

Thematic Implications in the Stage Directions of George Ryga's Play *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*

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ABSTRACT---- *The aim of this paper is to illustrate how George Ryga in his play The Ecstasy of Rita Joe (1976), tries to make use of stage directions to enhance the themes expressed in the text. Thus, he uses stage directions extensively in order to express, illustrate and present his themes. Like Bernard Shaw who distrusts the readers apprehension to grasp his ideas and motifs, we see that Ryga, to a great extent he presents us a play which the stage directions run parallel to his intended themes and thus enforcing his purpose, not only for the readers only, but also for the actors and directors of his play.*

George Ryga's *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* (1976) makes use of stage directions more than any Canadian play to express the themes and ideas intended by the dramatist. Like John Herbert's *Fortune and Men's Eyes* (1964) and David Freeman's *Creeps* (1970), *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* depicts a repressive system whose agents thwart the protagonists' desire for freedom and personal fulfillment. But the real focus of *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* is the alienation and self-imprisonment from which the main characters suffer. This kind of environment enforces a distinctive kind of garrison mentality among its inhabitants whose struggle for survival involves not only their physical well-being but their ethical and ethnic identities as well. Thus, in order for the playwright to make sure that the message of the play can be more fully comprehended, he incorporated lengthy stage directions and an extensive use of lighting. Stage directions have the potential of activating and enhancing the thematic implications of a dramatic text. Since most serious plays-- at least the non-trivial ones-- are more often read than seen in the theatre, it is important to pay more attention to the non-verbal aspect of a play by distinguishing between the primary and the secondary texts:

Roman Ingarden in *The Language of the Theater* argues that the spoken dialogue that takes place between the dramatic characters, and the verbal text segments that are not reproduced on stage in spoken form (pp.317-23). This second category includes the title of a play, preface, inscriptions, and stage directions. The qualitative and the quantitative relationships between primary and secondary texts are extremely variable. Prefaces, inscriptions and dedications were absent from the majority of Shakespeare's plays even the stage directions were kept to the minimum, whereas when Ben Jonson published his plays under the title of *Works* in 1616; he included Latin inscriptions, dedications, prologues, and — stage-directions. In plays such as those of George Bernard Shaw, "the primary text is almost overwhelmed by the secondary text (p. 1, 28) . His play *Androcles and the Lion* (1916) opens with a preface which is almost twice the length of the dramatic text. *Man and Superman* (1903), on the other hand, contains stage directions that are up to four pages long. Such practices show that there is not only a highly developed distrust of the stage, actors, directors, and readers, but also a belief that the dramatist's point of view of his work and the meaning of the text can only be conveyed by himself. (Boulton, 1968, p.29).

The stage directions in the secondary text can be divided into two parts: one that refers to the actor's instructions and the other which gives instructions governing the set, the properties, lighting and sound effects. This division, of course, is not final; it is possible to expand it when technical innovations are employed-- such as film and projection. In addition, as stated in In Eric Bentley and A.E. Kennedy (pp. 8-13) that the primary text may carry signals for actors and readers which ensure that the dramatic situation is constituted in the dialogue, as in Shakespeare's plays and those of his contemporaries.

In the naturalist drama, it is the sign and the gesture which dominate, since there is a notion of the debasement of the individual and his sense of awareness which gives way to mute acting. As a result, in the modern stage, the leading — theoreticians of drama such as Adolf Appia, Gordon Craig, V.E. Meyerhold and Antonin Artaud have pleaded for a deliterization process resulting in the dominion of mimes and gestures.

In George Ryga's *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, the stage directions emphasize the idea of alienation; the ramp, for instance, alienates the characters and the stage from each other on the one hand, and alienates the characters from the audience on the other. This is exactly what occurs when we read: "This ramp dominates the stage by wrapping the central and forward playing area" (*The Ecstasy*, p.37). But here there seems to be a paradox: while the playwright intends to make the audience share the experiences of the main characters by keeping the lights on at the opening of the play on both the

auditorium and the stage at the same time, later we see that characters, especially the “Indians” are separated from the audience by the lights. On the other hand, we see the Magistrate, David Joe, Mr. Homer, and Jaimie Paul directly address the audience, thus breaking the traditional “fourth wall” which separates the audience from the actors. Furthermore, the playwright asks for an expressionistic setting. The play calls for one setting but different locales. The action requires many places: the courtroom, the reserve, the prison, Jaimie’s room, the city streets, but the physical setting remains constant throughout the play.

