## CHAPTER I

# A history of Native American drama

#### AN ORIGIN STORY

One August evening of an Oklahoma summer, a thousand theatregoers gathered to celebrate the opening night of a new Native American play. The audience came from many different communities, including: the Chickasaw Nation, a major producer of the production; the Oklahoma state government, which declared the play the inaugural event of its centennial; and the nation-wide extended family of Te Ata, a classically trained Chickasaw actor who had previously toured her one-woman performances across the Americas and Europe for over seventy years. The World Premiere of *Te Ata*, a play written by another Chickasaw woman, playwright JudyLee Oliva, was a theatrical event that represented Native American theatre's rich history and growing future.

The 2006 Equity-level, full-scale production of Te Ata was the first professional Native American play to be produced largely by a Native American nation.<sup>1</sup> The play featured some of Native theatre's rising stars: JudyLee Oliva is one of the playwrights who currently leads Native theatre's move into mainstream American theatrical venues; and DeLanna Studi, the Cherokee actor who played the title role, has captured national attention on stage and in film. The artistic team included professional theatre artists from throughout the United States, while the cast was comprised of "actors from across ten states and eight Native [American nations]" (Te Ata World Premiere website). Some of these Native actors, such as Donna Couteau Brooks, who played Elder Te Ata, embodied the changes that have occurred in Native theatre over the recent decades. Brooks, whose professional career has long included performing as a Sac and Fox storyteller, was active in the early Native American theatre movement when she performed with Spiderwoman Theater; she had arrived at Te Ata rehearsals after working on Grandchildren of the Buffalo Soldiers, a play by the Assiniboine playwright, William S. Yellow Robe, Jr. Grandchildren had just gained the

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distinction of becoming the first Native American play in the United States to obtain a "fully-mounted professional collaborative touring production by regional theaters" when Trinity Rep and Penumbra Theatre Company joined to produce it ("Trinity Rep," website).

During *Te Ata*'s week-long run in August 2006, over 3,000 theatregoers traveled from 30 states to Oklahoma to witness a story about a journey in the opposite direction: a Chickasaw actor's crossing from Indian Territory onto the international stage (*Te Ata* World Premiere website). The production was an historic moment for both Native American and general theatrical history: for the first time, a play served as the site where State and Native governments came together to celebrate common roots; for the first time, a professional theatrical production became the chosen vehicle for a Native nation to express its identity. The World Premiere of JudyLee Oliva's *Te Ata* transformed from a mainstream production of a Native American play into a touchstone for Native theatre, not only staging the possibilities for Native American theatre, but also presenting a metatheatrical origin story about how such moments in Native American theatre came to be.

# NATIVE AMERICAN THEATRICAL PERFORMANCE IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Mary "Te Ata" Thompson Fisher's (1895–1995) career represents the many challenges and difficult decisions Native American performers faced at the turn of the twentieth century. What makes her story unique amongst those of Native American actors from her era is that Te Ata pursued her theatrical career through an academic path that led her to Broadway. Her love of acting developed in her university theatre classes at the Oklahoma College for Women (OCW),<sup>2</sup> where she became the first Native American student to graduate. Te Ata's theatre teacher, Francis Dinsmore Davis, nurtured Te Ata's acting abilities and gifts for traditional Native storytelling.<sup>3</sup> When Te Ata graduated from OCW, her senior recital was a one-woman performance composed of traditional stories she had learned from her father. JudyLee Oliva, who researched Te Ata's life before beginning work on her play, writes that Te Ata "had to borrow much of her 'Indian' props, including a drum, a bow and arrow, and a costume. None of the props nor the costume was authentic, but the presentation marked the beginning of her career" ("Te Ata – Chickasaw" 7).

Following her graduation from OCW, Te Ata performed in Chautauqua shows, including the Redpath circuit, while taking graduate classes in

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acting at Carnegie Tech in Pittsburgh. Her Chautauqua performances were a continuation and expansion of the 1919 senior recital, and they allowed Te Ata to build her credentials as a professional performer before venturing to New York City. Te Ata's first Broadway performance was in the 1922 production of *The Red Poppy* with Estelle Winwood and Bela Lugosi, and although she went on to secure jobs with other Broadway shows, she soon became dissatisfied with the stereotypical "exotic" roles in which she was cast. Oliva writes, "[I]t was becoming apparent to Te Ata that the commercial theatre was interested in her primarily because she was an Indian with a gifted voice and graceful presence and not because of her acting ability. She was an anomaly and a novelty" (ibid., 7, 10).

