

Governor of the Dew

by **Floyd Favel**

and

The Velvet Devil

by **Andrea Menard**

STUDY GUIDE

**THE NATIONAL ARTS CENTRE ENGLISH THEATRE
PROGRAMMES FOR STUDENT AUDIENCES
2002-2003 SEASON**

Marti Maraden
Artistic Director, English Theatre

This Study Guide was written and researched by **Deborah James**, in consultation with **Globe Theatre** (Regina), for the National Arts Centre English Theatre, August, 2002.

This document may be used for educational purposes only.

About This Guide

This study guide is formatted in easy-to-copy single pages. They can be used separately or in any combination that works for your classes. Here is an outline of the contents of each page with suggestions on how you may want to use it.

Section Titled	May Be Used To
Plot Synopses —a basic story outline for each play	Give background on plot
A Production Who’s Who —program information	Aid students writing reviews
Forms and Facts —a discussion of genres linked to a pertinent historical fact about first contact between the indigenous peoples of the Americas and Europeans	Define applicable terms Extend context of meaning
Floyd Favel on <i>Governor of the Dew</i> —an interview with the playwright/director	Discuss inspiration Introduce the idea of ritual Give context for the play
What To Watch For in <i>Governor of the Dew</i> —information on the ideas of Grotowski, Stanislavski and Chaikin as they relate to <i>Governor of the Dew</i>	Focus a review topic Teach about modern theatre
Andrea Menard on <i>The Velvet Devil</i> —an interview with the playwright/performer	Introduce the character Look at script creation Suggest themes
What To Watch For in <i>The Velvet Devil</i> —information on divas and the performer/audience relationship as it relates to <i>The Velvet Devil</i>	Focus a review topic Extend performance context
Themes for Exploration —three broad themes that link the two plays with suggested discussion questions	Make connections between the themes of the plays and students own experiences
Background on Set Design —information on set and set design with comments from set designer Art Penson	Introduce set design Look at the design process
Design sketch for <i>Governor of the Dew</i>	Introduce set design
Design sketch for <i>The Velvet Devil</i>	Introduce set design
Extension Activities and List of Works Consulted	Ideas and resources for further work in class

Plot Synopsis—*Governor of the Dew*

The performer says we are going to hear a folktale that her mother used to tell her when she was a child. It is about an old woman named Rose Billy who lived all by herself on the reserve.

One day Rose Billy was visited by an old Beaver. The Beaver is filled with sadness and shame because of what he has lived through. Rose Billy comforts him tenderly and urges him to unburden himself by telling his story.

The Beaver tells her that in his youth he was to become the Governor of his tribe. One day at the river's edge he encountered a group of humans from a distant land. Among these newcomers he spied a beautiful young Métis woman singing about regret. The Beaver fell deeply in love with her despite their many differences. Against the wishes of her people, the young woman swam off with the Beaver.

They returned to the den that was home to the Beaver's tribe. After a blissful summer together, the woman got very sick with an illness the tribal healers had never seen before. When their cures failed, the healers suggested she return to her own people to seek a cure from them. The Beaver, while heart-broken to see her leave, encouraged her to go for the sake of her health.

Then the Beaver took a new wife from his own tribe and started a family. But he, too, came down with the strange illness the woman had brought with her. It quickly spread to his family and then to his whole tribe. By the spring the sickness claimed the lives of all his loved ones and his whole tribe. The Beaver was the only survivor. There was nothing left for him to govern but the dew, "the tears of the Creator."

Rose Billy responds to the Beaver's story with healing compassion. She gives him ritual gifts of tobacco, tea, and coloured ribbons and thanks him for the blessing of his visit.

The performer ends the piece by reminding us that the original tellers of this story are now gone, but they will always be remembered when this story is told.

Plot Synopsis—*The Velvet Devil*

The Velvet Devil takes place on the stage of the Capitol Theatre in Saskatoon in 1941. In front of an audience from her home town of Batoche, Velvet Laurent performs a concert in tribute to the mother she has recently lost. We learn about Velvet's life—her early years in Batoche, her ambition to make it as a singer in the jazz clubs of Toronto, and her quest for a lasting love—through a series of original songs.

