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## **An open letter about the premiere of *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson* in Minneapolis from Rhiana Yazzie**

RHIANA YAZZIE

EDITOR'S NOTE: Co-produced with the Hennepin Theatre Trust, Minneapolis Musical Theatre ran *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson* from June 6 – June 29, 2014 at the New Century Theatre in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Since then, all evidence for the support of this rock musical has disappeared from Hennepin Theatre Trust's website. No apology was ever issued. Although the object of its address has now passed, we feel that this open letter is still a poignant piece of resistance writing and in the context of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, where Donald Trump is touted as the “New Andrew Jackson” we believe it is timely as well. (AC)

Does Minnesota know itself well enough to responsibly produce a show like *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson*? The title makes the play sound like a fun, maybe even gory, critique of our seventh president, about whom most Americans have heard contradictory ideas. Whether or not we've investigated the subject, it sounds like attending this play will likely cast a clearer light on a shadowy part of American history, one that might include a critique of the spectacular violence waged from 1829–1837 by the slaveholding president dubbed Old Hickory. Maybe *Bloody Bloody* will take Andrew Jackson's campaign of ethnic cleansing head on? Maybe it will acknowledge the thousands of Native Americans he killed. As a Native American, a playwright, a musical theatre fan, and artistic director of New Native Theatre, I say right on. What a wonderful opportunity and contribution to American theatre to see a play responsibly take up these important issues, issues that have determined Native American inclusion and access. We need as many advocates in the media as we can get. But that's not what happens, instead this script, written by J. Michael Friedman and Alex Timbers reinforces stereotypes and leaves me assaulted, manipulated and devastatingly used as a means to a weak and codependent end.

On June 6th, 2014, Minneapolis Musical Theatre opens *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson*, a co-production with the Hennepin Theatre Trust. It's taken four years for any company in the Twin Cities to approach this offensive play since it debuted in New York in 2010. Could it be because in Minnesota we have a relationship with Native Americans and their experience collectively embraced? Could it be that we know our history, the legacy of the vicious founding of this state, and its violent dealings with Native Americans? Could it also be because Minneapolis is home to the founding of the American Indian Movement? Could it be for these

reasons we can see that the play is an exercise in racial slurs against Native Americans justified with a thin coating of white shaming? Why would we together be bothered with it then?

But soon it will be performed and the character Andrew Jackson written by Alex Timbers and J. Michael Freedman will spew unchallenged racial epithets five times a week on soil that is still yet recovering from our own troubled history. Soil where blood has been spilled and land has been taken and people have been shoved aside. There is nothing about this history that is “all sexy pants,” to quote the marketing machine that accompanied this show. The truth is that Andrew Jackson was not a rockstar and his campaign against tribal people—known so briefly in American history textbooks as the “Indian Removal Act” is not a farcical backdrop to some emotive, brooding celebrity. Can you imagine a show wherein Hitler was portrayed as a justified, sexy rockstar? This play exacerbates the already deficient knowledge our country has when it comes to Native history; in that context, a false story about this country and our engagement with Native American people is unforgivable.

I saw this play when it debuted at the Public Theater in New York in 2010 and was invited to speak with the authors among a group of other Native American artists to openly discuss the play’s inaccurate history and depiction of Native Americans. It was dubbed as an emo rock musical paralleling George W. Bush’s rise to power and the following Tea Party movement.

I can list specifically the ways that the play distorts history, but that would take pages. Instead I’ll look at a few key moments such as the inciting incident where Andrew Jackson’s parents are killed by Indians who shoot random arrows into the young Jackson’s home—no Jackson’s parents were not killed by Indians—which creates a vendetta that propels him throughout the rest of the play and justifies countless tirades, massacres and slurs against Indians.

Even Minneapolis Musical Theatre producer and director, Steven Meerdink says, “this show really falls short on its lack of transparency of the fact that it does not try to accurately present historical events and figures. The authors deliberately skew, distort, satirize, blur, and condense roughly 60 years of history into a 90 minute play. There are things presented in the play that never actually occurred, and many other things presented that may have occurred—but with dates, circumstances, or relevant people changed.” Meerdink says this will appear in a program note.

Aside from skewing historical events, the play does something much worse. Reading this play again this week has saddened me. It's even made me think I might have to unfriend J. Michael Freedman on Facebook.

The most common defense of the play is that it's a South Park kind of aesthetic, therefore it's an equal opportunity defacer. Meerdink echoes what I've heard the authors and original producers say in person and in print, "There are ugly things said about many groups of people in the show—the British, the Spanish, Native Americans, and European Americans..." But Sesame Street has me thinking, one of these things is not like the other.

