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The opening scene of *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* by George Ryga uses Brechtian staging techniques, characters, and dialogue, to introduce the theme of man's dominance over nature. Here, the stage itself can be interpreted as representing the idea of all stories, histories, laws, and cultures, are constructions of man. The magistrate, who physically and visually lords over the stage high in his chair represents the laws of white society within the boundaries of the city and in contrast Rita Joe represents the natural world and the indigenous culture that is trying to survive within these parameters.

Perhaps the first thing that the audience can see is the staging of the play. There is a circular ramp which “ dominates” the stage (p. 27). It sweeps around behind the magistrate's chair and forces the focus into the center. This concentrated focus gives both the chair, and who will sit in it, much power and emphasis. The next thing the audience can see is that the curtain always remains up. This exposes all the inner workings of the play which are normally hidden from the audience. This allows us to literally “ see behind the curtain” and acts to deconstruct the stage and storytelling environment. In doing so, Ryga asks the audience to look deeper into the nature of representations, to see the play, and by extension all stories, as a construction.

The players now enter the stage in a way which is “ workmanlike and untheatrical” (p. 28). This entrance continues the idea of stories, laws, cultures, and history, as a construction of man. There are recorded voices of muttering and throat clearing and the clerk calling the court to session.

Using a recording of voices, instead of live ones, gives a feeling of inhumanity and disconnection from reality. It creates the courtroom as a

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place where everything is routine, repetitious, unnatural, and alienating. Then the magistrate, the policeman, and Rita Joe enter. The magistrate addresses the audience directly “ firmly and with reason” saying “ The quality of the law under which you live and function determines the real quality of the freedom that was yours today” (p. 28). Ryga is asking us to consider many questions such as whose laws we live under, how just are those laws, how do those laws affect those who live under them, and do they affect everybody in the same way? When the magistrate argues that “ nobody is a prisoner here” Rita Joe responds that the policemen gave her money and then arrested her. Even though she has the power to tell her own story with her own voice she still concludes that “ nobody’d believe [her]” (p. 28) . This dialogue reinforces the idea of two differing camps, man and nature, or, white and aboriginal, each with their own distinct cultures and laws. Rita Joe has stepped into the other camp and is definitely at a disadvantage.

One important undercurrent of the play is subtly set up and reinforced by the policeman, the singer and the murders. They add tension and depth to the opening scene foreshadowing the events to come. The policeman is the agent of the magistrate, the hand of the law on the streets who has brought Rita Joe into court. Rita Joe has already told us that he is a liar and as he “ retreats into shadow” there is a feeling of mistrust and malevolence as we consider the idea that perhaps there has been an abuse of power (p. 28). Then steps forward the singer. Her use of song and poetry bring to mind the beautiful natural world. She sings about “ the wind”, “ seeds” and the “ dandelion” (p. 28). These natural images represent Rita Joe’s world and

where she has come from. Rita Joe is the weed, the dandelion in the sidewalk, she is unwanted, unvalued, and vulnerable in this cityscape. This opening scene also introduces other elements of foreshadowing. We see the murders “ hover in the background” (p. 28). They are not identified yet but they are given two signals: the sound of one whistling and one lighting a cigarette. We will see these signals again at the end of the play and understand that the murders were there the whole time. They are another piece of the picture, another kind enforcer of the laws of the city.

This is a play written by a white man for a white audience. Its purpose was to enlighten people; to show them the systematic oppression which is present within white culture, and, to present that culture as a construction of man. The play works on many levels, from the literal interpretation of an aboriginal woman trying to survive inside an overwhelming foreign culture, which not only abhors her but also holds all the cards, to a metaphorical interpretation of man versus nature. In the case of *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* it is “ the Man” who wins in the end and the audience is left with a lot to think about.

#### Works Cited:

Ryga, George. *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*. In Jerry Wasserman (Ed.), *Modern Canadian Plays Vol. 1* (5th ed., pp. 27-57). Vancouver, BC: Talon Books.