In response to her Broadway experiences, Te Ata decided to take control of her image. She refined her one-woman show, added dramatic adaptations of poetry on Indian themes, and continued to add traditional legends from other Native nations. Te Ata's aim was not only to make a living as an entertainer, but also to educate audiences about the diversity across Native America by presenting accurate information about Native cultures. To these ends, Te Ata spent many of her vacations traveling to Native communities and educating herself about the different cultures. In turn, during her performances, Te Ata attributed traditional legends to their appropriate Native nations and explained the significance of her props and clothing (ibid., 15).

Te Ata's shows, which incorporated two styles of performance (Native American storytelling and classical acting for the Shakespearean stage), allowed her to gain recognition on her own terms. She performed for all audiences, Native and non-Native, schoolchildren and international leaders, and won the support of Mrs. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who, with the president, invited Te Ata to become the "first performer to entertain at the White House during FDR's administration" (ibid., 11). In addition to her many national performances, including two at Carnegie Hall and a special performance at the Roosevelts' home in Hyde Park for King George VI and Queen Elizabeth, Te Ata also performed internationally. During her first European tour in 1930, she traveled as a cultural ambassador with letters of introduction from Vice President Charles Curtis<sup>4</sup> (ibid.) Significantly, at a time when misrepresentations of Native Americans abounded, Te Ata was able to maintain a professional career that upheld the dignity of Native cultures. She continued that mission until the late 1980s, when she retired to her home state of Oklahoma,5 which honored Te Ata with the title of "Oklahoma's First State Treasure."

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Te Ata's decision to leave Broadway for a theatrical career that she could more actively control was in response to the limitations placed on Native American performers and Native representation by the entertainment industry during the first half of the 1900s. These stereotypical limitations created characters in a national story that white Americans and Canadians told themselves about the development of their countries. The previous decade had been one of systematic government-enforced removal, isolation, eradication, and assimilation of Native cultures, so that white citizens could obtain more land, wealth, and rights as the new countries grew. The conflict between Native Americans and the new national governments inspired misrepresentations of Native people through various forms of media. Performance venues, such as theatre, cinemas, dime museums, wild-west shows, and world's-fair exhibitions, capitalized on the exotic allure of the "vanishing race." In acts of imperialist nostalgia, Native people were honored as romantic, brave, and spiritual, but doomed to extinction because of their "non-progressive" world views. However, these Indians were also "crafty" and at any time could switch from noble creatures to savage killers, slaying white women and children. The savage Indian was quite popular, owing to the need for the new countries to feel secure about their gross mistreatment of Native peoples. The savage stereotype also assuaged white doubts, as Native nations threatened each country's myth of superiority whenever Native people fought successful battles for their lands against non-Native troops. These stereotypes of Noble/Savage for men or Princess (ready-to-die-for-her-love-of-the-white-man)/Squaw (sexually ravenous savage) for women, weave throughout American history and, in so doing, persist in media representations of Native peoples, even today.

Government treatment of Native Americans has not only shaped the way Native peoples have been represented through performance, but also shapes how we in theatre studies, today, view the work of Native Americans in theatre history. For example, the Native American performers from the early 1900s who are recorded in general theatre history surveys are most often performers in exhibits and kitschy venues. Moreover, Native American performers of this era are usually remembered not by name – unless they happened to be a "fallen" Native leader like Sitting Bull in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show – but by their ethnicity only, "Buffalo Bill's Indians," "an Indian in a dime museum." Yet, surprisingly, at the turn of the century a number of Native Americans, like Te Ata, were performing in various "legitimate" theatrical venues. An example is Pauline "Tekahionwake" Johnson (1861–1913), a Mohawk woman who was Te Ata's counterpart in Canada. In college, Johnson aspired to become

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a professional actor; however, that dream shifted when she began publishing her writing. We now remember Johnson primarily as a writer, but she did use her theatre training to give dramatic readings to promote her writing during the first decade of her professional publishing career. These performances incorporated Victorian-style language and sophistication to proclaim her writing's political message "that Canada was still Indian land wrested unfairly from indigenous hands" (Malinowski (ed.), *Notable*, 211). Other performers, such as Tsianina Redfeather Blackstone, who was Cree, and Ada Navarrete, who was Mayan, were Native opera singers.