The above mentioned locales, in addition to the constant fuse of lighting which defines not only the mood of the play in general but the characters in particular, play an important role in separating the stage on one hand and alienating the characters on the other. The preface to the first edition of *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* by Dan George, who played the role of David Joe in the 1976 production of the play, reveals one of the important themes of the play: the long lasting struggle of the Indians (the so-called natives nowadays) and their displacement in the white man’s society.” The play carries a message all Canada should hear. It is a message Canada needs to hear. ..”(p.5). The tone of these words is “liberal didactic.” (Worthington, pp. 139-43). It reveals that the Indians have to present their case before Canada because the laws which are “a hundred years old” are made in a way to protect the Whites and to affect all Indians for years to come. They need above all to create sympathy and understanding for they are depressed economically, socially and politically. This need for recognition of their rights to live decently in all aspects of life is expressed in the words of Rita Joe and Jaimie Paul. The obstacles to fulfill this need are expressed in the words of the Magistrate at one time and in stage directions at another (pp.15-16).

In the opening stage directions, Ryga asks for a large circular ramp which dominates the stage by “wrapping the (central and the forward playing area (p.15).” Within this playing area, pieces of stage furniture or props may establish the locale for each particular scene in the play, (for example, the court, Jaimie’s room, and the reserve), but the action is not limited spatially or chronologically. On the backstage wall hangs a mountain cyclorama and in front of it a maze of curtain and a cityscape, but Ryga specifies that these are up to the start of the play. Only after the cast of the play make “workmanlike and untheatrical” entrances are the cyclorama and the maze curtain lowered to create a “sense of compression of the stage into the auditorium.” The backstage props are emblematic, emphasizing Rita’s longing to escape past the cityscape to the mountains.

The initial workmanlike entry of the actors is strongly anti-illusionary and theatrically effective. The audience watches the actors assuming their roles, and by this process the world on stage and the world of the audience are confused. The stage becomes an explicit extension of the auditorium. But, while the members of the audience may regard themselves as sharing in the action of this play, ultimately they are excluded from it by the ramp which surrounds the stage and thus being alienated. In much the same way the play does not ask the white audience to identify with Rita Joe, for a white audience cannot enter the Indian world; instead the play asks for recognition that she, and the Indians, have an existence as human beings. The ramp with its circular form also suggests the cyclic nature of the play. The play’s action reflects Rita Joe’s memories, jumping backward and forward, to the past or present, and it has no clear beginning and end. Events which happen before Rita’s first courtroom appearance are shown after it in the play, while the ending, with Eileen Joe’s direct address to the audience, could be a re- beginning of the action, the start of a scene about Rita’s arrival in the city. The ramp also has no beginning or end: it is constant, running around the action regardless of what the characters do. And just as the lowering of the cyclorama creates “a sense of compression,” so the ramp which encloses the play compresses and limits the action. The actress playing Rita Joe is trapped within the ramp, just as the character Rita Joe is trapped in the city.

In the scene which opens act II, Rita Joe is shown in prison. Ryga’s stage direction for this scene specifies that the cell be suggested by light alone: “Lights isolate the FATHER, another light with prison bar shadows isolates RITA JOE in her area of the stage” (p.77). As long as Rita remains in the lighted areas, which may refer to the white world. she is imprisoned and alienated, as other Indians, in this light, white flashing world. Yet the audience still sees the other areas of the stage which suggest other areas of her life. For example, the cyclorama at the back establishes “the tension between the city and the Indian reserve.” The Magistrate’s chair remains at stage, suggesting that Rita’s actions are constantly being scrutinized and judged by the white world. Isolation by lighting has occurred twice in the first act of the play. At one point, Rita Joe, standing before the Magistrate and Policeman, is “contained in a pool of light before them” (p.38), and at another point, there is a “harsh light upon her. She turns away, aware that she is in captivity” (p.55). The use of light to suggest captivity and isolation is effective, not only because it preserves the integrity of the ramp enclosing the action, but also because stage lighting is ephemeral, yet powerful. The actor in a spotlight is separated from all the rest of the actors and from the audience; this is a convention of modern stage. But David Joe, trying to reach his child, is held back by shadows. The isolation by light is a device which the audience will not question, but one which is poignant because the shadows are so substantial. This idea of detachment which is implied in the use of lighting and the stage directions is accompanied by the idea of segregation which is expressed in terms of the whites’ denial of the Indians’ freedom. Ryga writes about those who are isolated from their society and denied their legal rights to live decent life on their lands no matter where they may be. (Abu-Swailem,1999)