A Production Who's Who

These performances of *Governor of the Dew* and *The Velvet Devil* have been co-produced by the NAC English Theatre and The Globe Theatre (Regina, Saskatchewan). Both plays were premiered as part of the Globe Theatre's Sandbox Series, *Governor of the Dew* in the 1999/2000 season, *The Velvet Devil* in the 2000/01 season.

A production of a play in the professional theatre represents the collaborative efforts of many, many people, each with a specific job to do. The combined talents of the following people made these shows possible:

Governor of the Dew

Performer - Monique Mojica
Playwright and Director - Floyd Favel
Original Music - Anthony Rozankovic

The Velvet Devil

Playwright and Performer - Andrea Menard
Director and Dramaturge - Ruth Smillie
Original Songs and Music - Andrea Menard and Robert Walsh

Music

Music Director, Band Leader and Musician (Piano) - Anthony Rozankovic
Musician (Wind Instruments) - Michel Dubeau
Musician (Bass) - John Fraboni
Musician (Percussion) - Paul Johnston

Design Team

Set Designer - Arthur Penson
Costume Designer - Russ Danielson
Lighting Designer - Martin Conboy

Stage Management Team

Stage Manager - Peter Jotkus
Apprentice Stage Manager - Matthew Byrne

For the National Arts Centre (Ottawa) (www.nac-cna.ca)

Artistic Director, English Theatre - Marti Maraden
Managing Director, English Theatre - Victoria Steele
Production Director - Alex Gazalé
Publicist & Media Relations Coordinator - Laura Denker

For the Globe Theatre (Regina) (www.globetheatrelive.com)

Artistic Director - Ruth Smillie
General Manager - Maureen Bachmann
Production Manager - Dannyll Challis
Marketing/Communications - Susan Parkin

Forms and Facts

English literature is divided into types or categories of works called **genres**. *Governor of the Dew* and *The Velvet Devil* are **plays** and belong to the genre called **drama**. *Governor of the Dew* is based on a **folktale**, which is a story with an unknown author commonly told by the people in a region. *Governor of the Dew* also features original songs performed in English, French, and Cree.

To read other folktales from the Native American Culture and around the world, visit these two award-winning web sites:

Tales of Wonder at <http://www.darsie.net/talesofwonder/index.html>

Encyclopedia Mythica at <http://www.pantheon.org/mythica.html>

The Velvet Devil tells the story of a Métis woman named Velvet Laurent. Literature that tells about the lives of real people is called **biography**. While the setting and circumstances in this play are true to life, Velvet Laurent is a fictional character.

An **allegory** is a symbolic story containing more levels of meaning than may be obvious on the surface. In *Governor of the Dew*, the Beaver struggles to come to terms with the devastating consequences suffered by his tribe after contact with someone from another culture introduces a new disease into the population. It is possible to interpret this aspect of the story as an allegory about the historical facts of first contact between the First Nations and Europeans.

The Beaver's tale contains an echo of real events that took place centuries ago. The first Europeans to arrive on this continent brought diseases with them, such as

“...smallpox, measles, influenza, bubonic plague, yellow fever, cholera, and malaria—all unknown in the Western Hemisphere before 1492.... Native Americans, having had no exposure, had little or no immunity; they caught the new sickness quickly, and infection was extremely virulent.... The great death raged for more than a century. By 1600, after some twenty waves of pestilence had swept through the Americas, less than a tenth of the original population remained. Perhaps 90 million died, the equivalent, in today's terms, to the loss of a billion. It was the greatest mortality in history.”

(Excerpted from *Stolen Continents: The “New World” through Indian Eyes since 1492* by Ronald Wright, Toronto: Penguin Group, pages 13-14.)

Floyd Favel on *Governor of the Dew*

When was Governor of the Dew written? What inspired you to write it?

I first wrote *Governor of the Dew* as a short story in the summer of 1996. In the spring of that year my mother had died and in so many ways writing this was for me a memorial to her, her stories and our culture. The play is based on a Cree folktale first told to me by my mother. The story was that a beaver had gone to visit an old woman who lived up the creek from us when I was a boy. The old woman let the beaver into her house, fed him tea, and offered him tobacco and coloured ribbons as an expression of honouring. This was as much as my mother told me. I created the rest of the story, imagining what the beaver would have said.

