

*Iskoonigani Isksweewak*  
The Rez Sisters

*Stratford*  
FESTIVAL

2021 STUDY GUIDE

*Iskoonigani Isksweewak*  
The Rez Sisters

BY TOMSON HIGHWAY  
DIRECTED BY JESSICA CARMICHAEL

TOOLS FOR TEACHERS  
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# THE REZ SISTERS STUDY GUIDE

## ABOUT THE PLAY

*The Rez Sisters*

By Tomson Highway

Directed by Jessica Carmichael

[The Rez Sisters House Program](#)

### Grade and Curriculum Connections

- Grades 9+
- Global Competencies: Collaboration, Communication, Critical Thinking, Creativity, Learning to Learn/ Self-Awareness
- The Arts
- Canadian and World Studies
- English
- First Nations, Métis and Inuit Studies
- Health and Physical Education
- Native Language
- Social Sciences and Humanities

### Content Advisory

- Deals with mental health, death, grief and abuse
- Contains coarse language and the depiction of violence
- English, Nēhiyawēwin (Cree) and Anishinaabemowin (Ojibwe) languages are spoken

### Synopsis

They have their dreams and their difficulties, these seven women. One yearns for a singing career; another for a white porcelain toilet. One grieves for her lover, killed in a motorcycle accident; another harbours the memory of a horrific sexual assault. The cancer that afflicts one of them is not the only malignancy they confront. But one dream they hold in common is that of winning “the biggest bingo in the world” – and one day, accompanied by the transformative spirit guide Nanabush, they leave their Manitoulin Island reserve and set out for Toronto to do just that. Ribald, harrowing and mystical, this seminal work of Indigenous drama celebrates the spirit of resilience and the powerful beauty these women bring to the tough world in which they live.

### Themes and Motifs

- Loss
  - Colonialism
  - Poverty
  - Trauma and Abuse

- Illness and Death
- Grief and Resilience
- Hope and Humour
- Gender
  - Sisterhood and Friendship
  - Identity
  - Female Strength
  - Two-Spiritedness
- Transformation
  - Journey
  - Tradition and modernity
  - Fecundity
  - Appearance and reality
  - The supernatural and spirit world

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### Pre-Show

- What role does language play in your life and culture? Why is it important for people to be able to express themselves in their chosen languages?
- What is colonialism and what are its impacts in Canada and the United States?
- How would you define 'home' and 'community'? Why are they important? How do their definitions change across culture?
- What is materialism? What are the positive and negative effects of this phenomenon?
- What do you know about 'the trickster' figure? What do you expect this character's function will be in the play?
- This play focuses on seven female characters: Pelaijia, Philomena, Marie-Adele, Annie, Emily, Veronique and Zhaboonigan. Tomson Highway wrote *The Rez Sisters* in 1986. Knowing this, in what ways do you imagine these characters might be portrayed? How has the role of women – and particularly Indigenous women – and their access to power changed since then? What still needs to be done in order to achieve equity?

### Post-Show

- What makes someone resilient? How do the women in the play find resilience?
- What did the representation of Nanabush mean to you? Did anything about this character surprise you?
- What images or phrases from the production have stayed with you after seeing it? Why do you think the playwright and/or director chose to include these?
- What is the significance of the road trip? In what ways does it change the women?
- What is the function of comedy in this play? Why do you think comedy sometimes helps us to engage with difficult subject matter?

- Does this play resonate for you with regard to today’s understanding of gender identity, sexual orientation, diversity and expression? Why or why not?

## MINDS ON

**Objective:** This exercise invites students to identify and explain some of the key themes, ideas and issues explored in the play.

**Materials:** Access to Suzanne Keeptwo’s article and bio (below)

**Directions:** Share Suzanne Keeptwo’s article and bio with students. Invite them to respond to the debriefing questions independently, in conversation with a partner or in small groups, or in a written reflection.

Tomson Highway’s *The Rez Sisters*, written in the mid 1980s, is noted for being influenced by Michel Tremblay’s<sup>1</sup> *Les Belles Soeurs*<sup>2</sup> written 20 years earlier. Like Tremblay’s play, *The Rez Sisters* depicts a cast of inter-related women of a specific socio-economic status previously unexplored in Canadian theatre. If Tremblay gained notoriety by delving into Quebec cultural identity never seen before, Highway achieved the same by portraying seven reserve-based women from a fictional location but an all too typical First Nation reality. Although situated in northern Ontario, the sisters could be from almost any reserve community across the nation state of Canada. All reserves are federally legislated, meaning regardless of location, they must all adhere to the rules and regulations of the Indian Act<sup>3</sup>. Highway successfully shines a light on the lived experience of women personifying the impact of the Indian Act while celebrating the resiliency and character of the First Nation feminine.