The first time the British are depicted, they are flogging Jackson. But in that scene Jackson never once makes a racially based insult, in fact there isn't one racially based insult against the British in the entire play, not even a gratuitous use of the word "limey." Jackson in fact remains in control during this scene and actually walks away from the flogging when he's had enough, leaving the British soldiers dumbfounded.

When the Spanish are introduced, again, not one racial remark made to insult them. Instead they are simply and accurately called Spaniards. But in the introduction to this roundhouse fight with them, Jackson begins a joke, "Tell me what's the difference between a little homosexual Indian boy and George Washington? Besides the fact you'd murder either of them without thinking twice?" This joke goes unchallenged except for the Spaniards calling back, "You are the gay."

The authors may have thought this was a joke, perhaps even the producers and the majority of the audience in New York when it premiered did too. But in Minnesota, it's not funny at all. Maybe in the world Alex Timbers and J. Michael Freedman live in, Indians are not targets of racial violence today. Maybe the murder rate of Native Americans in their world isn't astronomical. Maybe in their world, gay Native Americans don't have the highest suicide and murder rate in the entire country. Then again, maybe they are right, these unfortunate Indians are murdered without a second thought. Maybe that's the political comment they were hoping to make with this scene and asking their audience to be aware of and call out for a change?

It is these moments of unchallenged cruelties raged against Native Americans that leave me pained, even more so than the untrue history. I want so badly to be on the same side as the authors, I know they want to prove Jackson was a troubled character in American history with a terribly violent, unstable, genocidal mind. But when they keep adding gratuitous brutalities

against Indians I have to question what their real organizing principle as artists actually is when Jackson says to an Indian character, “You are despicable creatures! You show no loyalty to anything. Your music is terrible, your table manners suck, and your painting skills are absolutely dreadful. I mean look at this.” Then a stage direction reads, “Pulls out a primitive drawing of a buffalo.” The fact is that the writers are not satirizing this practice, they are employing the practice as a process for writing. “Primitive” is a deeply fraught and loaded term that has been used to justify atrocity against indigenous people world over. It is not a benign stage direction. It trades in the same disregard for the humanity and culture of Native Americans that this “emo rockstar” exhibits. Where is the line? Where is the satire?

This isn't the only instance where stage directions give insight to the authors' points of view. After Jackson's parents are killed, “Three young Indian boys enter and dance around... taunting [Jackson] all the while and pretending to shoot arrows at him. They're really fucking annoying.” Because this is the post Broadway publication, I can't help but wonder if there is an allusion to the protests the authors got from real Native Americans; and if not, it certainly sets up what is yet to come out of Jackson's mouth. You Indians have “No artistic vision. You're savages! You're soulless, Godless and well you get the point.” The play finds any and all opportunities to berate Indian characters Jackson encounters.

Ultimately, watching/reading the play means putting up with 85 minutes of racist tirades before getting to the last five minutes of white guilt. Well, thank goodness it's a musical and I can at least enjoy tapping my toes, at least up until *Ten Little Indians*. Children's songs and nursery rhymes like this have socialized generations of children to believe that Native people were expendable and that there was no need to empathize with them; it was also used to attack African Americans and to envision a future that doesn't include adult Native or African Americans.

During *Ten Little Indians*, ridiculous, inane, powerless Indian characters are coerced into or are gladly signing their lands away for smallpox blankets and dream catchers—dream catchers? Any Minnesotan should know that's Ojibwe not Cherokee. Then after hearing nine ways in which Indians are killed it's reveal that the last death is a hanging.

Wow. How does that land here in Minnesota? Our state holds the record for the largest mass hanging in U.S. history when 38 Dakota men were executed in Mankato. Would there be

any acknowledgement of this history while the production runs? Or would the producers and creative team just take their paychecks quietly and move on without so much as an apology?

As the play nears its end, finally, Jackson doesn't relent on his nauseating remarks about Native people and their culture. To justify his defiance of the Supreme Court ruling that removal of tribes from their land was illegal and unconstitutional, Jackson implores a Native character Black Fox, "I wish you'd built symphonies in cities, man, and put on plays and showed yourselves a little more essential. You know, to the culture? And yeah, you totally were here first, absolutely, but we don't give a shit, and we never will."