Only recently have the stories of these Native theatre professionals from the early twentieth century been finding their ways into theatre history. While some of these early performers are emerging out of a relative invisibility, other performers have been present in theatre history all along; it is their Native identity that has been written as invisible. The stories of two of these Native American theatre figures, actor William Penn Adair Rogers (1879–1935) and playwright Rollie Lynn Riggs (1899–1954), both members of the Cherokee Nation, are under revision by scholars in Native studies.

Will Rogers was born in Indian Territory and raised within the Cherokee community, where his father was active in Cherokee Nation governance. Rogers' family had been deprived of a large portion of their ranch lands owing to federal policies that freed up Native lands for white settlers. As a student, Rogers transferred from a predominantly Native American biracial school to a mostly white school, where he suffered from racial slurs and developed "a sensitivity to his Cherokee Indian heritage...that was evident in his militant reaction to any criticism of Indians or people of partial Indian ancestry" (Markowitz (ed.), *American*, 304-305).

Rogers' performance career spanned from 1902 to 1935, during which time he became one of the United States' most beloved celebrities, honored for his quintessential American charm. Over those years, he performed in wild-west shows; in vaudeville, in the Ziegfeld Frolic and Follies; in Broadway plays and musicals; on radio; and in seventeen motion pictures (three of which he wrote, produced, directed, and starred in); additionally, he wrote books and a syndicated newspaper column. When he died, "The *New York Times* dedicated four full pages to him...the nation's movie theatres were darkened; CBS and NBC television stations observed a halfhour of silence; and in New York, a squadron of planes, each towing a long black streamer, flew over the city in a final tribute to the hero and friend of aviation" (Malinowski (ed.), *Notable*, 369). Despite Rogers' huge celebrity status and nickname, "The Cherokee Kid," most studies about his career

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have underplayed his Native American heritage, claiming that his Cherokee persona was private and held separately from his public persona.

Daniel Heath Justice, a Native literary critic and member of the Cherokee Nation, argues otherwise in Our Fire Survives the Storm: A Cherokee Literary History. Taking issue with some biographers who have interpreted Rogers' claims of Cherokee heritage as quirky wisecracks within a larger non-Native act, and others who dismiss Rogers' Native identity because he was a biracial member of the "assimilated" Cherokee Nation,<sup>6</sup> Justice claims Rogers as a powerful Native voice in America's history: "as a light-skinned Cherokee well-loved in the United States, he was a stealthy minority with access to a forum and a platform inaccessible to other Indians of his day" (Fire, 124). Justice revises Rogers' personal and professional biography to reveal the performer's close ties to his Cherokee community and his public advocacy of Native issues. Reclaiming Rogers' trademark evenhanded, understated satire as a Native form of humor, Justice traces Rogers' critiques of American policies toward Native nations, including the history of America's founding, the Trail of Tears, broken treaties, imperialism in Alaska and Hawaii, and capitalism veiled by religion. This revised Rogers is one who is precisely more American because of his Native American heritage, which inspired him to use humor to point out the failings of society. Thus, Rogers' own version of American history is one of violence and unrest, as he told his radio listeners:

Our record with the Indians is going to go down in history. It is going to make us mighty proud of it in the future when our children of ten more generations read of what we did to them. Every man in our history that killed the most Indians has got a statue built for him. The only difference between the Roman gladiators and the Pilgrims was that the Romans used a lion to cut down their native population, and the Pilgrims had a gun. (qtd. in ibid., 129)

Such a perspective cannot be dismissed easily as a mere character gag to garner fame. As Justice rightly restores Rogers to Cherokee literary history, theatre studies is challenged to rewrite how we view this star of the American stage.

Perhaps the general public did not see Rogers' Native heritage because his persona did not match the stereotypes that the general population read as "Indian." The invisibility derived not from Rogers' presentation of self but rather the general public's inability to see a contemporary Native presence in America. Lynn Riggs, like Rogers, was also a biracial Cherokee from Oklahoma whose professional theatrical work, although part of American theatre history, has only recently been incorporated into the story of Native

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American theatre history. Like Rogers, Riggs did not adhere to prevailing stereotypes of Native peoples, yet his theatrical work reveals close ties to his Oklahoma and Native identity. Riggs now holds the distinction of being the first professional playwright of Native American theatre.

