

2012

## **One Dead White Guy at a Time: Miss Julie: Sheh'mah, by Tara Beagan**

Kim Solga  
*Western University*, [ksolga@uwo.ca](mailto:ksolga@uwo.ca)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/englishpub>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### **Citation of this paper:**

Barker, Roberta and Kim Solga. *One Dead White Guy at a Time: Miss Julie: Sheh'mah, by Tara Beagan*. *New Canadian Realisms: Eight Plays*. Ed. Roberta Barker and Kim Solga. Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2012. 239-43

One Dead White Guy at a Time: *Miss Julie: Sheh'mah*, by Tara Beagan

Kim Solga

In her hit 2008 play, *Miss Julie: Sheh'mah*, Tara Beagan does something I – and no small number of my female undergraduates – have wanted to do for years: she cusses out August Strindberg. In the Ntlaka'pamux language of Beagan's grandmothers, "sheh'mah" is a rude word for white person; as Beagan says, "it basically means 'whitey,' or 'honky.'"<sup>1</sup> In other words, this is *Miss Julie: White Trash*. Beagan, of course, is not calling Strindberg – the celebrated naturalist and symbolist playwright, whose *Miss Julie* (1888) is considered one of the purest examples of stage naturalism in the modern theatre canon – white trash; at least, *not exactly*. The term refers to the way in which the First Nations servants on the interior British Columbia estate where *this* Miss Julie lives probably regard her. It's a rude word, sure, but it's also an act of resistance: Beagan's title refuses, before any curtain has gone up, to grant the white woman at the heart of this play any special privileges. Instead, it aims to stage the complexities – the challenges and the pleasures and the mundanities – of the otherwise invisible "Indians" who centre this adaptation and give it political force.

Tara Beagan is a "proud halfbreed": Ntlaka'pamux (Thompson River Salish) on her mother's side and Irish Canadian on her father's. Born and raised in Alberta, Beagan found her way to Toronto and began her playwriting career there in 2004 with *Thy Neighbour's Wife* (UnSpun), which won the 2005 Dora Mavor Moore award for Outstanding New Play. Hot on the heels of that success, *Dreary and Izzy*, her first full-length work under the banner of Native Earth Performing Arts (NEPA), played the

Factory Studio space in Toronto in late 2005, and was subsequently published in a stand-alone edition by Playwrights Canada Press. A number of works followed, while Beagan, eager to learn more about not only her craft but also the challenge of supporting other First Nations artists, began working for NEPA directly. Of this formative time, she writes:

During my time inside NEPA's office, I wrote my first commission and I was handed my first dramaturgical gig. The playwright was thirty years my senior. I was terrified. I did not know why I was being trusted to contribute to his growth in some way. Yvette [Nolan, then Artistic Director at NEPA] was convinced that I could do the job. Her faith helped me find my way.<sup>ii</sup>

In a recent memoir reflecting on her years working with Nolan at Native Earth, a company devoted to celebrating and strengthening young artists, Beagan takes seriously the responsibility of becoming a mentor to the generation of First Nations playwrights emerging behind her. And now, as the new Artistic Director of NEPA (2011-), Beagan lives that responsibility, its risks and rewards, every day.

The truth, however, is that the spirits of mentorship and collaboration have always guided her artistic practice. *Miss Julie: Sheh'mah* was a commission from and collaboration with KICK Theatre's Melee Hutton and Christine Horne; *The Mill: The Woods* (2010) was the third in a linked series of plays written for TheatreFront in Toronto, alongside and in conjunction with works by Matthew MacFadzean, Hannah Moscovitch, and Damien Atkins; and Beagan's latest NEPA-programmed play, *free as injuns*, will premiere at Toronto's Buddies in Bad Times in February 2012, continuing her longtime association with that theatre, the artistic home of Toronto's queer

community. Beagan's labour – as an actor, as a playwright, and now as an artistic director – cleaves to and is sustained by the belief that artists, especially First Nations artists, in Canada have a responsibility to support one another, to enable one another, and together to build communities.

Given Beagan's working ethos, her choice to adapt a Strindberg text – especially one so burdensome as *Miss Julie*, as it drags the legacy of its author's notorious misogyny behind it – might seem odd. Why bother with something so old and exhausted when you can create something brand new? The idea for *Sheh'mah* originated with Hutton and Horne at KICK<sup>iii</sup>, who together imagined a Canadian *Miss Julie* featuring First Nations servants in place of Jean the valet and Kristin the cook in Strindberg's original. Beagan, proud of both her mixed heritage *and* her feminism<sup>iv</sup>, may well have been an obvious choice for the commission. And, while Strindberg's naturalism may read as old-fashioned to many contemporary students and audiences, Beagan's adaptation is anything but: she streamlines the language, hewing it rough where Strindberg sought to refine; she places the casual arrogance of Miss Julie's normalized racism front and centre; she misses no opportunity to reveal the fierce, bodily passion that grips both Johnnie and Julie as they make love in an extended sequence in full view of the audience; and she turns what tragedy the play might bear into one of serious political consequence for today's Canadian audiences. What destroys these lives? A world terrified by miscegenation; the crime of sex across the colour line. Importantly, for Beagan, there is no impossibility here; there is no generic rule (as there was for Strindberg's nineteenth-century empiricist naturalism<sup>v</sup>) that these two hungry bodies cannot grow up to love, marry, and have a family. The rules dividing Johnnie and Julie in this adaptation are

