as Legend Art as it reflects many of the secret legends known only within the Ojibway and Cree Tribes. In 1966 Morrisseau was invited to design a large mural for the Indians of Canada Pavilion at Expo '67 in Montreal. However, the original design was deemed unacceptable because it depicted a young bear and an infant child nursing on the breasts of Mother Earth. Morrisseau redesigned the mural but left it to his colleague Carl Ray to finish the painting.

Morrisseau was dubbed "The Picasso of the North" by the French press in 1969 who considered him one of the most innovative artists of the Century. Unlike Picasso, however, Morrisseau developed his unique style without influence from European art.

In 1972 he almost died in a hotel fire in Vancouver, but recovered from his severe burns. A year later he was incarcerated in Kenora on charges of being drunk and disorderly. On the recommendation of friends and his art dealer he was kept in jail to help him overcome his alcoholism. Given an extra cell for a studio he resumed painting with a passion. He adopted Christianity around that time and these beliefs are reflected in his works of the period. Morrisseau also believes in Eckankar in which it is possible in dreams to astral travel to other dimensions. Here he is inspired in "The House of Invention" where all creators visit. Norval Morrisseau was awarded the prestigious Order of Canada Medal in 1978 by the Governor General of Canada for his contribution to Canadian Art. He was the only painter among the three Canadian artists invited to contribute and show their work at France's Bicentennial Celebration in 1989.

From the 1980s onward Morrisseau's works show much more vibrant use of colours and abstract shapes. The paintings often become more complex and philosophical and focus on spiritual elements. By the turn of the last century Morrisseau had to give up painting canvases due to ill health, but continued to do drawings until 2003. He now suffers from Parkinson's disease and is confined to a wheelchair as a result of a stroke. In 2006 he was honoured by a retrospective exhibition of his work compiled by the National Gallery of Canada, which is now touring to Santa Fe, New Mexico and New York City, after having been in Ottawa, Thunder Bay, and Kleinburg.

The Art of Norval Morrisseau

Morrisseau is a self-taught artist. He developed his own techniques and artistic vocabulary which captured ancient legends and images that came to him in visions or dreams. Most of his art is characterized by figures shown in profile with heavy black outlines. Initially he painted on any material that he could find, especially birch bark, and also moose hide. His mentor Selwyn Dewdney encouraged him to use earth-tone colors and traditional material, which he thought were appropriate to Morrisseau's native style. The subjects of his art in the early period were myths and traditions of the Anishnaabe people in a style similar to images found in the petroglyphs of the Great Lakes region. See http://www.kinsmanrobinson.com/dynamic/artwork_display.asp?ArtworkID=396

Norval Morrisseau: His Life and Art (page 3 of 4)

His later style changed: He used more standard material and the colors became progressively brighter, eventually obtaining a neon-like brilliance. The themes also moved from traditional myth to depicting his own personal struggles. Examine *The Land (Landrights, 1967)* (<http://www.mcmichael.com/exhibitions/morrisseau/images.cfm#>). Painted during a transitional period we see some of the earth colours of his early period combined with the background painted in the bright colours of his later works. Notice the so-called X-Ray technique of many of his early paintings in which the two-dimensional figures drawn in profile show internal features. The aboriginal figures on the left painted on a blue background have inside them a beating heart and the creatures of the air, land and water. Attached to the man's back are the ancestors looking to the traditional past. The words of the humans and the traditional creatures shown as squiggly lines reach out, but do not penetrate the figures of the white men on the right side of the painting. Energy emanating from the fist of the young man reaches toward but does not connect with the white men. The Europeans have a beating heart but no connection with the land is shown in their bodies.

He also produced art depicting Christian subjects: during his incarceration, he attended a local church where he was struck by the beauty of the images on stained-glass windows. Some of his paintings, like *Indian Jesus Christ*, imitate that style and represent characters from the Bible with native features. Examine *Self-portrait* (c 1975) <http://www.mcmichael.com/exhibitions/morrisseau/images.cfm#>. In this painting he depicts himself in profile as a shaman with elaborate headdress, regalia and cloak. Notice the effect of the bright colours which imitate stained-glass windows.

Now examine *Untitled (Shaman Traveller to Other Worlds for Blessings)* (c 1990s) <http://www.mcmichael.com/exhibitions/morrisseau/images.cfm#>. A more mystical subject is attempted. The shaman (Morrisseau) is transformed into a Thunderbird and is flying on a yellow background surrounded by birds and "power balls" emanating energy. The creatures of the mauve spirit world on the left show the x-ray technique, perhaps suggesting their internal strengths.

Take a look at *Obseavations of the Astral World* (1989-1999) found at http://cybermuseum.ca/cybermuseum/search/artwork_zoom_e.jsp?mkey=102446. Here Norval is depicted as a Grand Shaman partially transformed into the powerful Thunderbird and resting on a green background, surrounded by mythical creatures such as the bear/fish. On the opposite side of the painting on an earth-coloured background is a family learning from Morrisseau's observations of the astral plane (yellow background). Notice the family is surrounded by colourful Trees of Knowledge.