Interestingly, *The Rez Sisters* was primarily performed for reserve-based and urban Native audiences who had the chance to see themselves depicted as tight knit, honest, tragic, and ridiculous – for the first time – within the safety and magic of the theatre. In this sense, audience members living on or off reserve can recognize the similarities of First Nation women’s lives, providing widespread appeal. From an Indigenous perspective, this play offers a glimpse at solidarity regardless of the trappings within the overlapping lives of these all too familiar characters. In Tomson Highway’s honest depiction of these women and their plight<sup>4</sup>, we can laugh at ourselves and each other, otherwise we may very well cry.

Preparing, then traveling to play bingo for big winnings, then back again, is a simple enough plot but the antics<sup>5</sup> between the women and their dialogue coloured with gossip, jealousies, heartaches and complaints are laced with subtle references to Indian Act realities that – to this day – influence the daily existence of all reserve-based status “Indians.” The mention of the priest, the lack of services (no public transit, no paved roads), an unsatisfactory band council chief, unemployment, male absenteeism<sup>6</sup>,

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Tremblay – French Canadian novelist and playwright from Montreal, Quebec.

<sup>2</sup> *Les Belles Soeurs* – Tremblay’s play, written in 1965, revolutionized Canadian theatre (particularly Quebec’s cultural identity) by introducing working class women speaking their regional dialect, and attacked the deeply religious and conservative society in Quebec at that time.

<sup>3</sup> Indian Act – A Canadian act of Parliament that concerns registered Indigenous peoples, their bands, and the system of reserves. It has a wide-ranging scope covering governance, land use, healthcare, education, etc.

<sup>4</sup> plight – a dangerous, difficult, or otherwise unfortunate situation.

<sup>5</sup> antics – foolish, outrageous, or amusing behavior.

<sup>6</sup> absenteeism – the practice of regularly staying away from work, school or absence of duty or obligation without good reason.

poverty, alcoholism, sexual and domestic violence, suicide, and the desire to escape – with nowhere to go – are all symptoms of systemic racism and inter-generational<sup>7</sup> oppression prevalent on too many reserves. Sadly, the common aspiration<sup>8</sup> for the women of the play is to win big bingo money to acquire, for the most part, shiny new appliances, indicative of deeply imposed capitalist values<sup>9</sup> that colonization<sup>10</sup> has brought upon us all. Ironically, for Philomena, her dream is for a bigger, whiter toilet symbolizing the need to process all the “sh\*t” that goes down on the reserve. It is no coincidence the dream toilet is white. Tomson Highway, just like Trickster mythology itself (described below), is clever with his choices.

The play itself serves as a metaphor of the “elder brother” entity common amongst Cree and other Indigenous peoples, frequently known as “Trickster.” This is a mythological figure of the oral storytelling tradition used to teach about the complexities, foibles, and often outrageous nature of human behaviours. Within the play, Highway includes the Trickster character, naming it *Nanabush* as per the Ojibwe Anishinabeg. Traditionally, Nanabush can manifest into any human or animal form, and gender; the playwright chose to portray this Nanabush as a bird, a symbol of freedom with its ability to take flight – in Life or by way of death.

Nanabush can be interpreted *beyond* the Trickster figure and effectively symbolizes pre-colonial Indigenous cultural identity. Present, albeit unseen, throughout the piece, this spiritual entity is witness to the impact of systemic oppression the women embody. S/he responds, in angst, at the recounting of the violent attack of Zhaboonigan and is accessible to those, like Marie-Adele, at the time when body crosses over into spirit or “going home.” Within the context of the play, Nanabush – as a symbol of Indigeneity<sup>11</sup> – is rendered invisible by the forces of colonialism<sup>12</sup> but is held deep within the blood memory (ancestral knowledge) of all Indigenous peoples.

The presence of Nanabush provides the greatest source of hope to the rez sisters – and Native audiences alike – whether they know it or not. Like our Indigenous ways of knowing and being, our ancestral knowledge is there waiting for us all to (re)embrace. In spite of the impact of the Indian Act and policies of assimilation<sup>13</sup>, Indigenous Peoples of, what many refer to as, Turtle Island (a.k.a. North America), have survived. Cultural revivalism<sup>14</sup>, pride, sovereignty<sup>15</sup>, and the cry for Indigenous Human Rights are increasingly on the rise. But, there remains a long way forward toward Canada’s reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples of these lands, making Tomson Highway’s *The Rez Sisters* still so very relevant to this day. *The Rez Sisters* provides non-Indigenous audiences the opportunity to glimpse inside this reserve dynamic, a world held at bay for far too long due to the same colonial controls.

