

Daystar/Rosalie Jones

Dancer. Teacher. Choreographer. Writer. Passionate Amateur Mime and Mask-Maker. Wannabe Puppeteer. Founder, Director of Daystar: Contemporary Dance-Drama of Indian America. Acknowledged 'pioneer' of native modern dance USA. My father's insight: One day you will realize that you were blessed to be a descendant of the original peoples of this land.



Dreaming the Fourth Hill

Nitsitapiw Aakii, the Alone Woman at the center of the story has a vivid dream of Ksiistsikomm, Thunder. The power of Thunder lets loose the mythic figure of Old Man, who can change himself into any form he wishes. In the course of her wanderings, Nitsitapiw Aakii meets Old Man. He gives two gifts: one beautiful and another not anticipated and not beautiful, resulting in decisions that plunge the woman into a dark world. Is the dark world real or imagined? How will she find her way through it? Within Indigenous thought, gifts are given for many reasons, depending on the relationship of the giver to the receiver but always they carry with them responsibilities and reciprocities. Allegory of the Cranes is in the end, the story of one human being in a struggle to achieve maturity and finally to "find her face."

This is the opening paragraph of the program *Allegory of the Cranes* as performed in 2012 at the Nazareth College Arts Center, Rochester, NY, for its Third Annual National Dance Festival. The work had premiered at Nozhem: First People's Performance Space, Trent University (Peterborough, Ontario) in collaboration with the Department of Indigenous Studies and its Indigenous Performance Initiatives. A second performance took place at Hartwell Hall, Department of Dance at The College at Brockport in upstate New York. It was not until its third performance at the Arts Center that I, as the choreographer, was able to articulate, at long last, an understandable and true synopsis of the dance-drama. My previous uncertainties had centered on fears that perhaps the work had tried to encompass too many ideas; perhaps I was running aground among the irreconcilable characters, tensions, and plotlines. But, on the other hand, I considered this work to be an artistic effort to harness the straining forces at work in any life as we experience the life passages that are taking us to final destinations.

Having lived my life primarily as a dancer and teacher of dance, a tradition of the "modern dance" was very much ingrained in my psyche: one celebrated life with dance and with special choreography and performance, to mark the passing from one life stage to the next. Barry Lynn, my lifelong mentor, teacher, and friend, always celebrated ten-year life passages with a dance concert. Last year, at one hundred years of age, he celebrated as usual, with dance, performing a new "story dance."



Photo 1. "Napi Old Man." Dancer: Keith MacFarlane. Nazareth College Arts Center, 2012. Photo by Jim Dusen.

Four years ago, upon turning seventy years of age, it seemed natural, even essential, to perform "a personal ceremony of remembrance and revelation." That "ceremony" would ultimately involve the juxtaposition of multiple personal experiences: memories and stories from the Blackfoot peoples where I was born and my ancestry as Little Shell Chippewa, of Rose of Lima the patron saint, in teachings given by Elders of Anishinaabe and other Nations, my interest in right/left brain function with myths both Indigenous and Western, and to celebrate my skills as a mask-maker-mime and contemporary modern and intertribal dancer.

The first workshop and performance of the concepts took place at ChaliceStream (dance studio) in northern Wisconsin in 2010, under the title "As I Looked Up." It was there that I was able to investigate the underlying premise of the work. Napi Old Man, the half-mortal half-spirit helpmate sent by the Creator to the Blackfoot peoples, had been with me for many years, being personified in my first story dance, *Tales of Old Man*. Now he became the antagonist of the woman seeking self-knowledge. Finally, the image of the Crane came forward as the embodiment of the innate power of

Photo 2. "Rose of Lima Comforts Alone Woman." Dancers: Nancy Hughes and Rosalie Jones. Nazareth College Arts Center, 2012. Photo by Jim Dusen.



women. In some cultures the Crane is seen as long life; the Anishinaabe clan system places Crane as representing leadership. In courtship rituals the Crane dances exquisitely! Crane would become that unseen power residing behind and within the persona of Nitsitapiw Aakii (Alone Woman) in *Allegory of the Cranes*.