Image Conventions in Morrisseau's Art

- Lines of Power: Figures of animals and people may show "lines of power" radiating from heads or bodies. They are short lines whose variations in length and intensity indicate the quality of the power. They can both transmit and receive information.
- Lines of Communication: Animals and people are joined with these flowing lines which indicate relationships. They reflect the artist's perception of the nature of the interdependence.
- Lines of Prophecy: Some creatures of power may have frond-like curling lines issuing from their mouths. They mean more than ordinary speech. They are an indication of prophecy, often associated with shaman talk.
- Lines of Movement: These are very short lines which show important physical movement near an organ (heart) or a shaking tent.

Norval Morriseau: His Life and Art (page 4 of 4)

- The Divided Circle: Morriseau makes repeated use of the “divided circle”, often showing several in one painting. Usually, they are connected with the main image by lines of communication. This symbol carries a great deal of meaning. It represents all of the dualities present in Morriseau’s view of the world. They may be good and evil, heaven and earth, day and night.
- X-Ray Decoration: This term describes the artist’s depiction of inner structures for animals and persons. These structures may show internal organs such as the heart or womb. They may show representations of inner spiritual life. Clothing is seldom indicated and then is usually elaborate robes or costumes.
- Use of Colour: Colour is very important in Morriseau’s art. For most of his career he has painted with unmixed acrylics. Morriseau believes that colour reflects an inner reality. It also transmits a harmony through nature to the material world. For Morriseau colour placement is intuitive. Certain colours have consistent meaning: light blue and dark blue and strong healing colours; white denotes old age, mauve may indicate spiritualism, yellow (as in eyes or backgrounds) may indicate insight or enlightenment.

[Note: The above information has been paraphrased from - Lister Sinclair, and Jack Pollock, *The Art of Norval Morriseau*. (Toronto: Methuen, 1979) 51-58.]

His work brings back our memories of childlike simplicity. His colors affect us in ways that are not immediately apparent. His visions, like ancient wisdom that has turned into dreams of the future, come to life on canvas and paper. His art expresses his spiritual explorations and aspects of Anishnaabe culture as well as his personal development. It reflects tensions between Aboriginal cultures and Christianity, shamanism, the interconnection between all living things and the importance of the family.



*Red Lake Regional Heritage Centre Collection (Red Lake, ON); by permission

For more information check out the website of the Kinsman Robinson Galleries (Toronto), principal dealer for Norval Morriseau: <http://www.kinsmanrobinson.com>.

Glossary (page 1 of 2)

- Aboriginal Peoples** - the three indigenous peoples of Canada – the First Nations (Indian), Inuit, and Métis.
- Algonquian** - an Aboriginal language group comprising a number of languages spoken by bands whose original lands covered most of eastern North America. A few of the tribes are Ojibway, Cree, Ottawa (Odawa), Micmac and Algonquin.
- Animals in Mythology**
- Bear (Mukwa)** - sacred animal or demi-god whose teeth and claws are used in healing rituals; powerful controller of chaos and weather.
- Buffalo** - benevolent bringer of plenty. A rare white buffalo brings peace and good fortune.
- Frog** - controller of water and fertility; a good spirit in times of plentiful water but evil when there is a drought.
- Anishnaabe, Anishnabek** (pl.) - literally “the good being(s)”; the preferred name for the people commonly referred to as Ojibway.
- Eckankar** - “Religion of the Light and Sound”. Followers believe that the divine life current (ECK) flows through light and sound; that the soul is eternal and has the ability to travel; and that spiritual insight can be gained through dream and vision.
- Elder** - an individual known for his or her wisdom. Elders have a variety of spiritual strengths such as interpretation of dreams, knowledge of herbal remedies, or power to heal. Although usually senior in age, sometimes a younger Aboriginal person can come to possess the gift of wisdom.
- Kateri** - the first Aboriginal saint. Kateri Tekakwitha (1656 –1680), the daughter of a Mohawk warrior and a Christian Algonquin woman, was horribly scarred during childhood by smallpox. She later took a vow of chastity and lived a life devoted to caring for the sick. When she died her scars miraculously disappeared to reveal a beautiful girl. She is memorialized at a church on the Kanewake reserve near Montreal.
- Manitou** - a kind of spirit considered to inhabit all living and non-living things.
- Kitche Manitou** – The Great creator, spirit or master who gives life and permits all things, often depicted on scrolls or petroglyphs as a circle, representing eternity, divided into four directions, representing his universal omnipotence.
- Medicine Woman/Man** - an individual with the power to heal others who are sick.
- Mikkinuk (Miskinuk)** - Turtle, which was endowed with the power to act as interpreter between all species on the earth and to travel between the past and the future. These powers were given to Mikkinuk by Nokomis, also known as “Sky-Woman” or “Grandmother to All”, because he offered his back for her to rest on while she created the world. Mikkinuk is always present at every shaking tent ceremony. It is said that North America rests on the back of a giant turtle and so is named Turtle Island.
- Misshipeshu** - one of the best known and most feared mythological creatures of the water possessing demi-god powers. A large cat-like animal with horns and a crested back, it was said to live deep underwater. Because it had the power to create dangerous whirlpools by whipping its tail, offerings of tobacco and gifts were placed on the shore to ensure a safe passage through the waterways.

Glossary (page 2 of 2)

Ojibway (Ojibwe)(also known as Chippewa) - Aboriginal nation, part of the Algonquian language group, occupying much of the area around the Great Lakes of North America, particularly northern Ontario, southern Manitoba and Michigan; one of the most populous Indian groups with over 150 bands.

