

Blending Time: Dramatic Conventions in Yvette Nolan's *Annie Mae's Movement*¹

Christy Stanlake

Imagine sharing a moment with a departed political leader. She appears before you with a need to tell her story of resistance, power, and betrayal. Her story begins with an explanation of her work with American Indian youth. She says that her dream was to rebuild a strong Indian Nation. Yet as she speaks, a man from the past invades the conversation. You see the violent rape and execution of this woman, and then realize that you have become a present-day witness to an unresolved murder.

In the 1997 biographical play, *Annie Mae's Movement*, Yvette Nolan reconstructs time to make the audience a present-day witness to the past.² In this play, Nolan portrays the life's work and murder of the American Indian Movement's (AIM) member, Anna Mae Pictou Aquash.³ To construct the plot, Nolan uses a chain of short episodes to depict the last year of events leading up to the rape and murder of Anna Mae. These episodes cover chronological events ranging from 1974 through December of 1975,⁴ and Nolan bookends these past events with present-day scenes that both begin and end the play. On a fundamental level, the play works as a long flashback *taking* the audience back in time to view the days leading to Anna Mae's murder, and then *returning* the audience to the present. Nolan uses this flashback technique as a basic framework upon which she builds a more complex theatrical plot intended to pull the audience into Anna Mae's life.

Nolan begins the play in present time. The viewers first see Anna Mae, who addresses the audience directly and introduces herself; however, Anna Mae is interrupted suddenly by the sound of helicopters and waves of winds from their blades. Anna Mae runs away as the FBI Guy enters and states, "Right. Let's get this show on the road."⁵ At this moment, Nolan begins the flashback structure. The next fifteen scenes become past episodes that depict the events leading to Anna Mae's murder, while the play's last scene, Scene Seventeen, completes the flashback structure and returns to present time. Once more, Anna Mae directly addresses the audience, yet in this last scene, something different happens. Past events occur within the present mode of time.

To ready her viewers to accept this deviation from a pure flashback

Christy Stanlake is a first year Ph.D. theatre student at Ohio State University. She received her Masters from the University of Oklahoma. Her thesis was titled "Theatricalizing Power: A Performance Analysis of Selected Plays by Four Contemporary Native American Playwrights."

technique, Nolan utilizes three different time frames within *Annie Mae's Movement*. These three time frames include present time, as characters address the audience directly; past time, scenes which reveal actions in the 1970s and are portrayed through a realistic style of acting; and blended time, in which past events are presented directly to the present audience in such a way that the audience becomes a living—and often acknowledged—witness to the past. These episodes of blended time accomplish several tasks: they pull the audience closely into the play's action; they provide the audience with perspectives required by Nolan; and they cause the events of the past to attain more significance in the eyes of present-day society. Consequently, while the present time episodes rouse the audience's attention, and the episodes displaying past time share pertinent information with the audience, the moments of blended time drive the play's action.

Blended time becomes more prevalent as the show progresses. When it finally transforms into a strong presence within the flashback section, Nolan allows blended time to jump from the flashback episodes into present time. Thus, of the seven segments of blended time, only one—Anna Mae's murder—takes place within the present-day section of the play. In this final scene, the past becomes a part of the present; Anna Mae's 1975 murder lives within the lives of the present-day audience.

Not only do blended time scenes grow in number throughout the play, they also grow in intensity. The first segment is so subtle that the audience does not readily recognize the merging of past and present. This initial blended time moment is short and takes place in Scene Two. It creates a surreal atmosphere as the audience witnesses a sighting of the mythical Rugaru. The entire scene is described by Nolan's stage directions:

The rugaru appears. He is part man, part creature, big and hairy, obviously not of this world. He moves like a man, mostly, kind of like Sasquatch. As he crosses the moon, he stops, turns his head, scans the audience. He raises his face to the sky and opens his mouth, but the howl that issues is amplified, effected, not of this world.⁶

Because this episode takes place between the direct address of the audience (in Scene One) and the 1974 scene of Anna Mae teaching in the survival school (Scene Three), the Rugaru scene appears to be a mere transition preparing the audience for the flashback. However, this scene has a deeper significance. In Scene Three, Anna Mae's student tells her about the sighting of the Rugaru, a creature whose presence foretells of change. He states, "They saw the Rugaru on Pine Ridge Forty people saw it. Forty different people."⁷ Nolan empowers audience members to realize, upon hearing this statement, that they were the group of people who saw

the Rugaru. This recognition is reinforced by the actions of the Rugaru. Nolan calls for the Rugaru to "scan the audience."⁸ This scanning breaks the fourth wall which divides the characters from the viewers, the present from the past. Thus, by making the present-day audience serve as the witnesses to the Rugaru, Nolan connects the present to 1974.