You spent some time studying with the famous director Jerzy Grotowski at the Ricerca Theatre in Italy. What influence has he had on your work?

My work has been significantly shaped by Grotowski in that he stressed to me the importance of grounding my work within my mother culture because there I would have an infinite creative source to draw upon.

I also accept his view of theatre as offering a kind of modern equivalent to tribal religious ceremonies. In many ways the theatre is a secularized rite/ritual. We live in a world that has very few common rituals; theatre is the most universal act we have to bridge cultures and societies. And while it can serve a ritualistic function, theatre is also about performing. It's something done to be shown. Ritual is done for spiritual reasons, for the Gods and the benefit of humanity.

So in *Governor of the Dew*, we are not doing ritual. We are presenting a show based on and rooted in a culture that is ritualistic. It's important to remember that native cultures did not have anything like theatre as we currently think of it. We did have storytelling. There are performative elements in the rituals, but they do not constitute a performance because these elements were part of a larger spiritual practice. Dance narrative existed, but it, too, served a specific purpose within the tribal context.

Governor of the Dew is a show for one performer accompanied by a band. What techniques did you draw on in rehearsal to shape the final performance?

The play calls for a very complex performance from the actor. There are several songs and a musical underscore that runs throughout the show, so the performance makes use of some elements from dance drama. We used some ideas from the more conventional Stanislavski-based approach to building characters. But the dominant method we used was the sound and movement technique developed by Joseph Chaikin. Here the actor uses her voice and body to incarnate the right image/sound/feeling/colour for each character.

What To Watch For in *Governor of the Dew*

According to *Governor of the Dew* playwright and director **Floyd Favel**, his knowledge about these three great thinkers of the modern theatre informed some of the decisions he made while creating this show.

Jerzy Grotowski, 1933-1999, was an important figure in modern theatre. Born in Poland, he founded and directed for the Polish Laboratory Theatre (1959). He developed the concept of a “poor theatre” that focused on the essential relationship between the actor and the audience, with all the extras—like fancy costumes and sets, and moody lighting and music—stripped away. His goal was to reconnect the theatre with its earliest roots in tribal ceremony and ritual. He founded the Workcentre at the Ricerca Theatre in Pontedera, Italy, in 1986, where actors are still trained using his methods. His ideas about theatre continue to be explored.

Konstantin Stanislavski, 1863-1938, was one of the world’s most influential directors and acting theorists. He founded the Moscow Art Theatre in the 1890s, where he directed the first productions of most of Chekhov’s plays. His system of actor training stressed the detailed preparation of a role and the emotional and psychological truthfulness of an actor’s characterizations. His ideas are still very much alive in acting schools and theatre programs all over the world.

Joseph Chaikin was born in 1935. He created The Open Theatre (1963-1974) in New York. His work has been influenced by Grotowski’s ideas about a “poor theatre” that concentrates on the essentials of actor and audience. He also made use of modern ideas about role-playing and theatre games to develop his own method of actor training. Chaikin’s approach to acting stresses “transformations” in which the roles the actor plays constantly change to match up with an ever-changing reality.

As you watch the performance, be on the lookout for elements that suggest:

“poor theatre”

ceremony and ritual

careful preparation

emotional and psychological truthfulness

acting that stresses transformation.

Andrea Menard on *The Velvet Devil*

Where did the fictional character of Velvet Laurent come from?

The character of Velvet Laurent has haunted me for quite a few years. She is real in a way because she had a story to tell and she insisted that I tell it. I really didn't want to write about her at first; but her life and her pain and her desires became very real to me.

Ruth Smillie, the director of the show, also gets credit as the dramaturge. What role did she have in the development of the script?

Ruth Smillie had a big role in the development of the show. As I said, I had great difficulty trying to find Velvet's story at the beginning. I liked the character of the mother and wanted to write about her. But Ruth really challenged me in ways that kept me on track. She'd say "Why did you call this show *The Velvet Devil*?" I kept trying to make the songs be about something else when really they were just about Velvet's life. And Ruth urged me to stay with Velvet's story.