Petroglyph - a graphic symbol carved onto a rock face, especially one dating to prehistory.

Pictograph - a pictorial symbol or sign painted onto a rock surface or cliff depicting an ancient message.

Residential Schools - boarding schools for Aboriginal children operated by the Canadian government in partnership with various churches in operation between the mid-19th and late 20th centuries. The purpose was to indoctrinate the children with a formal western education and draw them into mainstream culture. Native languages and traditions were strictly forbidden resulting in a loss of heritage, pride and identity. Abuses of all kinds often took place.

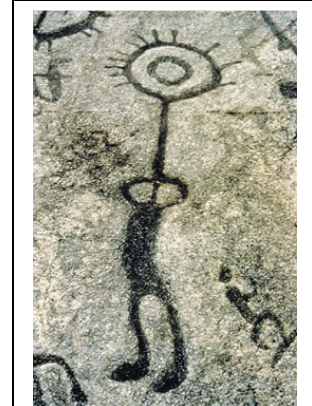
Scroll - long strips of birch bark painted with symbols and images used as aids for storytelling, ritual procedures, prayer books or beliefs. Scrolls are usually created by the members of the Great Medicine Society or Midewiwin.

Shaman - a man or woman who has the gift to use trance-like techniques to communicate with and benefit from the spirit world. Shaman commonly refers to one who has the capacity to heal and also to transform, taking on the characteristics or appearance of spirits and animals.

Taboo - an action or word that is to be avoided or forbidden by social custom.

Thunderbird - gigantic bird that protects the Anishnabek. A Thunderbird has the ability to cause thunderstorms. It makes thunder by beating its brilliantly coloured wings and shooting lightning bolts from its eyes. It takes its storms south in the autumn and returns with them in the spring.

Tobacco - plant used by First Nations people in traditional ceremonies and rituals for thousands of years. When burned, the rising smoke provides a direct link and a means to send prayers to all spirits beyond the sky. Sweet grass, sage and cedar are other sacred plants that are burned in Aboriginal ceremonies. Smoke is also used to "smudge" or cleanse people and ceremonial objects. Cedar and sage burn out negative forces while sweet grass purifies and unites.



Petroglyph near Peterborough, ON

First Nations, Métis and Inuit Artists (page 1 of 2)

During the late 19th century, Métis leader Louis Riel predicted: "My people will go to sleep for a 100 years and it will be the artists that awaken them." In fact, it has been during the last quarter of the 20th century that Aboriginal Peoples have rediscovered and embraced the power of visual art, theatre, writing, music and film. Through these arts the rest of Canada is learning the wealth of culture of our Native peoples who in turn are beginning to regain the self-confidence that so many lost. What follows is a tiny selection of those artists. To learn more about any of these visit their personal websites. Many, many more are waiting to be found.

Performing Artists



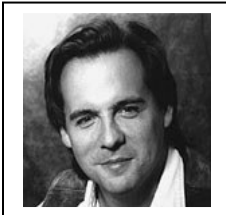
Susan Aglukark is a multiple award-winning Inuk singer/songwriter, a leading voice in Canadian music. She blends the Inuktitut and English languages with contemporary pop arrangements to tell the stories of her people, the Inuit of Arctic Canada. The emotional depth and honesty of her lyrics, her pure, clear voice and themes of hope, spirit and encouragement have captivated and inspired listeners from all walks of life. Her motivational speeches address the social and health problems in Aboriginal communities and seek to re-awaken the confidence and

self-esteem among the youth of the North.



Adam Beach, a 34 yr. old film and TV actor, was born on the Dog Creek Reserve in Manitoba of Saulteaux decent. He was inspired to go into acting after taking high school drama classes in Winnipeg and took on several small roles in television before landing the lead in Disney's *Squanto: A Warrior's Tale*. He's been busy ever since playing Aboriginal roles, the most notably in *Windtalkers* and *Flags of Our Fathers*. He has been cast as a regular on *Law and Order: SVU* for the next three years. He recently hosted the National Aboriginal Achievement Awards honouring 14 men and women who have achieved professional and personal success in various fields.

Literary Artists



Drew Hayden Taylor is one of Canada's leading Native playwrights and humorists. Humour figures in all Taylor's work, eliciting laughter edged with disturbing awareness of stereotypes being exploded and bitter truths being given a very thin sugar coating. An Ojibway born in 1962 on the Curve Lake First Nation, near Peterborough, Ontario, he has been a journalist, a documentary director and short story and TV writer. His plays include *Toronto at Dreamer's Rock* and *Bootlegger Blues*; an anthology of short stories is titled *Fearless Warriors*.



Tomson Highway was born in a tent near Maria Lake, Manitoba of Cree parents. He trained as a concert pianist but chose to make his mark as a playwright. Two of his plays, *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* have been performed in Ottawa at the Great Canadian Theatre Company and the NAC respectively. Highway, who is openly gay, pushes the envelope in his works and looks to expose the problems, challenges and injustices that the Native population faces.

