

*They Know Not What They Do*

By Tara Beagan

For Native Earth Performing Arts' Made to Order program,  
as commissioned by Frank Pio of the Toronto Catholic District School Board.

Directed by Tara Beagan

Sound and Projection by Andy Moro

Stage Management by Janet Antone

Fight consultation by Aqua

Cast:

Angela Analok

Derek Garza

Sarah Podemski

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*Three actors on stage, separate. They stand, and each has a chair behind her/him.*

## **INTRO**

Simultaneous, all:  
My first day of school.

S I was six.

D Seven.

A Five. My Grannie had me dressed in my best clothes. My hair all braided and smooth.

S My dad was getting ready to head out to the trap line, and my mom was hanging laundry. They were standing in the yard together, laughing and kidding around. We hadn't seen a motorized car come down that road, before, so when me and Louie heard it coming we actually went down the lane towards it. Shiny and black.

D My dad borrowed a wagon and we traveled the three hours into town, to meet the truck. He knew by then there was no point trying to disappear on them. Our land had become too precious to them for us to keep getting in the way.

S I had never seen two people all dressed in black like that before. They looked like shadows.

D It was a cattle truck.

- A I was pretty proud of how I looked.
- S Tawnshi! (**tawn**-sheh = “hello. “for audio sample, see <http://www.learnmichif.com/language/greetings> )
- D Washed up, and all, but still... the back end of a cattle truck. Not for some fun hayride, either.
- A My Grannie was proud, too. She smiled. But her eyes were sad.
- D No... no fun, anymore. At all.
- S I couldn't understand them, but they must have just said it, straight out.
- A And then the boat came. And she told me to hold her in my heart. Her voice sounded like it was already far away.
- S That they were taking us - me and my brother – away. To school.
- D I thought every school was like that.
- A I watched her become smaller and smaller as that boat pulled away.
- S The woman – a sister – put her hands on our shoulders and led us away. Towards that car, which seemed to get shinier and blacker.
- A Takuniaqquguk! (tah-koon-nee-ah-koo-gook = “see you in a bit.” For audio sample, see <http://www.tusaalanga.ca/glossary/inuktitut?pager=T> , 18<sup>th</sup> word from top of list.).
- S I thought my parents were coming with us. But when the doors slammed shut, they were still standing where we'd left them.
- D This was no ordinary school.
- S And then my mom started running towards us. But I couldn't shout out. And the lady shadow said something to us that sounded like someone saying sorry when they didn't really mean it. Because they still think they were right, even though someone got hurt.
- A (as in prayer) Grannie.
- S And just that fast, we were gone. To school.
- D I wouldn't be coming home after class.

Simultaneous:

S ...Mama.

A Grannie

D I wouldn't be coming home on weekends.

S I didn't know I wouldn't be able to see him once we got there – my brother.

A Grannie.

D Uncles.

Simultaneous, all:

This was no ordinary school.

D I could not see any of my family without a chaperone in the room.

S Without approval from the Mother Superior.

A Without a prearranged meeting.

D If they could afford to make the trip.

A But my Grannie did not have a phone. And could not write a letter in English. So, how...?

S That motorized car had driven us through the night.

A I didn't even know where they brought me.

D We didn't even have our own wagon, never mind a car.

S I didn't even know where I was.

Simultaneous, all:

“School” they said.

S For all the good that did.

Simultaneous, all:

I didn't even speak English.

*All three brace themselves.*

## **SCENE 1**

PROJECTION: A nightmarish speech runs under a series of slides depicting clerical staff looming over students. Outdoor group scenes.

*The actors stare up, uneasy, at the barking adult, who they cannot understand. Bewildered, they do a sort of inspection dance, in unison, as they are manhandled by a staff member. Turned to the side, mouth inspected, ears pulled, etc.*

SOUND: WOMAN'S VOICE (garbled speech.) "Welcome, students. This is your new home. You will be brought to your dormitory after mass. Beforehand, you will be cleansed and groomed appropriately. You will be assigned a number. This number will appear in every item you will be issued today: clothing and bedding. You will be shown to your bed, which will coordinate with the number on your standard-issue items. Any student caught with an item that does not belong to him will be punished accordingly. Follow Sister Anna to service."

*The students trudge around in a winding path. At one point D trips and gets yelled at.*

SOUND: WOMAN'S VOICE (garbled) "Stand up, you imbecile. Stand up!"

*The others hold their breath as D stands back up. They wind along, finally landing back in front of the same chairs. They sit, at last.*

## SCENE 2

*They are at church.*

PROJECTION: Scary, bleeding icons and stained glass.

