

THE REZ SISTERS

THE REZ SISTERS
BY TOMSON HIGHWAY
DIRECTED BY JESSICA CARMICHAEL

GRADE RECOMMENDATION

Grades 9 and up.

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.

STUDENT MATINÉE DATES

September 1, 4, 22, 24.

FUN FACT!

Multi-award-winning playwright Tomson Highway is also a novelist, and pianist/songwriter.

SYNOPSIS

On the Wasaychigan Hill Indigenous Reserve (“Wasy”) on Manitoulin Island, Ontario, seven women related by birth or marriage arrange a road trip to Toronto in hopes of winning the jackpot in “the biggest bingo in the world.” Each woman dreams of winning the prize to help improve her impoverished circumstances.

Pelajia Patchnose, who fixes roofs, wants paved roads on the reserve and yearns for the return of Nanabush, the mythical trickster. Her sister, Philomena Moosetail, is desperate to own a white porcelain toilet. Marie-Adele is married to Eugene and they have 14 children. She has cancer and dreams of someday owning her own island. Annie Cook, Marie-Adele’s older sister and half sister of Pelajia and Philomena, dreams of becoming a country singer and being able to sing with Fritz the Catz, a Jewish country musician. Annie’s sister, Emily Dictionary, is a bisexual ex-biker who works at the local store and mourns the loss of her lesbian lover killed in a motorcycle accident. Emily was once in an abusive relationship with a man, which has made her bitter and tough. Veronique St. Pierre, Emily’s meddlesome sister-in-law, dreams of having a new stove to replace the old one that frequently breaks down. The last of the group is Veronique’s adopted and mentally challenged daughter, Zhaboonigan Peterson, who was sexually assaulted by two white men.

Accompanying the women on this journey is Nanabush, a mythical spirit (and the only male character in the play). He appears in many guises. Along the way, he challenges, at times impedes, and supports the women. Only Zhaboonigan and Marie-Adele can see this spirit among them.

As they travel to Toronto, the women share their stories, squabbles and joys and in turn develop a deeper understanding and respect for one another.

Marie-Adele dies at the bingo game in Toronto and is escorted into the spirit world by Nanabush. Although the women do not win the jackpot, Philomena wins enough to pay for a new toilet.



Back at the reserve Veronique finds purpose and joy in cooking for Marie-Adele’s husband and children. Emily confides in Zhaboonigan that she is pregnant. Annie sings backup for Fritz the Catz and Pelajia goes back to fixing roofs. A seagull joins her as she hammers on the roof; it is Nanabush in disguise.

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

GLOBAL COMPETENCIES:

- Creativity
- Learning to Learn/Self-Awareness
- Communication
- Collaboration
- Critical Thinking

GRADES 9–12:

- The Arts (Dance, Drama, Music, Integrated Arts, Media Arts, Visual Arts).
- Language/English (Oral Communication, Reading and Literature Studies, Writing, Media Studies).
- First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies (Communities and Governance, Expressions of First Nations, Métis and Inuit Cultures, Issues and Perspectives, Understanding Contemporary First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Voices, World Views and Aspirations).
- Health and Physical Education (Healthy Living).
- Native Languages (Oral communication).

GRADES 11–12:

- Social Sciences and Humanities (Dynamics of Human Relationships, Equity, Diversity and Social Justice, Gender Studies, Human Development Throughout the Lifespan, Introduction to Anthropology, Psychology and Sociology).

GRADE 12:

- Canadian and World Studies (Canada: History, Identity, Culture).