You, too, are a Métis woman whose singing has brought her a great deal of recognition. Is there much of yourself in Velvet Laurent?

Yes, probably a lot more than I used to be willing to admit. Like Velvet, I have that battle in me about whether singing is a holy thing. And because I've been able to sing all my life it seemed like everyone expected that my dream was to be a big singing star—the kind of diva that Velvet becomes in Toronto. But it's not one of my dreams.

How would you describe Velvet's relationship with her mother?

She always felt her mom was the angel. She idealized her mom's way of looking at singing and at life. Singing was her mother's way of speaking with God and connecting to the spirits. But what Velvet doesn't know is that she has the same power, she just goes about it in a different way.

When she comes home after her mom's death, she has to come to terms with her own choices and how they were so different from the ones her mother made. Velvet is hung up on thinking that her mother and her whole community were mad at her for refusing to conform to their expectations and leaving them behind. But she is actually the one who feels she's done something wrong. They're proud of her success, too. And as the show unfolds she comes to realize this and forgives herself for doing the only thing she could have done.

What To Watch For in *The Velvet Devil*

According to *The Velvet Devil* performer and playwright **Andrea Menard**, when Velvet Laurent is working the jazz clubs in Toronto “she knows she’s the queen of the stage.” This kind of attitude places Velvet firmly in the tradition of the diva.

A **diva** is a famous female singer whose talent and stage presence give her an aura of alluring mystery and power. In fact, the word is derived from a Latin term for goddess. The usual relationship between a diva and her audience tends to resemble the relationship between a goddess and her worshippers. To learn more about divas, visit

Divas - The Site at <http://home2.planetinternet.be/verjans/>

Velvet will sing 19 songs in all, including “The Velvet Devil”, “Angel Wings”, “Call My Name”, and “Queen of the Parade”.

But we meet diva Velvet Laurent in a very special set of circumstances—back home in the town she hasn’t visited for 12 years performing a tribute concert for her belated mother in front of an audience full of people who knew her before she made it big in the city. And this situation changes the nature of the relationship between the performer and her audience.

During *The Velvet Devil*, Andrea Menard as Velvet Laurent will be relating to you as if you were one of the people from Batoche who attended that concert at the Capitol Theatre in 1941. As you watch the performance, pay close attention to how Andrea Menard uses eye-contact, open and closed body positions, facial expressions and vocal intonations to communicate.

the moment Velvet seems to feel the most comfortable onstage, and

the moment Velvet seems to feel the most defensive and self-protective.

Themes for Exploration

1. Standing Apart from the Crowd

Both *Governor of the Dew* and *The Velvet Devil* feature characters whose daring actions ultimately set them apart from their communities. Psychologists suggest that everyone feels both the need to belong to a group and the need to be a separate and unique individual.

Through discussion, have students find answers to the following questions:

What groups do you belong to? (family, circle of friends, clubs, teams, etc.)

Describe a real or imaginary situation where you come into conflict with a group.

Would you rather censor some parts of yourself to fit in with the group or be true to yourself even if it means losing your connection with the group?

2. Older and Wiser

Both the old Beaver in *Governor of the Dew* and the mature Velvet Laurent in *The Velvet Devil* comment on how their life experiences have changed them. Ask each student to describe a younger version of himself or herself. Invite them to comment on the differences between the people they were then and who they are now.

3. We Will Remember

The re-telling of the story in *Governor of the Dew* and the performance Velvet Laurent gives in *The Velvet Devil* are commemorative acts, dedicated to honouring the memory of a lost loved one. Artists have often used their art to capture the memory of people and events that have great significance for them. Encourage students to identify a significant person or event from their own experience to commemorate in a sketch, poem, song, group tableaux, video, or personal essay. Ideas to get them started include:

births and deaths

first meetings and experiences (e.g. first love, time away from home)