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<sup>7</sup> *Inter-generational* – relating to involving, or affecting several generations.

<sup>8</sup> aspiration – a hope or ambition of achieving something.

<sup>9</sup> capitalist values – capitalism – an economic system based on the private ownership of the means of production and their operation for profit. NOTE: The reserve women are aspiring to live like the more financially well-off and to have all the comforts and conveniences in their homes.

<sup>10</sup> colonization – the action or process of settling among and establishing control over the Indigenous people of an area

<sup>11</sup> indigeneity – quality of being Indigenous; membership of an Indigenous group.

<sup>12</sup> colonialism – the policy or practice of acquiring full or partial political control over another country, occupying it with settlers and exploiting it economically.

<sup>13</sup> assimilation – the process of adapting or adjusting to the culture of a group or nation, or the state of being so adapted.

<sup>14</sup> revivalism – the tendency or desire to revive former customs, beliefs.

<sup>15</sup> sovereignty – the authority of a state to govern itself.

*Suzanne Keptwo, Métis (Algonkin) artist and professional educator, merges traditional Anishinaabe Teachings and artistic expression to enlighten others about Indigenous historical truths and contemporary realities. She has worked across the nation state of Canada as a professional facilitator with host clients including the Museum of Human Rights (Winnipeg), McGill University (Montréal), Full Circle: First Nation Performance (Vancouver) and the College of New Scholars, Artists, and Scientists of the Royal Society of Canada. Suzanne is also a freelance writer, editor, and consultant and the author of We All Go Back to the Land: The Who, Why, and How of Land Acknowledgements. Her area of expertise is bridging cultural gaps of understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. She also enjoys leading the Four Nations Exchange, an Indigenous community theatre ensemble (Ottawa).*

### Debriefing Questions:

- Suzanne Keptwo talks about the “deeply imposed capitalist values that colonization has brought upon us all.” What do the women’s comments about winning bingo reveal about colonialism and its legacy?
- How has colonialism influenced the women’s understanding of material comfort and success? How might this influence their own identities and the world around them?

## CONNECTION TO THE ARCHIVES

The 2021 production of *The Rez Sisters* opened on July 13, exactly 68 years to the day after the Stratford Festival’s first show (which was *Richard III* – you can see an image of that production below). In what ways has the Stratford Festival changed since 1953? In what ways do you think it will continue to change?



The Stratford Festival’s Archives maintains, conserves and protects recent and historical records about the Festival and makes those materials available to people around the world. Our multi-media archival holdings date from 1952 and extend through to contemporary materials. We house correspondence, production records, Board minutes, photography, design artwork, scores, audio-visual records, costumes, props and set decoration, press releases and other promotional materials: these document the processes that bring a production to the stage and reflect all aspects of mounting a play, from the administrative to the creative and beyond.

In addition to visiting the Archives in person, you can explore our [online catalogue](#).

## RESOURCES

Jessica Carmichael, director of *The Rez Sisters*, offers suggestions of reading and listening material to accompany your experience of the show. Click [here](#) to access the reading and listening list.

[The 2018 CBC Lectures: All Our Relations: Finding the Path Forward – Tanya Talaga](#)

[Indigenous Canada Course – University of Alberta](#)

[Indigenous Peoples Atlas of Canada](#)

[Key Moment Videos – National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls](#)

LaFlamme, M. “Highway to the Valley.” *Canadian Theatre Review*. 151.1: 55-59.

Nothof, A. (1995). “Cultural Collision and Magical Transformation: The Plays of Tomson Highway.” *Studies in Canadian Literature*. 20.2: 34-43.

Perkins, L. “Remembering the Trickster in Tomson Highway’s *The Rez Sisters*.” *Modern Drama*. 45.2 (2002): 259-269.

[Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls](#)

[The Rez Sisters Showstarters](#)

Tomkins, J. and L. Male. “Twenty-One Native Women on Motorcycles: An Interview with Tomson Highway,” *Australasian Drama Studies* 24 (1994): 13-28.

Contact us to book a streamed viewing of this production for your class: [groups@stratfordfestival.ca](mailto:groups@stratfordfestival.ca)