First Nations, Métis and Inuit Artists (page 2 of 2)

Visual Artists

Norval Morrisseau is considered the grandfather of native artists in Canada. In 1973 he and six other native artists formed the Professional National Indian Artists Inc. to promote their works and encourage the development of other native artists. This group came to be known as the Indian Group of Seven and influenced a new generation of legend painters often referred to as “The Woodland School”. The members of the original Group were Norval Morrisseau, Daphne Odjig, Alex Janvier, Jackson Beardy, Carl Ray, Eddy Cobiness, and Joe Sanchez. A very small sample of these and other Native Artists is found below. Students can conduct a web search using each artist’s name to see examples of his/her work.



Daphne Odjig was born in 1919 of Ojibway and British parents on the Wikwemikong Reserve on Manitoulin Island. Unable to bear discrimination she left her native heritage behind and moved to Toronto. Her art was initially influenced by European painters but she later returned to her roots and began to focus on the imagery of the Ojibway culture. Her images became brightly coloured and highly stylized with soft flowing contours, the shapes often outlined with black. Her images were most often emphasizing womanhood and family.



Jackson Beardy (1944 – 1984) Born on the Garden Hill Reserve in Manitoba, educated at a residential school and then as a commercial artist, Beardy was inspired by Odjig and Morrisseau to paint from the traditional myths and legends of his Oji-Cree heritage. He had a distinctive graphic style characterized by flat areas of warm colours and curving ribbons of paint. He explored the natural balances in nature, regeneration and growth.



Robert Davidson is one of Canada’s most respected contemporary artists. A Northwest Coast native of Haida descent, he is a master carver of totem poles and masks and works in a variety of other media as a printmaker, painter and jeweler. A leading figure in the renaissance of Haida art and culture, he was recently honoured with an exhibition of his works at the National Gallery of Canada.



Annie Pootoogook Born in 1969 in Cape Dorset, Nunavut, into an extraordinary artistic family where both her parents and her maternal grandmother were highly recognized carvers and printmakers, Annie has a unique voice expressing contemporary woman’s life in the North with insight and humour.

Contemporary Aboriginal Peoples Issues (page 1 of 2)

Images in Media

For over 100 years, literature, movies, TV, and comics ingrained into the North American mind the image of Aboriginal Peoples as stereotypical violent savages, loyal sidekicks, romanticized Indian princesses, or drunks. Not until the last quarter of the 20th century were Aboriginal characters in films actually played by an Aboriginal person, and rarely were their stories told from their point of view. The racist misrepresentation and historical inaccuracies have had a serious impact on the self-image of Aboriginal Peoples. For a discussion of this issue visit: http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/issues/stereotyping/aboriginal_people/aboriginal_portrayals.cfm.

Health Issues

Epidemics of disease brought by Europeans wiped out a huge number of Canada's Aboriginal Peoples, up to 90% in places. Elders and children were the first to die. Without the wisdom and traditional knowledge possessed by the elders in areas of healing, philosophy and leadership, communities became reliant on the European society and set the members in a subservient and dependent status with the resulting attitude existing until today. Other contemporary health issues have to do with crowded and substandard housing with the accompanying emotional stress and family abuse, alcohol and substance abuse, and AIDS. Many people believe that better health conditions depend upon raising self-esteem and developing self government. Visit: <http://www.schoolnet.ca/aboriginal/issues/health-e.html>.

Residential Schools and the Education System

The Residential School system operated by the government and religious orders lasted from the mid-1800s to the late 1900s. Children were taken from the reserves with the intent of indoctrinating them into white society. Along with deprivation and abuse, the children had to contend with the loss of their Aboriginal heritage and sense of self-worth. Repercussions last until today often in the form of alcohol abuse and shattered family structure. When the residential schools were eventually closed, the children were integrated into the current school system but, with curricula that lacked relevance, the drop-out rate remains high. Across Canada approximately 20% of Aboriginal children graduate from Grade 12. Read more at: <http://www.schoolnet.ca/aboriginal/issues/schools-e.html>.

Land Claims

When Europeans moved across North America to settle on their ancestral lands, the Aboriginal Peoples were coerced into signing treaties that took away their lands, rights, and in many cases livelihoods. Aboriginal Peoples believe that their treaty rights are a series of broken promises. Furthermore, many groups did not sign treaties to give away their lands which are nonetheless to this day occupied by non-Aboriginal settlements. Respect for sacred lands and natural resources of traditional holdings must be established. Although certain major land claims have been settled, many more have not even reached the courts. <http://www.schoolnet.ca/aboriginal/issues/claims-e.html>.

Contemporary Aboriginal Peoples Issues (page 2 of 2)

Indian Reservations

The economic and social conditions on many reserves are lower than in many Third World countries. Education completion rates among Aboriginal children are the lowest and unemployment rates are the highest in Canada. There is a need for more and better housing, improved health and dental services, social and recreation services, and culturally appropriate means of dealing with victims and initiators of different forms of abuse. Individuals and families need healing and a return to self-government and feelings of self-worth.

<http://www.schoolnet.ca/aboriginal/issues/reserves-e.html>.

Self-Determination

Indian treaties, Indian reserves, Indian Acts are all institutions designed by Europeans and Euro-Canadians to manage Aboriginal Peoples primarily for their own convenience. Now, Aboriginal Peoples wish to develop their own institutions, and to see their cultures grow and change in the directions they have chosen for themselves. Self-determination means designing and controlling their own justice systems, schools, health clinics, employment services and businesses. It means taking responsibility for their survival as healthy, vibrant peoples. Self-determination must come from within Aboriginal cultures themselves.