events from history or in the news

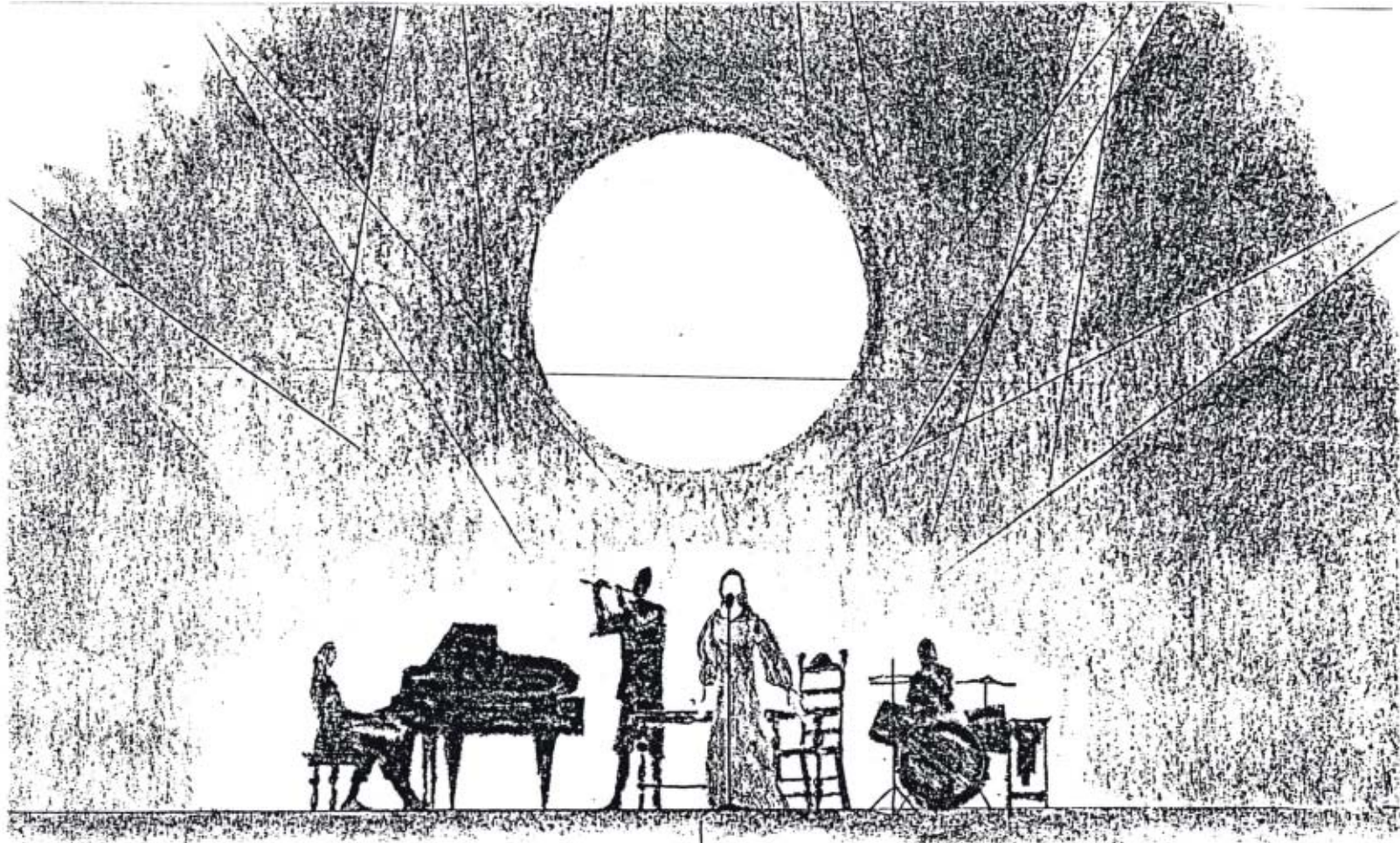
Background on Set Design

The set designer's job is to provide the physical surrounding in which the action of the play can take place. All the scenery, including furniture and most of the props the audience sees onstage, have been designed, chosen and/or overseen by the designer. Collectively, all these elements give the audience visual information about the director's concept of the play. It is essential the designer and director work closely together.