exclusively social, cultural, national: Beagan's tragedy is, in other words, utterly political. Unlike Strindberg, who saw his Jean and Julie as virtually different species, Beagan locates her play in the realm of Ibsenite realism, following such landmark texts as *Hedda Gabler* and *An Enemy of the People* as she teases out the ways in which, at a specific moment in time (1929) and in a very specific place (the lower interior of British Columbia), institutionalized racism alongside a refusal to challenge the status quo destroy three human lives.

Beagan, of course, is not just an inheritor of Strindberg, Ibsen, and the European realist tradition; she is also central to an ever-expanding community of superb First Nations Canadian playwrights. For many indigenous artists working in Canada, European realism is not a viable form for transmitting story and experience; for others, however, using and abusing the realist heritage offers the opportunity to convey *both* the difficult politics *and* the very real, very human passions of contemporary indigenous lives lived under the weight of Canada's colonial past and present. Canada's historic destruction of First Nations cultures, rape and murder of First Nations persons, and theft of First Nations land is well documented. To add insult to this injury, many indigenous Canadians today continue to live under the threat – and for those living on reserves, the daily reality – of dispossession. The First Nations human beings among us are still too easily *not* seen; they are still too easily figured by what the contemporary European philosopher Giorgio Agamben has called “homo sacer,” or “bare life.” They are people who may be maintained in “states of exception,” to use Agamben's language, who may be regarded as dispensable in order to maintain the smooth functioning of the otherwise “multicultural” state. To place figures like Johnnie and Christie-Ann into a European

realist text, then, is to make a crucial anti-colonial statement in support of indigenous human rights: it is to argue that the lives lived by these utterly marginalized persons *are real, not “bare”*. These lives are worthy of story; they are worthy of the complexity and multidimensionality accorded white figures in realist plays as a matter of course; and they are worth our time, our effort, and our careful consideration as audience members and readers.

Beagan’s work has tended toward realism in the past, and with *Sheh’mah*, followed by *free as injuns* (adapted from Eugene O’Neill’s *Desire Under the Elms* [1924]), she begins in earnest what she has called her project of “reclaiming the [modern theatre] canon, one dead white guy at a time.” A large part of that reclamation, for Beagan, is about “making it clear that our stories are relevant to one another; indigenizing the canon is the most obvious way of demonstrating to both First Nations and non-First Nations folks that we are irrevocably intertwined.”<sup>vi</sup> One of Beagan’s most important strategies in *Sheh’mah* is thus to force audiences into confrontation with that which makes us profoundly uncomfortable, and uncertain about the (apparent) divisions between us. In Strindberg’s *Miss Julie*, for example, sex between Jean and Julie takes place offstage, while extras take over the stage with a bawdy song. In Beagan’s version, the sex is full frontal. It goes on for a very, very long time (10 minutes). Miss Julie (played in the Theatre Centre production by KICK’s Christine Horne) comes to orgasm, right there in front of us. Some audience members get hit (by sweat, and other debris). Many of us have no idea what to do. There’s a hot white woman on stage getting down and dirty with a hot Native man, and we’re right in the middle of it. Where do we look?

During a recent visit to my modern theatre class at the University of Western Ontario, Beagan was asked by a curious student: why did you have Miss Julie orgasm? The question might seem silly, but for Beagan it is anything but. Why indeed? Because these two people are “totally into each other.” Because in another world, one governed by the pursuit of social justice rather than race-based law, these two people could be very happy. Because it’s not just tragedy in the making that writhes and groans up on the stage; it’s also hope, it’s possibility, it’s pleasure – it’s damn fun. And it is, for many real Canadians, an utterly normal, contemporary reality. We owe it to them not to look away.

---

<sup>i</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Beagan are taken from conversations I’ve been privileged to have with her over the past two years. All have been verified by the artist.

<sup>ii</sup> Tara Beagan, “Elder Up! A Mentor-Mentee Memoir,” *Canadian Theatre Review* 147 (2011): 71.

<sup>iii</sup> Horne and Hutton talk candidly about the play in “Rebooting Miss Julie,” *NOW Magazine*, accessed September 21, 2011, <http://www.nowtoronto.com/stage/story.cfm?content=165847>.

<sup>iv</sup> In a recent email, Beagan remembered “being called a dyke in high school for insisting on being proud of being a Feminist (capital ‘F’).” Email message to author, September 12, 2011.

<sup>v</sup> The quasi-scientific logic behind Strindberg’s construction of his central characters and their relationships is explained in detail in the Preface to *Miss Julie*, reprinted in virtually all contemporary editions of the play.

<sup>vi</sup> Email message to author, September 27, 2011.