Nolan's unique construction of time and plot in *Annie Mae's Movement* strengthens the other choices she makes concerning style of presentation, characters, point of view, and themes. Nolan combines these dramatic choices to transform the play from a single history of Anna Mae into a larger critique of how American Indian women in positions of relative power are sometimes treated. To create this transformation, Nolan first conditions her audience to accept an active rather than passive mode of viewing. Nolan then works to maneuver the way in which the audience perceives the play's action: first, from a generalized female perspective; next, to Anna Mae's personal perspective; and, finally, to an extended perspective that links the issues of Anna Mae's life to issues faced by contemporary Native American women.

Nolan begins *Annie Mae's Movement* by defining the audience's relationship to the play. In order to establish this connection, Nolan uses a blatantly theatrical style of presentation. She employs dramatic conventions (such as direct references to "the show,"⁹ minimalist scenery, and projected scene titles) to call attention to the fact that *Annie Mae's Movement* is a play. These conventions work to remind audience members that they are viewing a show, a constructed story that is in the process of being told. Consequently, the viewers are influenced to realize that they, too, are engaged in a process, that of deriving meaning from the presented events. Nolan uses these recurring theatrical references to prepare the audience members to accept their own roles, during blended time scenes, as present witnesses of the past.

In addition to molding her audience members into witnesses, Nolan constructs the point of view by which they observe the play. Nolan's first point of view is that of a woman's perspective, and it is secured initially through characters and casting. Only two actors, a male and a female, portray the seven characters within *Annie Mae's Movement*. The woman plays Anna Mae, while the man is cast in six different roles which range from AIM leaders to government officials. Although these members of AIM and the US government are at odds with one another, by having one man portray characters on both sides of the conflict, Nolan influences the audience to perceive that both factions have similar characteristics. These similarities deal directly with the treatment of Anna Mae since, in the context of the play, the men exist only in relation to her. Consequently, by depicting how both the FBI and AIM pursue Anna Mae, Nolan influences the audience to perceive that the play's conflict is more than an AIM versus the FBI scenario. Rather, the play's principal theme is one that centers upon the notion of men in high places

fearing powerful women.

In the second episode of blended time, Nolan simultaneously constructs a female perspective and permits the audience members to become acutely aware of their roles as present-day witnesses who directly experience the past. In Scene Six, entitled, "Anna amongst the women—St. Paul, MN," Nolan's stage directions state:

Anna sits on a chair near the edge of the stage, making the audience her circle.¹⁰ She is sewing a ribbon shirt and laughing uproariously at something that one of the other women has said. Someone else says something, to which she listens intently, nodding.¹¹

This scene is significant because it works to influence the way both men and women viewers perceive Anna Mae's struggles and subsequent murder. Nolan transforms the audience members into the women of the sewing circle by having Anna Mae play directly to the audience. During this scene, Nolan immediately tests the created female perspective when Dennis Banks enters the room and asks Anna Mae to give him the ribbon shirt which she has sewn for an AIM fund raiser. When Anna Mae tells Dennis that he should *buy* the shirt, Dennis responds, "You should be proud that I want to wear yours."¹² Finally, after Dennis has talked his way into a free shirt, he tells her, "You're a good girl, Anna Mae."¹³ Although these comments are not wrong, Nolan contextualizes them so that they are questionable enough to expose the audience to some of the obstacles which face Anna Mae, a woman working within an organization that is depicted as male-dominated.

From this constructed female perspective, Nolan works to draw the audience into Anna Mae's specific viewpoint. By choosing to make Anna Mae the only female character seen on stage, Nolan restricts the audience's perception by filtering all of the play's action through Anna Mae's experiences. This choice works not only to provide the audience with Anna Mae's frame of reference but also to mark Anna Mae as one who is set apart. Through Anna Mae's lines, in which she speaks about her relationships, it becomes obvious that she has strong connections with other women. However, because of Anna Mae's active involvement in AIM, she is often distanced from them. Nolan depicts this isolation from other women in various ways: by eliminating the presence of other female characters on stage, by rarely allowing the voices of other women to be heard, and by having Anna Mae relate only to imagined characters in scenes where she and other women share tasks. By allowing *only* Anna Mae to be seen and heard, Nolan communicates to the audience that Anna Mae is different than other women. Her position of power sets her apart.