<http://www.schoolnet.ca/aboriginal/issues/selfgov-e.html>.

An Excerpt from *Copper Thunderbird* (page 1 of 4) (see Activity #10)

(The Boy stands tall on the bed, reaching up he points his finger [to the roof of the tent] and a black line continues and begins to draw the outline of a white bear, a turtle, a bird, etc. The Old Man stands and does the same and like two young boys they bring the tent to life with the images of their spirit, mind and imagination.)

(As they draw, the sound of each animal becomes clear in the tent and mixes with each other. The drawing gets faster and faster, the noise gets louder and louder.)

(A door tunnel opens and so does the faraway image of a woman's body and the sound of her heels clicking from afar and drawing closer. Her flashlight penetrates the water and tent.)

(And finally we see her in 1950s splendor. She wears a wet housedress, a bathing cap, and cat glasses. She is the ultimate Auntie who ruins everybody's life.)

AUNTIE (Loudly)

What's going on in there? I said, What's going on in there?

(Silence)

Yes ... well ... You think I don't know what's going on in there? Just because I'm white and asking, doesn't mean I don't know what's going on in there.

(Silence)

I've seen everything ... You hear me?

THE OLD MAN

(whispers in conspiracy with The Boy)

Nothing ... Don't say nothing ... she's a bitch of an Aunt ... once a bitch always a bitch ... don't say nothin'

AUNTIE

I'm not stupid. ... I can see what's going on in there. You don't have to have 20/20 vision to see everything. Even if I have to wear glasses because, god knows, it's hard seeing everything. I can still see savages.

(She listens. Silence.)

An Excerpt from *Copper Thunderbird* (page 2 of 4)

AUNTIE (cont.)

I can see what you are up to ... which is no good. You should go to school that's what you should do. Get a trade. You should go to school and learn something useful instead of drawing those stupid pictures.

THE OLD MAN

I went to school. I got your grade four and then some for all the good it did me.

(speaking to The Boy)

You gotta learn your own education.

AUNTIE

What did you say?

THE BOY

Nothin'.

THE OLD MAN

Nothin'. The boy said nothin'.

AUNTIE

You should go to residential school and learn how to smile. Never underestimate the power of being useful and learning how to smile. The right smile can get you through a lot of doors especially if you are a useful Indian.

THE OLD MAN

Don't listen to her squeaking.

(The Boy slowly continues the drawing line.)

AUNTIE

Stop that useless pagan scratching when I'm talking. That boy is rude and useless. Bullheaded! Try to give an Indian advice and see where it gets you. Nowhere. What do I care?

An Excerpt from *Copper Thunderbird* (page 3 of 4)

THE OLD MAN

You have to decide your own future... What are you going to do?

AUNTIE

What are you going to do with your life? One of these days ... you're going to learn ...

THE BOY/THE OLD MAN

I'm going to ... He's going to ...

AUNTIE

... learn his lesson. One of these days he is going to learn his lesson and I'm going to be there. I'm going to ...

THE BOY (In Ojibway)

I'm going to be a Shaman! [translate]

AUNTIE

Yes! What did you say? I can't understand that devil speak ...

THE OLD MAN

He said he's going to be a Shaman. Deal with it ...

AUNTIE

Useless! Useless! Bullheaded Indian!

THE BOY

I am going to school ...

AUNTIE

I think he said he's going to school ...

THE OLD MAN

You just hear what you like ...

An Excerpt from *Copper Thunderbird* (page 4 of 4)

AUNTIE

Yes! By God ... he's going to school ... he's seen the light! Powerful ...
Powerful ... Lord ... Amen!

THE OLD MAN

And then .. He's going to leave school ... What do you think of that!

AUNTIE

Useless ... useless ... unsmiling bullheaded Indians ...

(The Old Man smiles satisfied.)

THE OLD MAN

Well ... geez ... you gotta have a personal belief.

AUNTIE

Mark my words you're going to learn your lesson ...

THE OLD MAN

No! He's gonna live his own life

AUNTIE

You're going to learn the lesson of your life. Which is ... nobody gets
to live their own life ... and I'm gonna be here to say "I told you so" ...
Yessirree, mark my words ... your gonna wish you listened to your old
Auntie ... No body lives their own life on this planet ... Your hear me ...

*(Complete quiet. Auntie frustrated by the silence hesitates and then clicks
her flashlight out. The sound of her footsteps echo down a long hallway.)
(The Old Man listens to her heels click down the long hallway.)*

THE OLD MAN

That woman messed up my whole life.

[End of scene.]

Suggested Movies/Books/Websites (see Activity #11)

Movies



A Separate Reality: The Life and Times of Norval Morrisseau (CBC, broadcast in Feb. 2005 on "Life and Times") The documentary is an admiring but unflinching portrait of the artist, which looks into aspects of his life that have never been discussed before in public. The film includes rarely-seen footage to show Morrisseau's astonishing journey from Ontario's Sandpoint reserve to his first triumphant exhibition in Toronto in 1962. It also deals with the period he spent living on the streets of Vancouver before meeting with the young man who later "adopted" him as father and helped him overcome his alcoholism.