SOUND: WOMAN'S VOICE (garbled) "Please stand for Father Campbell. (pause.) Stand up for Father Campbell- mind your manners. Stand up. Stand up." (pushing through the language barrier, and finally decipherable.) "STAND. UP!"

*All three stand.*

SOUND: MUSIC distorted and garbled, hymnal. Perhaps a church organ styles "O, Canada."

SOUND: MALE VOICE (garbled, but less so.) "Let us pray."

*Slowly, each student kneels, perhaps emulating older kids around them. Silence.*

*All three students look around, wondering what the heck is going on.*

SOUND: MALE VOICE (garbled mass)

*They stand again.  
They sit again.  
They kneel again.  
Silence.*

*S steps out of the scene.*

S Now, I don't know how it is for you, but when I'm starting to laugh when I know I'm not supposed to, it's way worse when I catch eyes with my brother, and see that he's about to laugh, too. They separated the boys from the girls as soon as we got to school, and it would stay like that until we finished school. But that day – the first time I was ever in a church – I was trying not to laugh at this strange meeting, and trying, also, to find Louie. I knew if he was smiling, that we were going to be okay. But I knew, too, that if we laughed in this place, it would be trouble. Still, I looked and looked. So many kids, all the smallest ones looking confused and scared. -Louie!

*S steps back into the scene and gets the giggles.  
She makes gestures toward her brother, making fun of the service – all of the standing and sitting and big gestures from the priest. This ends abruptly when-*

SOUND: A whip lashing skin.

Focus zeroes in on S as-

*A and D race to line their chairs up behind S, and cower behind them, partly blocked by chair backs. As they rush, they fiercely sound-*

Simultaneous:

D SSSHHHHHHH!

A SSSHHHHHHH!

*S kneels beside her chair and sets her hands on the seat, face up.*

### SCENE 3

S I learned English soon enough. You hear anything repeated often enough, you learn it. It gets into you and becomes the truth.

SOUND: A door slams. Hard-souled women's shoes cross the floor and stop in front of S.

SOUND: A WOMAN'S VOICE "You foul creature. You despicable, less than human thing. Laughing. As we think on our sins against our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. What makes you exempt? What makes you immune to temptation? To sin? What? Answer me!"

S I don't know, Sister.

SOUND: "Speak up."

S I don't know, Sister.

SOUND: "Oh, so you are exempt. Are you? You seem to believe so."

S No, Sister.

SOUND: "Absolution is not your right, little girl. He died for our sins that we may enter His kingdom after a life lived in His light. Do you think it funny that He died – crucified under the blazing sun – for your sins?"

S No, Sister.

SOUND: "Say it."

S It isn't funny, Sister.

SOUND: "The suffering of our Lord, Jesus Christ, is not amusing."

*Silence.*

SOUND: "Say it."

S The suffering of our Lord Jesus Christ is not amusing.

SOUND: Lash on S's hands.  
WOMAN'S VOICE "Again."

S The suffering of our Lord Jesus Christ is not amusing.

SOUND: Lash on S's hands.  
WOMAN'S VOICE "I am unworthy of His love, and yet I strive for worthiness in every humble effort I may put forth."

*S only looks up.*

SOUND: WOMAN'S VOICE "SAY IT!"

S I am unworthy... um. I am unworthy of...

SOUND: Lash. Lash. Lash.  
WOMAN'S VOICE "I am unworthy of His love. And yet I strive for Worthiness. In every humble effort. I may put forth."

S I am unworthy of His love, and yet I strive for worthiness in every humble effort I may put forth.

SOUND: Lash.  
WOMAN'S VOICE "You will never be worthy. You can't be. You were born rotten. Look at your eyes and your hair – the colour of dirt. At least your skin came out almost clean. I suppose you think you're a pretty thing. You mangy halfbreed animal. (Lash.) Say it again."

S I am unworthy of His love, and yet I strive for worthiness in every humble effort I may put forth.

SOUND: "I didn't ask for this posting. In the middle of nowhere. If I were a Brother, I'd be choirmaster at St. Michael's in Toronto by now. Instead of herding halfbreed heifers around the prairie like a lunatic clerical cowboy. (Lash.) Again."

S I am unworthy of His love, and yet I strive for worthiness in every humble effort I may put forth.

SOUND: "I'll have to keep my eye on you. The others would be crying by now."  
Lash.

S I am unworthy of His love, and yet I strive for worthiness in every humble effort I may put forth.

*Silence.*

S I am unworthy of His love, and yet I strive for worthiness in every humble effort I may put forth.