An eight-week rehearsal process with advanced performing arts students within the Indigenous Performance Studies program gave adequate time and dancing bodies to experiment with character and to develop choreographic sequences. Of more significance were the early-morning rendezvous into free-association; upon coming up from deep sleep, the free reign of imagination allowed images both mythic and real to rise up, roam, move, and interact in their own unique way and for their own purposes. This ‘dreaming imagination’ gave me the content needed for “Figures in the Desert”: the Child/Woman, Woman with Caged Peacock, the Blind Man, the Gangsta. This is the world into which Alone Woman steps to live out her encounters with Napi Old Man and where she must learn the meaning of his *two gifts*.

The *two gifts* establish a point of contradiction for Nitsitapiw Aakii: she will revel in the beauty and luxury of the painted coat, but will be unable to remove the comic mask given her. In the struggle between the gifts, Alone Woman will descend into a kind of decrepitude, represented by two wooden canes: they become the ‘prop’ holding her up in the struggle. Final release comes only in the revelation that the struggle is not from without; she must accept herself from within. She can discard the canes of her own free will. Acceptance reveals that she also has the power to remove the mask; in unmasking she “finds her face.”

In the final episode, Alone Woman is given two feather fans, thought of as eagle fans. The feathers come alive and lead her, first in a dance of freedom and then to the seashore, thought of as “the edge of the world.” At that moment, we hear her inner voice speak:

I have no idea how I may appear to the world . . .
To myself, I seemed [a child] playing on the seashore
Amusing myself in finding this or that colorful shell.¹

Photo 3. “Figures in the Desert.” Dancers: Priscilla Young, Daniel Fetecua, Sophia Roberts, Nancy Hughes, and Ashley Vita Verde. Nazareth College Arts Center, 2012. Photo by Jim Dusen.





Photo 4. "Nitsitapiw Aakii and the Double Eagle Fans." Dancer: Rosalie Jones. Nozhem: FPPS, 2011. Photo by Wayne Eardley.

Like a child she calmly rearranges the rocks on the shore and then ever so peacefully, falls asleep. Is it sleep or is it death? We hear her say:

Hours passed. Days passed.
Seasons passed. Years passed.
Then, in a moment, the reverie was over.

She awakes to the sound and sight of Cranes. She looks out over the unending vastness of the ocean thinking as she spreads her arms becoming wings:

A great white Crane flew overhead and swooshed out before me.
And as I looked up. . .
There lay before me the Unknown One
Now dark, now glistening. . .
With a million echoes in its voice
Rolling forward and back, forward and back.
Deep, wide – and far.
There lay the great ocean before me.
Undiscovered - Beckoning.²

It was primarily from Edna Manitowabi that I learned of the Anishinaabe Medicine Wheel with its Four Directions and of the life passages that are called the Four Hills of Life. While teaching over the past ten years at Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario, all of us, faculty and students alike,

came to revere her as an Elder—a teacher, counselor, ceremonial leader, and a friend. Edna has since become Professor Emeritus of the Indigenous Studies Department, and in “retirement” is now traveling throughout Canada conducting Anishinaabe coming of age ceremonies, teaching herbal medicine, and bringing spiritual benefits to those requesting such services. It was in her gift of speech, however, that one was brought to a more insightful understanding of the aspects of an Indigenous life approach. The Medicine Wheel puts one in the center of the world with directives of how to become humble and learn respect, relationship, responsibility, and reciprocity. The Four Hills of Life, on the other hand, can only be understood by having approached and climbed each hill in turn, one by one, falling, recovering, and continuing on. At a point, the concept of a linear lifetime folds into the ongoing circle of one life passage after another.

Every culture and certainly every individual person recognizes the Four Hills: Infancy, Youth, Maturity, and Old Age. Basil Johnston, in his 1976 book *Ojibway Heritage*, tells an extended story about the young man Weegwauss (Birch) who seeks out the wise man Chejauk (Crane) to interpret his dreams. Weegwauss has dreamed of myriad clans of people climbing hill after hill, some succeeding, others falling and recovering or succumbing to death or mortal injury due to the rigors of the struggle. Chejauk explains the details of his dream as the Four Hills but levels its meaning to one over-arching concept: the physical struggle for simple survival becomes meaningless without the discovery of essence and purpose as found in a vision for life. Typically one’s vision is sought during Youth, the Second Hill, but whenever it is achieved, that vision will stimulate growth and strength for climbing the remaining Hills (Johnston 1976).

