

Positivity is key:
comparing the rez
sisters and les belles
soeurs



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The plays *The Rez Sisters* and *Les Belles Soeurs* both deal with groups of women, united in sisterhood, who experience social challenges within the story. Through a comedic lens, we accompany the characters in both stories as we are given insight into their social dynamic which both prove to be hostile, competitive and jealousy-fueled. However, despite the similarities shared between these two social scenarios, Highway's *The Rez Sisters* provides a much more positive look on the women's situation than does Tremblay in his respective story line because of a substantial feeling of hope embedded throughout the play. This notion of hope amongst Highway's sisters exists due to the essence of genuine cooperation, the existence of positive attitude and determination and the natural human sympathy for the disadvantaged.

Firstly, Highway demonstrates a situation where the sisters participate in genuine cooperation. Although there exists a superfluous amount of argumentative bickering in both stories, the sisters on the reserve inevitably join and formulate a set plan. They ultimately recognize that despite how much they would enjoy simply criticizing and cursing at one another for the remainder of their existence, they remain dependent on each other for almost everything on the reserve. They must exist as a tightly knit community in order for any sort of progress to be made. When the bingo scenario comes into play, this truth becomes even more important. A significant example is when Pelajia first discusses how they would convince the chief for a loan to travel to Toronto for the bingo. She plans on convincing the chief of her good intentions with the prize money, in the odd event that she actually wins. She elaborates by stating: " I'll tell him we'll

build paved roads all over the reserve with our prize money..... There's enough money in there for everyone, I'll say"(p. 59). Here we witness a true sense of community cooperation by prioritizing the needs of the whole before the self. Although each sister's dream is to win the bingo, they understand the importance of a functioning community on the reserve.

By contrast, despite Tremblay's women arriving with a preconceived plan to paste stamps, their evening collapses simultaneously with their relationships between one another. What was intended to be a cooperative activity inevitably results in trickery, stealing and eventual chaos. As a result, the women attempt to work against one another rather than for each other.

Secondly, the essence of positivity is enforced by the fact that the characters on the reserve continuously maintain a sense of positive attitude and determination. Although these feelings are often disguised by offensive language and name calling, their spirit of togetherness as well as their passion and obsession for the World's Biggest Bingo prevents them from descending into anarchy. Even though they face significant obstacles that would prevent them from accomplishing their mission, they somehow manage to simply border on the delicate line between cooperation and chaos, without in fact fully crossing that line.

Inversely, Germaine and company are overtaken by negative attitude as a result of their cumulative jealousy. Consequently, there is a constant negative relationship instilled from the beginning. Unlike their comparative counterparts, they are unable to gain composure enough to accomplish anything significant; their own criticism and jealousy of one another leads to

their combined downfall. Even from the beginning of the story when we are still learning of the different character's qualities, this essence of detrimental selfishness is present in Marie-Ange's monologue: "The ones with all the luck least deserve it. What did Mme Lauzon do to deserve this, eh? Nothing. Absolutely nothing! She's no better looking than me. In fact, she's no better period!... And now, I'll have to live next door to her...It burns me up. I can't stand it...It's not fair!"(p. 11). Her jealousy is so deeply rooted in her mind that she severely distorts her views of her sisters and eventually compromises their friendships together. In short, instead of a healthy amount of competition and jealousy binding them together, an excess of those emotions rather serves as a division and pushes them even further apart.

Another aspect of this positive outlook and determination lies in the fact that the women on the reserve have an actual goal set in mind for themselves. When the negativity of their seemingly senseless arguments reaches a high, Pelajia often reminds the group of the greater issue at hand: The Bingo. Despite the obstacles set in front of them, they continuously pursue their mission towards Toronto. Although none of the characters wins a large prize, the essence of positivity exists from the fact that they had actually reached their location, something that was glorified so much over the entire story. Tremblay's women had the vague and selfish goal of helping Germaine post stamps, however their jealousy and negative nature tore them apart before they could achieve any significant results.

Finally, the essence of positivity stems from the aspect of human nature that sympathizes for the disadvantaged. Naturally, these women are inherently

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placed at a social disadvantage; their daily life entails a struggle on such a reserve. It is simply human nature for one to hope for the less fortunate to achieve something greater and beyond what they have been dealt. For the reader, it provides a sense of hope that these underprivileged women may receive a chance at something they actually deserve. An excerpt that demonstrates this clearly is when Emily describes her past life of being in a gang, and says to her friends: " And talkin' about bein' a woman. An Indian woman. And suicide. And alchohol and despair and how fuckin' hard it is to be an Indian in this country...No goddamn future..."(p. 97). In case the reader cannot infer from the text the struggles of living in a reserve, Emily explicitly states the difficulties in her rant to the other sisters. In a 'root for the underdog' spirit, one surely hopes for the main characters' success. Therefore, the entire morale of the story is uplifted when the reader learns the women have successfully made it to the Bingo.

Contrarily, Tremblay's play seems doomed from the start; without any real motivation for the characters, a hopeless, gloomy air sets in from the beginning. Although these sisters are not very wealthy or privileged, they hardly seem grateful for the commodities they do in fact possess. Intuitively, they all seem to envy the other women for some material possession. As the play progresses, their mutual jealousy does not give the reader a sense of sympathy for the characters and in the end, their fate seems deserved.

On an overall note, it is clear that Highway's play demonstrates certain important qualities that render it a significantly more positive play than Tremblay's. Regardless of its realm of positivity, both plays effectively

convey the emotions of the women involved while providing insight into the dynamic of sisterhood.

Works Cited

Highway, Thomson. “ The Rez Sisters”. Markham: Fifth House Limited, 1998.

Tremblay, Michel. “ Les Belles Soeurs”. John Van Burek, ed. Vancouver: Talonbooks.