The Paradox of Norval Morrisseau (1974, National Film Board, 28 min.) In this study of Norval Morrisseau, filmed as he works among the lakes and woodlands of his ancestors, we see this remarkable Indian artist who emerged from a life of obscurity in the bush to become one of Canada's most renowned painters. Morrisseau the man is much like his paintings: vital and passionate, torn between his Ojibway heritage and the influences of the white man's world. (Available from NFB.)

<http://www.coghanart.com/nmvideo.htm> has a short video of Morrisseau explaining the healing powers of colours.

Books



Norval Morrisseau - Shaman Artist (2006) by Greg A. Hill; National Gallery of Canada. The catalogue of the recent touring exhibition of Morrisseau's works; includes many full-page reproductions of paintings as well as essays on his style and life. (five copies available at Ottawa Public Library, OPL)

The Art of Norval Morrisseau (1979) by Lister Sinclair and Jack Pollock; Methuen. An extensive commentary on the works and style of Morrisseau including many photographs of the artist and full colour reproductions of his works. (Available at OPL)

Norval Morrisseau: Travels to the House of Invention (1997) by Norval Morrisseau; Key Porter Books. This is a beautifully produced book filled with many large colour plates and explanation of the works by the artist. (five copies available at OPL)

Norval Morrisseau and the Emergence of the Image Makers (1984) by Elizabeth McLuhan and Tom Hill; Methuen. Catalogue of an exhibition held at the Ontario Art Gallery includes work by Morrisseau and a number of other artists of the "Woodland" school of art. (three copies in OPL)

Websites



<http://www.kinsmanrobinson.com/dynamic/artist.asp?ArtistID=11> website of the Kinsman Robertson Galleries, principal dealer for Norval Morrisseau. A number of pieces are shown here.

http://www.gallery.ca/exhibitions/exhibitions/Norval_Morrisseau/english/about.html

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norval_Morrisseau

Activities (page 1 of 5)

Before Seeing the Play (page 1 of 3):

1. A Reading Assignment (refer to page 1)

Distribute copies of page 1 of this Study Guide, "About the Play". The students should read the synopsis and comments on the play beforehand so as to be better prepared to understand the world of Norval Morrisseau. The description of Norval Morrisseau's life and art found on pages 4–7 would also be very helpful.

2. A Visual Art Project (refer to pages 5-7)

Many of Morrisseau's paintings are meant to illustrate legends which had been passed down orally through the generations. Sometimes they are like guides to the storyteller indicating events, relationships or strengths of creatures. Have the students visit the following websites containing First Nations legends and myths, choose one story and then illustrate it with a coloured drawing. There should be enough details in the piece that the whole story is prompted by this visual aid.

<http://www.native-art-in-canada.com/nativelegends.html>

<http://www.ewebtribe.com/NACulture/stories.htm>

<http://www.mpm.edu/wirp/ICW-141.html>

<http://www.ioejack.com/coastsalishhistory.html>

3. A Visual Art Project on Cree Syllabics (refer to pages 5-7)

A writing system was devised for the Cree language in the mid-1840s by a missionary working in northern Manitoba for his native students who were having difficulties learning to read and write using the Roman alphabet used in English. The new syllabary was quite simple; it consists of just nine basic shapes representing syllables, which can be rotated to distinguish between different vowels and adorned with a diacritic dot to distinguish vowel lengths. This syllabary was so easy to learn that it caught on quickly, leading to an incredibly high literacy rate among the Cree and adaptations of the script to be used to write native languages all over Canada, including Inuktitut and others. Norval Morrisseau (a.k.a. Copper Thunderbird) chose to sign his paintings using these syllabics:



Have students visit <http://eastcree.org/keyboard.html> a site which illustrates the syllabics in the form of a chart along with a vocal interpretation of each symbol. Then have students spell their own name using Cree syllabics.

Activities (page 2 of 5)

Before Seeing the Play (page 2 of 3):

4. Art Appreciation Activity (refer to pages 5-7)

a) Visit the website of the Kinsman Robinson Galleries (official representative of Morrisseau) and look at his painting *Bird Family with Circles of Life* (http://www.kinsmanrobinson.com/dynamic/artwork_display.asp?ArtworkID=238) painted mid-career in 1983. Refer to the description of Morrisseau's style of art on pages 5-7 and write a paragraph describing this painting in your own words. What is Morrisseau's subject matter and what do you think he is saying? What aspects of Morrisseau's distinctive style are illustrated in this painting? How does the artist use colour and forms (shapes) in his art? How would you describe the composition of the work (arrangement of elements in the painting)?

b) Now examine an earlier painting from 1965 called *Beaver and Wigwam Represents Human Life/Interdependence of One Another*

(http://www.kinsmanrobinson.com/dynamic/artwork_display.asp?ArtworkID=397).

Notice the two-dimensional x-ray style, the creature with body parts from different animals, the divided circle representing duality with energy emanating from it and the powerlines connecting the various elements. What is the artist saying in this painting?

c) Now examine a more complex painting from 1995 called *The Shaman's Dream* (http://www.kinsmanrobinson.com/dynamic/artwork_detail.asp?ArtworkID=278). Write a paragraph describing it in your own words. What is Morrisseau's subject matter? How does the artist use colour and forms (shapes) in his art? How would you describe the composition of the work (arrangement of elements in the painting)? How would you define Morrisseau's artistic style? Locate the turtle, the snake, the spirits, the tree of knowledge, the powerlines, the power balls. What do you think the background colours mean? Why do you think the shaman's eye is a different colour than all the others?

d) Tour the other paintings on the Kinsman Robinson Galleries website and try to "read" each one.