Anna Mae's isolation from other women comes across vividly in the last past time scene. Prior to this scene, Nolan provides the audience with Anna Mae's personal perspective through a blended time episode that creates a surreal portrayal of Anna Mae's struggles with the FBI. Having equipped her audience with Anna Mae's viewpoint, Nolan then moves from the nightmarish encounter with the government into a scene that depicts the isolation that Anna Mae endures due to her position in AIM. In Scene Sixteen, the audience hears Anna Mae's last telephone conversation with her friend, Paula. Although the audience sees neither Anna Mae nor Paula, this moment is significant because it is the only time another woman's voice is heard on stage. Anna Mae tells Paula that she knows both AIM and the FBI are out to kill her, and as she speaks, the audience sees the Rugaru cross the moon projected onto the stage. Utilizing the image of the Rugaru, Nolan empowers the audience to interpret Anna Mae's last secrets, spoken to another woman in darkness, as the foreshadowing of her death. Thus, when the Rugaru's presence is witnessed this second time, Nolan's audience should know the change his appearance foretells.

Scene Seventeen returns the audience to present time. The flashback has ended, and Anna Mae addresses the audience directly. However, as Anna speaks to the audience, the FBI Guy invades present time. He approaches Anna Mae as she begins to beg for her life. He rapes her. During this rape, which takes place in front of the audience, Anna Mae ceases her pleading and states:

My name is Anna Mae Pictou Aquash, Micmac Nation from Shubenacadie Nova Scotia. My mother is Mary Ellen Pictou, my father is Francis Thomas Levi, my sisters are Rebecca Julien and Mary Lafford, my brother is Francis. My daughters are Denise and Deborah. You cannot kill us all. You can kill me, but my sisters live, my daughters live. You cannot kill us all. My sisters live, Becky and Mary, Helen and Priscilla, Janet and Raven, Sylvia, Ellen, Pelajia, Agnes, Monica, Edie, Jessica, Gloria and Lisa and Muriel, Monique, Joy and Tina, Margo, Maria, Beatrice, April, Colleen . . . You can kill me, but you cannot kill us all. You can kill me.¹⁴

In this last moment of Anna Mae's life, Nolan confronts the audience with four intertwined themes: Anna Mae's murder, the government's ability to "disappear" people, the masculine fear of powerful women (a fear which is demonstrated by the man's attempt to break Anna Mae's power through violently raping her), and Anna Mae's work—which she states will be carried on by other strong women whose names she mentions. Interestingly, many of the women mentioned are contemporary Native women playwrights.¹⁵

The final scene is the most significant in the play because the rape and murder of Anna Mae are not just a violation of her body, but they are an intrusion into the present mode of time. The evils which Anna Mae has faced in the past, now invade the lives of those living in the present. Nolan creates two levels of communication during this transformation of time. The audience becomes an immediate witness to the rape and murder of Anna Mae, and Anna Mae's murder becomes personal and, therefore, relevant to the members of the audience. As Anna Mae speaks the names of her sisters, Native American women who are speaking out today, her living words challenge the audience to acknowledge that Anna Mae's fight is not over but continues with other women in present-day society.

Annie Mae's Movement, itself, appears to be an element of blended time, for throughout the play, Nolan allows Anna Mae Pictou Aquash to step out of death into the present lives of the audience. The play does not merely replay Anna Mae's story. Through the use of blended time, the play bridges past to present and transforms audience members into active witnesses who are challenged, not only to question Anna Mae's unresolved murder, but to question the ongoing treatment of powerful Native American women. Thus, Nolan's strong choices of character, progression, and the arrangement of time, work to touch the audience intellectually, emotionally, and ethically.¹⁶

**Plot Sequence Breakdown of
Annie Mae's Movement
by Yvette Nolan**

Scene 1: 1998 Present Day "Beginning" (Direct Audience Address)

Flashback Section 1974 - 1975:

Scene 2: "Rugaru" (*Blended Time*)

Scene 3: "Survival School - Boston, 1974" (Past Time)

Scene 4: "Wounded Knee - 1974" (Past Time)

Scene 5: "Anna Meets Dennis" (Past Time)

Scene 6: "Anna Amongst the Women - St. Paul, MN" (*Blended Time*)

Scene 7: "Doug - Weeks/Months Later - The AIM Head Office" (Past Time)