We are told that the Fourth Hill is the hardest to climb. Physical abilities have diminished and death is inevitable. But even here, Age has its purpose. Youth stands at the South and Age at the North. Edna Manitowabi sees the two looking at each other from their opposite points in life and connects them in their duality. Youth has been instructed to find a vision pointing the way to one’s life purpose. From the perspective of a vision being lived and fulfilled, Age can advise the newcomer from a depth of experience: pitfalls to avoid, recognition of personal gifts, how to live “the good life”. Reciprocation comes alive in the meeting of Youth and Age. The absence of this relationship could be at the very heart of why some societies maintain human warmth and growth while others collapse into chaos and anarchy.

The creative process is as varied as there are artists to conceive and make art. In retrospect, my process could be described as being filtered through only a few points of origin: from my personal, individual life, from the stories and oral traditions of Indigenous peoples and/or from my essential nature as a dancer. Early in my dance training, the work of Martha Graham appealed in a special way: her work was both personal and mythic. She always found a way to place herself “in the story” of the Greek myths, so that with herself as protagonist, she gave a reality to the human struggling through the story. In the years since the founding of my company (Daystar: Contemporary Dance Drama of Indian America), perhaps that is what I have done: finding ways to place myself “in the story” of Indigenous tradition in order to learn the cultural lessons embedded in the story. Perhaps that is why most of my dance-dramas have manifested as a *woman’s* story.

Cultural teachings from the Elders and the Keepers of Knowledge can be found, for those who search, within Indigenous cultures across North America. These teachings, coupled with my personal story journeying within these teachings, were the foundations of *Allegory of the Cranes*. I do believe it is an imaginative yet honest statement of my Fourth Hill of Life. As well, I believe it is a work that directly addresses the issue of myth versus reality. Cultural personages are at work in lives of those living a life connected to Indigeneity. Rather than ‘mythology’, cultural belief systems are avenues through which Indigenous people are made more human, more complete culturally and psychologically and more in touch with themselves and each other in community. The Indigenous choreographer who chooses to live a life connected to Indigeneity can be the conduit through which that life is expressed and celebrated.

Notes

1. Rosalie Jones, final scene of *Allegory of the Cranes* script. Paraphrased from a poem by Sir Isaac Newton.
2. Ibid.

Work Cited

Johnston, Basil. 1976. *Ojibway Heritage*. Toronto: McClelland and Steward.

Rulan Tangen

To me, life is essentially movement, and much of my journey has been living so that I may dance. Now, as a woman of color confronting disabilities as well as heightened awarenesses in my post-cancer reality, I dance to live; my dance has become a functional ritual for the continuance of all of life. I believe that art in some of its highest forms can be healing, thus I create dances to sustain health, harmony, and balance of all forms of life and interconnected relationships—the dance of ecology.



Medicine man Hehaka Sapa said that a person cannot receive the power of a vision until he/she had performed that vision for the people; this manifestation of a collective vision for healing and renewal is thus activated by every moment of my own performance, process and practice of dance. I and Dancing Earth dedicate ourselves to this purpose, as is said in the Hopi prophecy: “We are the ones we have been waiting for.” With humble respect, I offer love and gratitude for the honor of being able to revitalize and expand the circle in any way that I can, through my movements, vision, concepts, words, breath . . .

Dancing Earth: Seeds Roots Plants and Foods, from Origi Nation to Re-Generation

When Dancing Earth is invited across Native country, the invitation is often not to be inside a theater or studio, but onto land.

At Noli High School on the Soboba reservation near Riverside, California, I am greeted by Cahuilla/Serrano cultural leader, ceremonial Singer and Bird Singer, and reviver of Cahuilla coyote dances Kim Marcus. He shows me a garden of cacti that serve as food, shelter, basket materials—all that is needed for life. He quietly says: at one time they didn’t need to have gardens, they could just find these things out on the land. But, the land gets reduced, the plants get endangered, and gardens are the response to those aspects of colonization, to create places to care for these plant relatives and retain the knowledge of all that they carry.