Governor of the Dew and *The Velvet Devil* are productions requiring minimal settings and each one features a single performer accompanied by live music. However, even the relatively simple designs of these productions communicate visual information about style, place, mood and history. Here are a few words from Art Penson about his work as the set designer of *Governor of the Dew* and *The Velvet Devil*.

"Because Governor of the Dew is abstract and poetic, I suggested to director Floyd Favel that we use the universal symbol of a circle in some way because it can relate to almost any theme or condition. He liked the idea right away but my original drawing contained native references that Floyd felt were too strong. He was happy with the circle but wanted to eliminate my references to the concepts of earth, air, fire and water which I'd incorporated. The solution became the startling white disc upon which light and shadow are projected, heightening and empowering the poetry of the play.

"The director of The Velvet Devil, Ruth Smillie, had mounted the show before and wanted to ensure its original success by revisiting the concept of a late-1930s theatre interior. For her I sketched a gilded, Renaissance-style proscenium arch with red velvet curtains, fringe and tassels which she liked immediately. The play really doesn't demand more elaborate treatment except, perhaps, for the period microphone used by the performer."

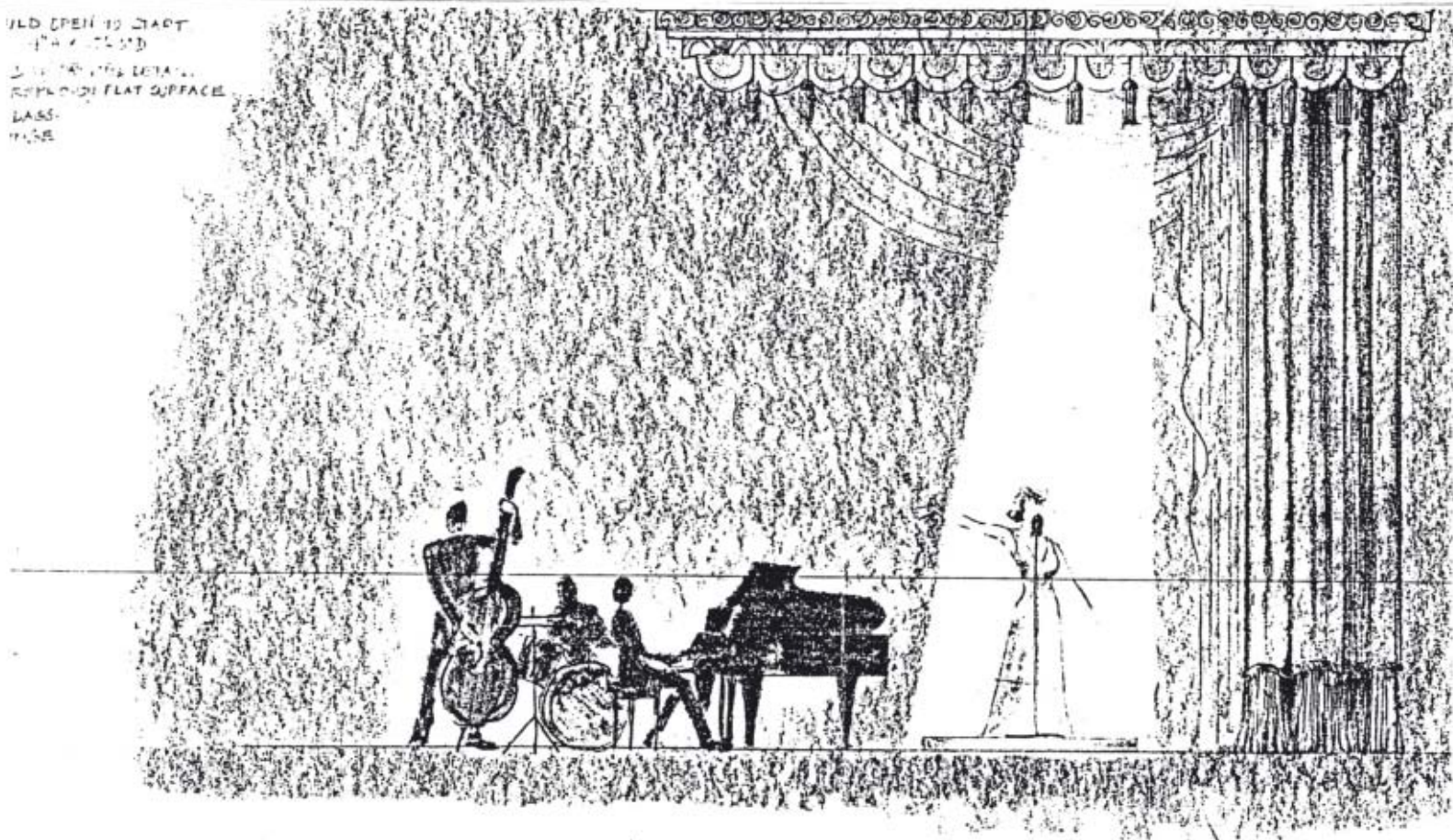


2nd Rendering Governor of the Dew - NAC-Globe Theatre Haymarket Square - Art Penson June

“2nd Rendering Governor of the Dew NAC—Globe Theatre Floyd Favel Art Penson June”

Set design sketch for *Governor of the Dew* by Art Penson

WLD OPEN TO START
1/4" x 1/4" x 1/4"
2 1/2" x 1/4" x 1/4"
REPRODUCE FLAT SURFACE
CLASS-
TRUSS



1st drawing Globe Theatre - NAC. Velvet Devil Ruth Smillie Art Penson. Jr.

"1st Drawing Globe Theatre—NAC Velvet Devil Ruth Smillie Art Penson June"

Set design sketch for *The Velvet Devil* by Art Penson

Extension Activities

Ritual—for lesson plans and information on ritual and ceremony as they relate to theatre, see Chapter 13, *From Ritual into Drama*, in *Improvisation: Learning Through Drama* by David Booth and Charles Lundy, and Chapter 15, *Early People*, in *Interpretation: Working With Scripts*, also by Booth and Lundy.