SOUND: Hard-souled shoes walk toward the door. The door opens. Hard-souled shoes leave the room. The door slams. Hard-souled shoes walk far down the hallway until the sound of them disappears.

S I am unworthy of His love, and yet I strive for worthiness in every humble effort I may put forth. (*whispering, now.*) "Halfbreed heifer." "The Colour of dirt." (Beat. With conviction, now.) I am unworthy of His love, and yet I strive for worthiness in every humble effort I may put forth. I am unworthy of His love, and yet I strive for worthiness in every humble effort I may put forth.

*The room darkens as night falls.*

*Each student crouches to the ground, shielded by their chair backs, all in a row.*

#### SCENE 4

*A window shadow lights D's face. The others can be seen a little less.*

D Nighttime was the worst. I thought that first night would be the worst, but it got worse and worse. When they brought me here, I didn't know I had to stay. Boarding school, I guess you call it. United.

S Catholic.

A Anglican

D "Residential school." It was at night that I really missed home. In the day, we boys got to build things in the winter and help in the fields in fall and spring.

A We worked in the laundry or sewing, making uniforms. Sometimes we had kitchen duty or we cleaned the school.

S But nighttime... nighttime it didn't matter that I ate more at that school than I ever did at home. Even if the carrots were soft or the porridge a little sour...

D A lot sour, in summer.

S Still – we ate!

D But at night. At night...

SOUND: Sound of hard-souled men's shoes walking slowly through a large room.

D At night, we didn't even breathe.

S Didn't even dare sleep.

SOUND: The shoes, still walking.

D Whenever he came into the dorm to pick someone. Whenever he stopped so close to me that I thought it was finally my turn...

A I prayed that it wouldn't be me.

SOUND: The shoes walk more slowly, now, They stop close by. They keep walking.

D And when it wasn't... I wondered what God would allow any kid to be chosen for that kind of horror. And if that God was the same God who spoke through that Man who terrorized us at night –

S If that was the same God,

D then who was it that I was praying to anyway?

SOUND: The shoes come to a stop.  
MAN'S VOICE, far off and whispering "Wake up, son."  
A BOY (moaning awake, and then "I don't-"  
The boy's mouth is clamped by the Man's hand.  
MAN'S VOICE "Shhhhh. Quiet, now. We all have to make sacrifices."  
The sound of the boy's voice jarring as he is picked up.  
MAN "Shhhhhh..."  
The hard-souled Man's shoes, heavier, now, circle the room and leave.

D And in the morning, we could all tell who it was had been picked. And not one of us could look him in the eye.

A Even those who'd been chosen, over and over.

S Families come together over hard times. But what that school did was destroy everything we ever knew good about families.

D The chosen boy was robbed of his childhood. And left alone in a school full of kids. For the rest of his life.

## SCENE 5

*A school bell shrieks the room to brightness.  
All three students jump out of "bed" and make their beds meticulously.*

SOUND: *God Save the Queen, in super fast tempo  
Bedsheets snap.*

*Students brush off their legs, stomp into their shoes, lace them up swiftly, etc.*

A But there was this one teacher.

D She was pretty great.

S She made home feel like it wasn't so far away.

A Especially when she told us-

S (as teacher) Attention, students! Thank you for lining up so neatly to head to mass and mess. (giggles from students) I have a special announcement to make. In two

weeks it will be the twentieth of December. On that day, you will travel home where you will remain for two whole weeks. (cheers from the students) Yes! Yes, rejoice and be glad in it. But keep it down. Father can hear you if he has the door open downstairs. (quieter cheering.) Your family will come get you, or for some of you, travel will be arranged to take you to the nearest town to your community, and your family will fetch you there. Those students who have no family to return to, “yule” be in good company – that’s a pun. Myself and Sister Margaret are in the same boat, and we will remain in the school to bring merry tidings into our halls, decked or not. You will not go without the Christmas spirit, here. So. Let us fall back in line and make our way down to morning service.

*D walks away quickly, trying to contain his joy.  
S holds A back.*

S     Angela, can I speak with you a moment?

A     Miss?

S     A letter came for you, Angela.

A     But my Grannie can’t write English. Can’t write our words either, I think.

S     It’s not... from your Grannie, Angela.

S gives her the letter. Before she can open it, S speaks.

S     Angela. Your grandmother has passed on.

A     Where?

S     She’s passed away. On to a better place.

A     She died?

S     Peacefully, they say. It seems she was out walking, and her heart just... stopped. Out walking in that cold. She must have been a hardy sort, your grandmother. It sounds as though she was several miles from the village.

A     Takuniaqquguk. (tah-koon-nee-ahk-koo-gook)

S     I understand you have no other family.