Born on Cherokee Nation land in the town of Claremore, Indian Territory, Riggs began writing plays while attending the University of Oklahoma (Braunlich, "Chronology," xvii; Weaver, "Foreword," xi). His impressive career as a playwright led him to New York City, where many of Riggs' scripts were professionally produced by theatre companies that featured first-rate actors such as Stella Adler and Lee Strasberg (Weaver, "Foreword," xi). Often, his plays dramatize relationships between people and their natural environments, particularly how the people and land of Oklahoma responded in the aftermath of Indian Territory's transition into statehood.

In 1988, Phyllis Cole Braunlich wrote Haunted by Home, a well-researched biography about Riggs' successful theatrical career; though, she underplays the significance of Riggs' Cherokee identity and how it shaped his work. A decade later, though, Native American literary scholars began to revisit Riggs' work and now challenge notions that The Cherokee Night (1932) is the only one of his plays that addresses Native issues. Jace Weaver's 1997 That the People Might Live: Native American Literatures and Native American Community examines Riggs' body of work to reveal an author who "unquestionably felt a responsibility to that part of his [Cherokee] heritage" and who used his writing to oppose the accepted representations of cowboys and Indians popular in film and literature (That the People, 97). Weaver's analysis of Riggs' work makes a convincing case, claiming the plays Russet Mantle, The Year of Pilár, and The Cream in the Well, and screenplays Laughing Boy and The Plainsman as Native-themed works. Weaver even rereads Riggs' most famous play, Green Grow the Lilacs (1931) - the play upon which Rodgers and Hammerstein based their musical Oklahoma! - through a Native lens and argues that the drama portrays Native and non-Native relations in Indian Territory during the transition to statehood. Native theatre scholar Jave T. Darby takes Weaver's perspective one step further in "Broadway (Un) Bound: Lynn Riggs' The Cherokee Night" and marks Riggs' play as "a major work in modern Native American theatre" ("Broadway," 9). Darby investigates how, through his construction of *The Cherokee Night*, Riggs developed a distinctly Native American style of dramaturgy, one that he refused to alter in order to please Broadway producers and create another theatrical hit. In "Platiality in Native American Drama" (chapter 4) we will look closely at the play to see how Riggs began to envision a uniquely Native American style of theatre, one that persists today.

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# NATIVE AMERICAN THEATRE FROM THE RED POWER MOVEMENT FORWARD

Some Native American literary scholars have referred to Riggs' work as a "coded" expression of Native American identity.7 However, when one compares the cultural context of the pre-civil rights era to the post-civil rights era, it is not surprising that early twentieth-century Native writers and performers often expressed their cultural identity in a manner that sometimes appears understated, or coded, by our contemporary standards. It was not until the large, political civil rights movements of the 1960s that people of many cultural backgrounds began publically celebrating and expressing their ethnicity. Throughout Native American communities of the 1960s, this expression of Native identities derived largely from the Red Power Movement, in which intertribal organizations and activities worked both to reclaim Native representations and to draw public attention to issues affecting Native Americans. One of the most famous and audacious examples of this was the eighteen-month occupation of Alcatraz Island in 1969 by Native American activists whose demonstrations successfully educated the general public about the federal government's treatment of Native peoples, while also visibly protesting US policies that had appropriated Native lands.

Not surprisingly, the experimental theatre movements of the 1960s combined with the political motivations of Native peoples to inspire what many today consider to be the beginnings of the Native American theatre movement in the United States and Canada. Although Native theatre companies started forming as early as 1956, when a Cherokee actor, playwright, and director named Arthur Smith Junaluska founded the American Indian Drama Company in New York City (Swisher and Benally, *Native*, 157), the events most credited for stimulating contemporary Native American theatre occurred as the late 1960s transitioned into the early 1970s. The founding of a school, the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA), and of a theatre company, the Native American Theater Ensemble (NATE), are the two events that created networks of Native American theatre artists who continue to shape Native drama today.

In 1962, IAIA was founded in Santa Fe, New Mexico, with the purpose of providing Native students a formal arts education influenced by traditional Native American creative practices. By 1969, IAIA's Native theatre program had organized under the artistic direction of Rolland Meinholtz and a manifesto of Native theatre, written by the Cherokee director of IAIA, Lloyd Kiva New (Darby, "Introduction," vii; New, "Credo," 3–4). We will read in the following chapter how New's Credo set the metaphorical stage

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for a conscious development of Native American dramaturgical expressions, which have continued to reverberate throughout the field of Native drama despite IAIA's own challenges of keeping its theatre program running. Oneida playwright and IAIA theatre alumnus Bruce King is perhaps the best example of how the school's philosophies inspired the growth of the Native American theatre movement. In addition to his playwriting, King has remained influential in developing Native theatre companies through his work with the Indian Time Theater Project in Chicago, Echo-Hawk Theatre Ensemble, Thunderbird Theatre at Haskell Indian Nations University, and two tours as a returning faculty member in IAIA's theatre program (Geiogamah, "Introduction," x; Bruce King, "About," 499).

