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Salmon Is Everything: Community-Based Theatre in the Klamath Watershed ed. by Theresa May, with Suzanne Burcell, Kathleen McCovey, and Jean O'Hara (review)

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***Salmon Is Everything: Community-Based Theatre in the Klamath Watershed.* By Theresa May, with Suzanne Burcell, Kathleen McCovey, and Jean O'Hara, eds. Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2014. Paper \$19.95. 208 pages.**

A collaboration between theatre artists, Native American tribal members, and nontribal residents of northern California and southern Oregon, the play *Salmon is Everything* illuminates the events surrounding the 2002 fish kill along the Lower Klamath River that left over 30,000 salmon rotting along the banks of the watershed. It is an activist piece of ecodrama, a genre of theatre defined as plays that highlight the connections between the human and the more-than-human world, or plays that point to social and environmental crises. *Salmon Is Everything* specifically examines the mismanagement of water rights of non-Native ranchers and farmers that provoked the destruction of the fish and the subsequent trauma to local tribal life.

The centerpiece of the volume is the script of the play, but the bulk of the pages are devoted to contextual writings of May and her collaborators, which offer insights into the fish kill as well as detailed reflections upon each writer's work on the project. For instance, in his foreword essay, "When Cultures Collide," Klamath Tribes member, Director of Native American Initiatives at the University of Oregon, and cultural advisor to *Salmon Is Everything* Gordon Bettles gives readers a passionate understanding of the devastation. His words also serve as a call to future action, particularly regarding the destruction of the river dams, which impede upon the health of the salmon. Theresa May's introduction to the text provides further background details, such as a reportorial history of the Klamath region and a rundown of its geography, but in this essay she also begins to discuss the creative process that motivated the creation of the play. These passages firmly establish the book as an interesting and worthwhile case study of how to produce and record works of community-based theatre that are both ethical and effective. The following essay, "A Call to Action: We Have to *Do* Something!" by Suzanne Burcell, member of the Karuk Tribe and cultural advisor to the project, is a personal account of Burcell's experiences working on the piece as well as an overview of the deep relationship between the Native peoples and the salmon. It is also a strong prelude to the next portion of the text, a copy of the script *Salmon Is Everything*, credited to May and the Klamath Theatre Project.

The play is a multivocal ensemble piece based on published reports about the fish kill, as well as informational interviews with community members conducted by the actor-playwrights. The cast is large and calls for about eighteen people. These characters function both as entities in and of themselves and as representatives of a larger perspective, giving the play an epic feel. The plot is organized around three intersecting groups of individuals: a young Native woman and her family, an Anglo-American ranching family, and an Anglo-American graduate student of

biology and her photographer partner. The heart of the play, though, transcends the personal and takes aim squarely at the political and cultural—specifically, the underlying clash between the Anglo-Colonial and Native American mindsets that precipitated the deaths of the fish. This weighty theme is well-addressed, not only through the action and dialogue of the play, but also through the wider shape of the piece, such as the juxtaposing of scenes between European and Indigenous peoples, the inclusion of both everyday and ceremonial situations, and the use of live sound, music, and multimedia projections. The result is a well-paced, engaging script reminiscent of the work of Brecht that reminds us humans beings of our imbrication with the natural world and asks us to “think globally and act locally” in order to secure the planet’s survival.

Three more essays follow the text of the script: another by May, “The Education of an Artist,” which gives a detailed account of her journey with the project as writer, director, and producer; a piece by tribal member Kathleen McCovey, titled “I am Karuk! My Voice as Rose,” which sheds light on the project’s collaborative process from a first-time actor’s point of view; and the essay “The Journey Home” by Jean O’Hara, May’s codirector, who also organized the tour of the play to different affected communities. The book finishes with a bibliography that is useful to both academics and practitioners alike, as it includes foundational texts on Theatre as Social Change by scholars such as Jan Cohen-Cruz and Dwight Conquergood (these writings are also discussed briefly in the essays), as well as sources particular to the Klamath region and the 2002 fish kill.

All told, the book is a very approachable, academically sound case study on collaborative theatre as well as a compelling peek into Native American cultures for whom salmon truly is everything—a living connection with the natural world and a centerpiece of cultural and spiritual existence. It is also important to note that while reading the contextual essays from the collaborators, it quickly becomes clear that *Salmon Is Everything* was not a fly-by-night undertaking. Each of the actors, codirectors, and advisors had a long-term and ongoing relationship with the Klamath, whether as students at the local university, full-time residents of the region, or members of the local Native American communities. The commitment exhibited by these people—and the ensuing success of their project—accentuates the point that community-based theatre is at its best when its stakeholders are truly invested, if not embedded in, the matter(s) at hand. This is not to say that “outsiders” cannot or should not engage in theatre for social change projects situated in a cause other than their own, but that investment in this work cannot be faked. A genuine concern for the long-term life of the community in which we create our theatre is crucial.

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