I will echo what Steve Elm, artistic director of Amerinda, an arts and theatre group in New York said, "I felt that there was a joke that I wasn't in on... this play seemed to be expressly written without any idea that there are Native people still alive." And I will further say, that this play takes for granted that people from the dominant culture don't have the capacity for kindness, change, or self-evaluation. We have many allies here in Minnesota and they will not stand idly by while history is whitewashed and Native culture—already imperiled by hundreds of years of misrepresentation—is further debased as a theatrical device.

If the authors had any understanding of contemporary Native American culture or artists, would they have been so quick to make such debasing statements about Native Americans? Because, let's face it, these comments are not about Indians in 1838, this is about their sense of the absence and extinction of Native peoples right now. Perhaps this says less about the authors themselves and more about the erasure of Native history in this country. But as artists, who are political, and intentionally incendiary in so much of the body of their work, there's no excuse for this ignorance and there's no excuse for the way this ignorance is suffused throughout this play.

How would Minneapolis Musical Theatre handle these tirades and images of violence against Native Americans? Would it be a safe place for a Native American family to spend their Sunday afternoon? Would Native youth that see the play feel empowered or erased and battered? How would the MMT actors feel about saying all of these cruel lines after four weeks? Would it get old? Would we learn anything? Would they care? Would we just say stop?

There has to be a better way to make a political point. The first step is to be smarter about your subject matter. Learn about the culture you're trying to make a point about. Ask yourself, how are contemporary people living with this historical legacy?

If you don't know what Native American artists are doing right now here in our state, go to *All my Relations Gallery* in Minneapolis, see great Native American fine art. There's nothing primitive about it and there never was. See shows at my company, New Native Theatre, we could produce four original musicals with the budget *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson* has, with work about, by, and for Native Americans that honors our cultures, our traditions, and broadens our understanding of American history. Watch dance by Emily Johnson and Rosy Simas. Listen to First Person Radio on KFAI. Read The Circle News. Or, look just 300 miles north to Thunder Bay where Northwest Ontario's largest regional company, Magnus Theatre, has a mandate to produce at least one First Nations play a year from Canada's ever growing canon of thriving Aboriginal theatre.

I grew up in New Mexico where Native American culture is very visible. Most of the normal markers of New Mexican culture take directly from the architecture, iconography, and Native artists of the tribes that have continuously lived there for time immemorial. New Mexico is not perfect in its relationship with tribes, but certainly the dominant culture in New Mexico embraces it, identifies with it, and protects it. As a young person, I once attended a show in Albuquerque's big theatre, Popejoy Hall. The Flying Karamazov Brothers came to do a comedy program. I don't remember anything about the show this many years later, except for the moment when that east coast based group had a short exchange where they made a Tonto voice, a quip, then a punchline. This happened right in the middle of a heightened moment of acrobatics, but instead of that New Mexican audience laughing, they all stopped. Not a peep came from that so-called funny punchline. In that moment, I knew my community had my back. My community said in its denial of a laugh at their punchline, that it's not ok to stereotype and strip humanity from Native Americans. As a child that moment was powerful. Did Minnesota have the back of the Native American children who call this state home? Who was going to stand up for them? Or did they laugh along with this ridiculous show and celebrate genocide?

Minnesotans should be proud that this state is where so many great contemporary Native American leaders have lived and worked. Those living in Minneapolis should be especially proud that only a few weeks ago Columbus Day was changed to Indigenous Peoples Day following the example of Red Wing which made the change a few months earlier. Perhaps the entire State of Minnesota will come next. These are things to be proud of and these are the ways

we as Minnesotans can turn our trajectory from the violent past that was the founding of this state to a more equitable home for all.

Is Minnesota, its audiences and artists, at that point yet of supporting Native Americans and defending their humanity in the way that audience did when I was a kid?

I hope so.

I think it was an unfortunate choice for Minneapolis Musical Theatre to produce this play, and I have no doubt they played into the same disconnect the authors did, not considering the effect it could have on real people or that Native Americans might actually be audience members. However, my call to action lies more with the authors who will continue to profit from productions of this play. Their royalties should go to places that actively do the work of dealing with Andrew Jackson's legacy—like the Minnesota Indian Women's Resource Center, Ain Dah Yung shelter for homeless Native youth, the Minnesota Indian Women's Sexual Assault Coalition, or many of the other worthy organizations directly serving Native people—and don't engage in the play's same laissez-faire attitude of lightly encouraging audience members to question over cocktails whether or not Andrew Jackson was an American Hitler while aggressively dehumanizing the people Jackson tormented. Because, he was.