5. View Images of Morrisseau's works on the Internet (refer to pages 5-7)

Visit several of the following websites to become familiar with the works of Norval Morrisseau. Use the commentary on pages 5-7 on Morrisseau's life and the distinctive Woodland style he developed to "read" the paintings.

<http://www.kinsmanrobinson.com/dynamic/artist.asp?ArtistID=11>

http://www.gallery.ca/exhibitions/exhibitions/Norval_Morrisseau/english/visual.html

<http://www.mcmichael.com/exhibitions/morrisseau/morrisseauatmcmichael.cfm>

A google search will introduce you to many other collections. Some fakes done in the Morrisseau style are now surfacing but a committee is working to authenticate the almost 10,000 pieces created by this very prolific artist. If you are interested, refer to some articles on this topic: http://www.westbridge-fineart.com/cgi-bin/new_news.pl?newsID=21 , <http://www.canada.com/ottawacitizen/news/story.html?id=cd2fa8b4-6a94-4294-9a49-2c3f9ee059f6&k=39778> and

http://www.goldiproductions.com/canada_site/art/art10_morrisseau2_fake.html.

Activities (page 3 of 5)

Before Seeing the Play (page 3 of 3):

6. A Playwriting Assignment (refer to pages 4-7)

Research from the NAC ArtsAlive website on different ways to begin a play's opening scene (<http://www.artsalive.ca/en/eth/activities/script.html>). Try your hand at using one of the suggestions to begin a biographical play about Norval Morrisseau. (See the pages in this Study Guide outlining his life). After viewing *Copper Thunderbird* compare the technique used by Marie Clement to begin her play.

7. A Reading and Performance Assignment (refer to page 10)

Obtain a play by one of the following Aboriginal playwrights, choose a scene with a partner and do a rehearsed reading of it for the class. Tomson Highway, Drew Hayden Taylor, Daniel David Moses, Monique Mojica, Margo Kane, Billy Merasty.

8. A Music Assignment (refer to page 10)

Susan Aglukark is an award winning Inuit singer. Some other First Nations and Métis musicians are Buffy St. Marie, Murray Porter, Robbie Robertson and the Red Road, Elisapie Isaac and Taima. Visit some of their websites, listen to some of their music, and find what it says to you about their First Nations culture.

9. A Movie and Cultural Analysis Project (refer to pages 12-13)

View one of the following videos dealing with the life of Aboriginal Peoples and compare the portrayal of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal characters. *Pow-wow Highway*, *Little Big Man*, *Dances with Wolves*, *Thunderheart*, *The Mission*, *Black Robe*, Disney's *Pocahontas*, *Clear Cut*.

10. A Scene Study or Discussion Activity (refer to pages 14-17)

An excerpt from *Copper Thunderbird* is included in this Study Guide. This is a scene for two males and one female. The excerpt may be used for a scene study in which a team of students rehearse and present the scene. Explore the comedy in the character of Auntie or the theatricality of two actors playing Norval at different times in his life. The scene could also be used as a jumping off point for discussion on the Residential School System. (See page 12 and also research material on a number of websites on the topic such as http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/gs/schl_e.html , <http://www.schoolnet.ca/aboriginal/issues/schools-e.html> or http://archives.cbc.ca/IDD-1-70-692/disasters_tragedies/residential_schools/).

11. An Art Appreciation Activity (refer to page 18)

Sign out from the Ottawa Public Library one of the art books mentioned on page 18 so that students may leaf through and become familiar with the style and subject matter of Morrisseau's paintings.

12. Any trip to the theatre should also involve the students being made aware of proper theatre etiquette while at the NAC. A handout is available on page 24 of this Study Guide. Please photocopy and distribute to students.

Activities (page 4 of 5)

After Seeing the Play

13. The teacher could conduct a class discussion on the following topics:

(refer to colour pages 26 and 27)

- Style of writing and direction chosen for this play;
- Themes explored – what was it about?
- Effect of having one character played by three different actors;
- Production aspects:
 - Costumes – how well did they define time period, character, mood? How were the costumes used to create humour, spectacle, Aboriginal mythology?
 - Set – how was it used to define location, theme? What mood did it convey? What abstract ideas did it evoke? What effect did the projections have on the viewer?
 - Lighting – did the realistic/non-realistic nature of lighting express anything; What special effects were used?
- Relevance of this material concerning an Aboriginal artist in the last half of the 20th century to today's audiences.