Hanay Geiogamah, a Kiowa/Delaware playwright, director, producer, and academic who has actively shaped the development of Native theatre for almost four decades, emerged as a leader of Native drama in 1972, when Ellen Stewart, director of La Mama Experimental Theater Club, worked with him to obtain the grants and performers necessary to found a Native American theatre troupe (Huntsman, "Native," xii). From NATE's original sixteen-member theatre company, we can trace the careers of many Native theatre artists actively working today, including Aleut actor and educator Jane Lind, and Navajo playwright and actor Geraldine Keams. In addition to writing the first plays associated with NATE, Body Indian (1972), Foghorn (1973), and 49 (1975), Geiogamah continued working as a playwright and then branched into other areas of Native American performance. In 1987 he established the American Indian Dance Theatre, and in 1997 he joined with Jaye T. Darby to develop Project HOOP (Honoring Our Origins and People through Native Theatre, Education, and Community Development) through UCLA.

Meanwhile, in 1974, two long-running academic programs were founded. North of the US border in Canada's theatre center, the Native Theatre School opened in Toronto. Similar to the IAIA theatre program, the Native Theatre School aimed to create an educational environment that supported the development of Native actors, playwrights, and directors. Some of the most famous Native actors in film, Oneida actor Graham Green and Cayuga actor Gary Farmer, came through this influential school. Now known as the Centre for Indigenous Theatre, the program has been transformed into a full-time academic program, including a threeyear conservatory curriculum for actors (Centre for Indigenous Theatre website). In Kansas at the Haskell Indian Nations University, Thunderbird Theatre was founded and then grew under the mentorship of Pat Melody, who directed the group from 1975 through her retirement in 2007. In

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addition to its tours and collaborative projects, the company boasts a strong connection to Bruce King, who has served as an artist in residence. The program next came under the direction of Creek playwright, director, and theatre scholar Julie Pierson-Little Thunder, who arrived in Kansas from her successful founding and artistic direction of the Native theatre company Thunder Road in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Meanwhile, Thunderbird Theatre alumni have also started their own company, the American Indian Repertory Theatre, which opened with *Weaving the Rain*, a play written by Kiowa actor and dramatist Diane Yeahquo Reyner.

The most famous professional Native American theatre company in the United States emerged in 1975, when three sisters of Kuna and Rappahannock descent, Lisa Mayo, Gloria Miguel, and Muriel Miguel, combined to form what is now the oldest continually performing women's theatre group in North America, Spiderwoman Theater. These three core members of the group have worked with artists of Native and non-Native heritage,<sup>8</sup> using a playful, improvisatory style of theatre to draw attention to serious issues affecting women. By 1981, with their signature production of Sun, Moon, and Feather, the group began to focus solely on issues relating to Native American representation, especially the portrayal of Native women. Spiderwoman has toured across the world, introducing audiences everywhere to the group's unique style of creating plays, which they call "storyweaving." In this process, the sisters build their plays with interweaving types of story (personal memories, family stories, traditional myths, contemporary songs, and historical events) that structure the dramatic action through overlapping moments of theme, sound, and image (Spiderwoman Theater, "About," 501). In addition to their work as a theatre company, the members of Spiderwoman Theater have inspired Native and non-Native theatre artists through their storyweaving workshops and artist residencies at universities, reservations, and conferences. Each woman also works actively as an independent artist, writing her own plays and acting in various professional theatre venues. The legacy of Spiderwoman Theater will continue well into the future, as playwright/performers such as Monique Mojica and Murielle Borst, daughters of Gloria Miguel and Muriel Miguel respectively, continue to shape the future of Native American theatre through their performances, publications, and development of theatre companies.9

Despite the early and persistent activities of Native American theatre artists in the United States, it was during the 1980s in Canada, where funding for the arts is more accessible, that a ground-swell of theatrical activity began to shape the ways the world sees Native drama. Ojibway