

**Courage, Truth And Commitment:
The Theater Of William Yellow Robe, Jr.**

By Hanay Geiogamah

With his new play, *Grandchildren Of The Buffalo Soldiers*, Assiniboine playwright William Yellow Robe Jr. demonstrates one of his great strengths: his courageous determination to dramatize some of the harsher truths of American Indian life and to present them so compellingly that Indian people who have the interest can see, hear and maybe empathize with the emotions of his characters. Perhaps the most important task of any Indian playwright of the 21st Century is to present life as it really is. William Yellow Robe is a writer who is not afraid of trying to understand contemporary Indian life and who does not hesitate to depict its lows and occasional highs regardless of what the audience reaction might be.

Bill's creative courage and commitment to dramatizing hard, nasty Indian realities was first evident in what is perhaps his most challenging play, *Sneaky*, from the mid 1980s. Those who know it will not easily forget the deliberately surreal, shattering final scene. A fair comparison could be made between Bill's thematic experimentations over the past 20 years with the similarly bold courage of Tennessee Williams, who did not flinch at including forbidden themes in his plays. Among other examples from his long and dedicated career is the fact that Bill is the first Native American dramatist to write about homosexuality in a reservation community, in his early one-act *Wink-Dah*. But in Bill's plays, the darkness is neither for darkness's sake nor for theatrical sensationalism or titillation. His plots are often based on highly sensitive aspects of contemporary Indian life that are likely to be ignored or denied by tribal traditionalists and academic purists. The family conflicts that arise from the interracial marriage of an African-American man and a Native American woman in *Grandchildren* provide a sharp, graphic display of this approach. And if any of his plays present "happy" or redemptive endings, as *Grandchildren* seems to do, it's because Mr. Yellow Robe's characters have fought very, very hard to win that happiness, that hopefulness that life doesn't always have to be an unrelieved, cheerless burden.

His plays are peopled not with the idyllic, romanticized Indians of so many misbegotten stereotypes and fantasies, but with men and women who are struggling for a fragment of dignity, self-respect, confidence, or strength to overcome the fractured existences they find themselves trapped in pretty much because they were born as Indians on a reservation in the wide open spaces of the American west.

This is not easy, comfortable theatre. Its colors and rhythms are intense. But it is honest, strong drama, and in watching and listening to a play like *Grandchildren Of The Buffalo Soldiers*, one cannot help but feel that the Indians are trying to come to terms with the challenges of their lives as much as are the real Indians William Yellow Robe Jr. grew up with and lives among today.

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