Thus, one of the tragedies of Rita Joe’s life is that initially she thinks she can choose between freedom and imprisonment. As one gradually learns during the course of the play, Rita has come to the city to escape the reserve, following Jaimie in his search for a new kind of freedom, the freedom from poverty and charity (Abu-Swailem, 1993). But once in the city

she and Jaimie are trapped as completely as they were in the reserve. For Indians there is no freedom save the sort that the whites recognize, and the white man's conception of the Indians' freedom is their imprisonment. Having left the reserve, Jaimie and Rita Joe only learn that they cannot return to it. Furthermore, an awareness of the Whiteman's way of life brings with it the recognition that the Indian's life is constrained. This recognition is made explicit in Rita Joe's cell when first her father and then the priest come to visit her. Rita wakes up. At first she is not bitter, but as her conversation with him progresses, she becomes angry with him and with the white world he stands for. At last, she explodes at him:

My uncle was Dan Joe. ..He was dyin' and he said to me —lon
ago the white man come with Bibles to talk to my people, who
had the land. They talk for a hundred years. .. then we had the
Bibles and they-had our land. (p.83)

And as the priest leaves, she screams at him:

Go tell your God. ..when you see him Tell him about Rita Joe
an' what they done to her! Tell him about yourself too!. ..That
you were not good enough for me, but that didn't stop you tryin'.
Tell him that! (pp. 83-84)

Rita is talking to the priest to go to his White God because the White God is not different from the white man's practices which are motivated by his religion.

As the second act opens, Rita is asleep in her cell and her father speaks about the time he left the reserve at the age of fifteen. A girl watched him as he worked and attracted him, but when he walked near her to get a drink of water, she ran from him with all her folk of geese following her. David Joe identifies Rita with that girl: like the goose girl, Rita runs away from the Indian reserve, pursued by the white geese, the wild birds that have been tamed and had their wings clipped. Yet if Rita is kept from returning to the Indian world, she is nonetheless hostile to the white world as she makes clear in the rest of the prison cell scene. After her father's address to the audience, Rita has nothing left save someone else's God. And that God is a cruel one, as the last line of the song repeated throughout the play reminds us:

"God was gonna to have a laugh
An' give me a job in the city!" (p. 65)

Throughout the play Rita tries to run from both the Indian world and the world of the city. Her escapement is reinforced but the several references to her past by the use of flashbacks. In the stage directions, Ryga describes Rita as "jubilant" or "happy in her memory" and others showing her happiness in the moments of the past. The only point in the whole play at which Rita Joe can and does escape from the bitter imprisonment of the city comes at the very end of the play when she is murdered. As the priest and the white mourners close in on the Indians, the white girl plays her guitar and sings:

Oh the singing bird,
Has found its wings,
And is soaring!
My God, what a sigh!
On the cold fresh wind of the morning! (p. 92)

Rita Joe escapes by dying, but death is the only way out of her prison. The final scene is a bleak one: Rita Joe has won her freedom only in death; the other Indians turn on the encircling whites, poised for an act of defiance which cannot end successfully. Ryga sees that the condition of the Indians' life is one which embitters and destroys an individual. Rita's humanity is destroyed by death. She becomes harder in the course of the play, less eager to please whites, but finally she must die. Because of his imprisonment, Jaimie also undergoes a change of character as he turns to aggression more and more; he, too, is finally killed by the anonymous murderers.

To sum up, George Ryga makes use of elaborate stage directions in this play in order to encompass the physical setting, characterization and motivation for the reader as well as for the actors. Stage directions become important to the progress of the action upon the stage, thus becoming essential to the understanding and intensifying of the unrealistic setting so as to foreshadow the events, motifs and themes as intended by the dramatist.

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