Scene 8: "Dennis and Annie - Late" (Past Time)

Scene 9: "Anna Amongst the Women II" (*Blended Time*)

Scene 10: "Dennis Sends Anna Mae to LA" (Past Time)

Scene 11: "The Los Angeles AIM Office" (Past Time)

Scene 12: "FBI Guy Outted/Speaking Tour" (*Blended Time*)

Scene 13: "The AIM National Convention at Farmington May 1975 (Past Time)

Scene 14: "Poem" (Past Time)

Scene 15: "Anna's Arrest and Interrogation by FBI" (*Blended Time*)

Scene 16: "Anna's Phone Call to her Sister" (*Blended Time*)

Scene 17: 1998 Present Day "End" (*Blended Time*)

Notes

1. Yvette Nolan, *Annie's Mae's Movement* (Unpublished ts, 1997).
2. Yvette Nolan is an accomplished Algonquin playwright from Winnipeg, Manitoba. Other plays by Nolan include *Blade*, *Job's Wife*, and *Video: Three Plays* (Toronto: New Canadian Drama Series, 1995); and *Child* located in *Beyond the Pale: Dramatic Writing from First Nations Writers and Writers of Colour* (Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 1996) 80-85.
3. To read more about Anna Mae Pictou Aquash, see Johanna Brand, *The Life and Death of Anna Mae Aquash*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: James Lorimer and Company Press, 1993). In accordance with the level of intimacy between Anna Mae and other characters, Nolan varies the use of the formal name Anna Mae with the nicknames "Annie Mae" and "Annie."
4. There is a discrepancy over whether Aquash died in 1975 or 1976. Furthermore, Nolan condenses many of the historical dates in the script so that the play flows quickly.
5. Nolan 2.
6. 3.
7. 4.
8. 3.
9. 2.
10. In stage directions, Nolan often refers to Anna Mae simply as "Anna."
11. Nolan 12.
12. 13
13. 13.
14. 43.
15. Gloria Miguel, Lisa Mayo, and Muriel Miguel of Spiderwoman Theatre; Monique Mojica, Margo Kane, Joy Harjo, Tina Mason, Maria Campbell are also performer / playwrights.
16. In September of 1998 Nolan's company, Hardly Art, premiered the play in Whitehorse, and after a successful run, Hardly Art and Red Roots co-produced a second run of the show in Winnipeg. Both productions were received positively by both audiences and reviewers; Yvette Nolan, letter to the author, 24 February 1999.

EMPIRICAL STUDIES OF THE ARTS

Executive Editor: Colin Martindale
IAEA Newsletter Editor: Holger Höge

Advisory Editors

Irvin L. Child
Gerald Cupchik
Robert Francés
Holger Höge
Morris Holbrook
Pavel Machotka

Editorial Board

Richard Bailey
Barron Brainard
Robert De Beaugrande
Howard Becker
Frans Boselie
W. Ray Crozier
Hans J. Eysenck
Robert Faulkner
Howard Gardner
László Halász
Ravenna Helson
Nathan Kogan
Shulamith Kreitler
George Kubler
Peng Lixun
Evan Maurer
Charls Pearson
Richard A. Peterson
Vladimir Petrov
Gerald Prince
Donald Ross
Thomas A. Sebeck
Valentin Semenov
Dean Keith Simonton
John B. Smith
Reuren Tsur
Will Van Peer
Frank Willett

Aims & Scope:

A rigorously peer-refereed journal for those professionals interested in any aspect of art, music, or literature, *Empirical Studies of the Arts* will be indispensable to their work.

Dedicated subject editors serve the fields of anthropology, applied aesthetics, psychology, sociology, and computational stylistics.

Abstracted and Indexed in:

A.P.A.-Psychinfo Database; A.P.A.-Psychological Abstracts; Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts; Social Planning/Policy & Development Abstracts; and Sociological Abstracts.

Subscription Information:

ISSN: 0276-2374 Price per volume—2 issues yearly
Institutional Rate: \$112.00 Individual Rate: \$40.00
Postage & handling: \$4.00 U.S. & Canada, \$8.50 elsewhere
Complimentary sample issue available upon request

Baywood Publishing Company, Inc.

26 Austin Avenue, Amityville, NY 11701

Call (516) 691-1270 Fax (516) 691-1770 Call Toll-free (800) 638-7819

e-mail: baywood@baywood.com • web site: <http://baywood.com>