Folktales—a wealth of tales for students to stage, study or use as models for tales of their own can be found at

Tales of Wonder <http://www.darsie.net/talesofwonder/index.html>

Encyclopedia Mythica at <http://www.pantheon.org/mythica.html>

Music—students can use live or recorded music to underscore their performance of a scene, or analyze how a musical underscore is used to heighten the mood and/or comment on the action in a scene from a film such as Baz Lurhmann’s *Romeo and Juliet*.

Research—*The Encyclopedia of Canadian Theatre* at www.canadiantheatre.com is an excellent research site. It also includes ideas for teachers about resources and activities. Or check out www.urbannation.com/takwakin/takwakin.html for information on Floyd Favel’s unique performance company. Learn more about Andrea Menard and *The Velvet Devil* at www.andreamenard.com.

Workshops, Visiting Artists, and Resources

The NAC offers several programs of interest to teachers and students, either in-house or at local schools: **The Skills Shop**—puts theatre professionals and students together for hands-on, in-school, group workshops.

Workshops Plus!—offers pre-student matinee workshops that allow for a full-day visit to the NAC.

Teachers Play!—offers one- and two-day workshops for teachers in areas like: Lighting, Voice, Movement, Acting Technique, and Design. See the *Arts Alive* publication, available through the NAC, for more information, or contact Outreach Coordinator Janet Irwin by telephone at (613) 236-2502 or email at jirwin2502@rogers.com.

The Playwrights in Schools program offered by the Playwrights Union of Canada (www.puc.ca) makes it possible, for a nominal fee, for playwrights to visit your class to do a reading, a workshop, or a chat about their background. A brochure on the program is available from PUC, 2nd Floor—54 Wolseley Street, Toronto ON, M5A 1A5 (416) 703-0201.

Theatre Ontario is a central source of information on training, career opportunities, awards, publications, productions and resources focused on theatre in Ontario. For more information, contact **Theatre Ontario**, 30 St. Patrick Street, 2nd Floor, Toronto ON M5T 3A3, telephone: 416-408-4556, fax: 416-408-3402, info@theatreontario.org, www.theatreontario.org.

Work Consulted—Ronald Wright, *Stolen Continents: The “New World” through Indian Eyes since 1492*, Toronto: Penguin Group, 1992.