14. Write a Play Review (refer to page 2)

While the play is still fresh in their minds, give students the assignment of writing a review of the production of *Copper Thunderbird*. Have them read reviews of other plays in The Ottawa Citizen or Xpress to give them an idea of the standard approach to theatrical criticism. A suggested outline for writing a review can also be found online on page 12 of the Study Guide for *The "Vaudevilles" of Chekhov* found in the NAC website <http://www.artsalive.ca/en/eth/activities/>. Another excellent guide to writing a review can be found on the Theatre Ontario website http://theatreontario.org/content/play_reviews.htm. Students may have received programs at the matinée, or may refer to page 2 of this Study Guide ("Who Helped Put the Production Together?") for the correct information about the production in their reviews. The areas the review should cover, in general and more specifically when merited, are: all design elements (lighting, sound, set and costumes), the performance of the actors, the direction, the basic narrative, dialogue and the central theme(s) of the script.

15. A Sociological Project on Contemporary Issues facing Canada's Aboriginal Peoples (refer to pages 12-13)

Have the class divide into several groups who will each pick an issue facing Canada's Aboriginal Peoples. Research each topic on websites such as those of Schoolnet <http://www.schoolnet.ca/Aboriginal/issues/index-e.html> or Cradleboard Project <http://www.cradleboard.org/main.html>. An Indian and Northern Affairs site also has important information: http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ks/10000_e.html. Each group can prepare a brief report, after which all groups present these reports to the class.

Activities (page 5 of 5)

16. A Research Project on Aboriginal Visual Artists (refer to page 11)

The following website contains a list of Aboriginal artists or selections of their works. Browse to find artists whose work you particularly like and explain what aspect of their style attracts you.

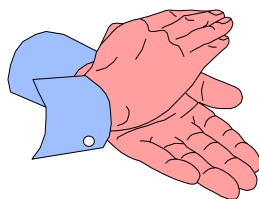
<http://www.aboriginalcanada.gc.ca/acp/site.nsf/en/ao34821.html#visualartists>



Theatre Etiquette

Please take a moment to prepare the students for their visit to the National Arts Centre by explaining good **Theatre Etiquette** which will enhance the enjoyment of the play by all audience members:

- 1.** *Copper Thunderbird* will be performed in the Theatre of the NAC. Matinées at the NAC are for students and the general public. It is important for everyone to be quiet (no talking or rustling of materials) during the performance so others do not lose their immersion in the “world of the play”. Unlike movies, the actors in live theatre can hear disturbances in the audience and will give their best performances when they feel the positive involvement of the audience members. The appropriate way of showing approval for the actors’ performances is through laughter and applause. For the enjoyment of all, people who disturb others during the show may be asked to leave the Theatre.
- 2.** If you plan to make notes on the play for the purposes of writing a review, please do not try to write them during the play. This can be distracting for the actors. Wait until after the performance is finished to write your reflections, please.
- 3.** It is important that there be no electronic devices used in the Theatre so that the atmosphere of the play is not interrupted and others are not disturbed. **Cell phones, pagers and anything that beeps must be turned off.** Cameras and all other recording devices are not permitted in the Theatre.
- 4.** You will be seeing *Copper Thunderbird* in the Theatre of the NAC. Tickets with assigned seats will be distributed by your teacher and to avoid confusion it is important to sit in the designated seat. All even numbered seats are on the left side of the theatre and all odd numbered seats are on the right. This means that seats 10 and 12, for example, are actually side by side.
- 5.** Programs may or may not be distributed at this student matinée. Information on the artists who put this play together, however, can be found in this Study Guide for those who wish to use it in writing a review. Some programs can be made available to teachers if desired as a teaching aid to show how a program is put together.
- 6.** The play is in two acts with one intermission. It is important to make a trip to the washroom before the show starts, as anyone leaving while the play is in progress may unfortunately not be allowed back into the Theatre.





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Investing in young Canadians through the performing arts:
as young audiences, through professional training
and in classrooms across the country.

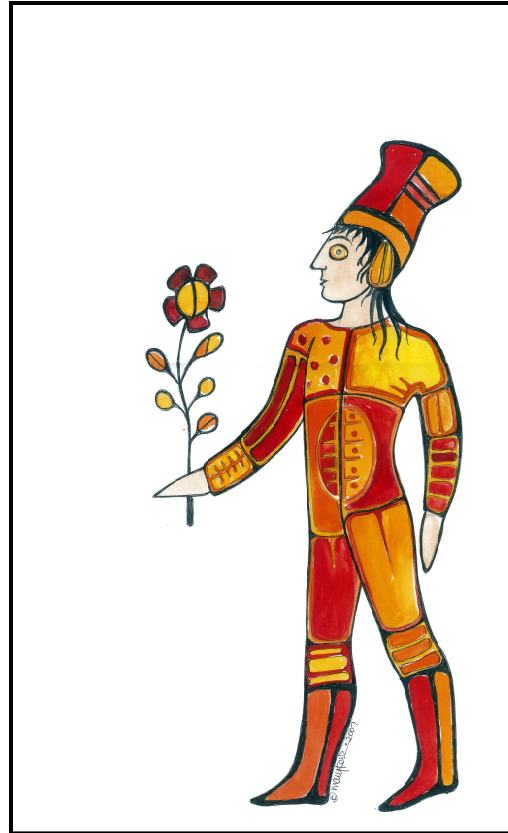
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and the National Arts Centre Foundation Donors' Circle.



Norval Woman



Kateri



Norval Man

Costume Designs for *Copper Thunderbird* – designs by Mary Kerr



Norval Wife



Thunderbird



Auntie Nurse

Costume Designs for *Copper Thunderbird* – designs by Mary Kerr