THEMES

- Appearance and reality
- Friendship
- Supernatural, mysticism and mythology
- Dreams and ambitions
- Gender and two-spiritedness
- Identity and female resilience
- Poverty
- Trauma, abuse, sickness and death
- Hope and humour vs. loss and conflict
- Transformation
- Post-colonial discourse
- Tradition vs. modernity
- Journey
- Life on a reserve
- Fecundity

THREE KEY FIGURES TO LOOK FOR IN THE REZ SISTERS

CHARACTERS	Marie-Adele	Nanabush	Emily
ADJECTIVES	Fearful	Symbolic	Tough

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY: LEARNING ABOUT THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN THE PLAY

3 classes (approx. 180 minutes)

OBJECTIVE: Students will research the Nēhinaw/Nēhilawē or Mushkegowuk (Cree) and Anishnaabe (Ojibwe) peoples, to advance their understanding of the community and characters found in the play.

INSTRUCTIONS: Students will be divided into small groups researching one of the nations in this fictional Indigenous reserve on Manitoulin Island: the Nēhinaw/Nēhilawē or Mushkegowuk (Cree) and Anishnaabe (Ojibwe) peoples.

RESOURCES: Computers.

An activity while reading or after seeing the play.

1. Divide the students into four groups. Using a hat draw, each group will do research on one of the following:
 - a. the Nēhinaw/Nēhilawē or Mushkegowuk (Cree) nation;
 - b. the Anishnaabe (Ojibwe) nation;
 - c. Manitoulin Island and its environment;
 - d. The treaties made with Indigenous nations on Manitoulin Island.
2. Each group will spend one or two class periods researching their topic and tie it into the following questions:
 - a. Audiences will hear English, Nēhiyawēwin (Cree) and Anishinaabemowin (Ojibwe) languages spoken in the play. For those not familiar with the two Indigenous languages, why might Tomson Highway introduce something unfamiliar to the listener? For those who do speak these Indigenous languages, what are the implications of hearing these traditional languages?
 - b. Tomson Highway uses the Nēhiyawēwin (Cree) language for dramatic style, as he says it is humorous, blunt and honest and has no gender. How does this impact your understanding of the Wasaychigan Hill Indigenous Reserve and its community?
 - c. What is the role of humour in a dramatic play? Although this play touches upon many painful and difficult subjects, why would humour be used alongside tragedy?

d. Why do you think Tomson Highway chose to write about seven women on this reserve? What might he be saying about power, leadership and patriarchy?

e. The Trickster teaches people about the nature and meaning of existence. How is the Indigenous understanding of the cycle of life reflected in the play?

f. How does the location of the reserve on Manitoulin Island play into the women's identity?

g. How does each character's perspective on living on the reserve differ from those of the others?

3. Each group will then present their findings to the rest of the class.

4. Afterwards, debrief with the whole class and discuss what stood out for them when doing the research and tying it back to the themes in the play.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

Each group will create a handout on what they have discovered about one of the Indigenous nations, Manitoulin Island and the treaties in the area, referencing the play and using the questions listed above to help them tie it together.

EDUCATION ENRICHMENT

Study Guide available at stratfordfestival.ca/studyguides

Prologues (interactive presentations on stage) are available at 11:00 a.m. on: September 22, 24.

Workshops and post-show chats may be arranged by calling the Education Department at 519.271.4040, ext. 2354.

Festival Theatre, Costume and Props Warehouse, Archives and Set Changeover tours may be arranged by calling the Box Office at 1.800.567.1600.

THEATRE ETIQUETTE AND THE ROLE OF THE AUDIENCE

Live theatre is a magical experience shared and respected by all: both by audience members and performers. The actors feed off your energy and your response to their work on stage.

Here are a few things to help everyone maximize their enjoyment of the performance:

- If you leave the auditorium, you will be re-seated at an appropriate time during the performance.
- Please turn off all cell phones and other electronic devices during the performance.
- Please refrain from talking or eating during the performance.
- Please do respond to the performance through laughter, tears or captivated smiles.

Here's some more information on [theatre etiquette](#).

BOOKING INFORMATION

Online: www.stratfordfestival.ca/schools

Email: groups@stratfordfestival.ca

Phone: 1.800.567.1600 or 519.273.1600

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