A     I had a mom. My dad died before I got born.

S     Yes. Tuberculosis, I understand.

A Huh?

S It doesn't matter. You'll stay here with I and Sister Margaret over the holidays. Angie. You won't go without.

A Who will bury her, Miss? I'm her whole family.

S Oh. Um. It's long over, Angie. You see, she died shortly after you left for school. It's just.. it took some time for anyone to find her. And then... well, the letter only just arrived.

A We used to go when it was our time.

S Pardon?

A I remember she told me. Our people. We used to go when we were no use to anyone anymore. The old ones. Or the ones who couldn't give. The ones who had no place. They would just... go. Maybe choose to be left behind. Or just walk away until they were let go from this world.

S Well... that's not... Christian talk, now, is it?

A (a long pause.) No.

S Why don't you rest, dear? I'll have the nurse write you a pass from morning mass and classes for the day.

A My Grannie isn't Christian, Miss.

S Not everyone has had the benefit of an education, Angela. That is the sad truth.

A My Grannie learned with her family. Not away. Stories and life and all kinds of laughing. At home. Before any white men came to the north.

S The village sent you her things.

*S fetches a tiny suitcase and brings it to Angela.*

S I'll see you in Home economics this afternoon, Angela. You're missing service, but... say your own prayers. You'll find comfort in them.

*The teacher leaves swiftly.  
D and S become A's idyllic imagining of her Grannie's family in the great pre-contact North. A becomes her Grannie.*

A She says you could see nothing but clean, bright snow – no messy white man

tracks in there – for miles and miles. Didn't even call them "miles." And her dad didn't have any TB. No way. He had dogs and a skywide smile. And he loved her pure and happy, with no devil in it. He could jump higher than anyone, higher, even, than the aq̄sarniq. [aurora borealis] And her mom. Gave her hugs. And string to build her stories on. Where's my string?

*A sinks to the ground and sits, dazed and sad.*

## SCENE 6

S Elizabeth!

D (as Elizabeth.) Yeah?

S How come they're letting us go home this year?

D Don't know.

S Grade one and two, no luck. Then suddenly. We can go home.

D Rules sometimes change, I guess.

S I didn't know rules about Indians ever changed.

D Me, neither.

S Do you think the rule about us coming to this school will ever change?

D Geez, Brielle, I don't know!

S Oh. Why do you think we suddenly got to come play outside?

D Don't know. But I did hear Miss scream, before. When she went upstairs to the dorm. Maybe there's a mouse in there.

S I don't think anyone would about a mouse.

D Well, I dunno. They really don't like it when we get to just talk to each other so much. What the heck is going on?

S Hey, I think we better make presents for our family, so when we get back we'll have stuff for them.

D What are we supposed to do, make them uniforms? Even if we did, we wouldn't even be allowed to take them outta the school!

S Well, no! Not dumb uniforms. But we could make up songs or maybe find some really nice rocks out here in the yard.

D You gonna give your Mom a rock for Christmas?

S Hm. Well, I guess not.

D And we'd get killed if anyone heard us singing songs they thought were Indian.

S Hm. Rats.

D Could practice Christmas songs to sing for them, I guess.

S Ah! My brother Louie is a way better singer than me, so if maybe he has the same idea, then I could just sing real soft when he sings strong and we'd be pretty great, I guess.

D Is Louie older than you?

S Only by forty minutes.

D Huh?

S Yep. Twins. He came out first, and since he was a boy, my dad named him after Louis Riel, a great hero. Do you know Louis Riel?

D Does he work at the school?

S No.

D Oh. Then, no.

S Well, he got born and then my dad was so excited he had a boy then when I started to come out, he got even more excited because he thought "Here we go – two boys in one shot!" And I guess my mom kept saying "No, no, noooo!" which was maybe the first word I ever heard if I could remember when I was that little. So, my dad wanted to name me Gabriel after another great hero, Gabriel Dumont. Do you know him?

D Um. I think so. I think he drives the bus into town when you have to go to the Doctor, innit?

S (doubtful) Uh. Yeah, maybe. But anyways, I turned out to be a girl, so Gabriel was out of the question. Then my dad got a good idea, which was to name me Gabriella, but my mom said "No" again, or maybe she still was saying "No" from finding out there was two babies in one shot. So then my dad got an even better

idea, which was to name me Brielle, which IS a girl's name, too, and by then my mom was asleep. So now when he tells people our names, he gets to say "Louie, Brielle." Get it?

D No.

S Me, neither.

D Let's do the Satan one.

S Yes!

Simultaneous, D & S:  
God rest ye merry, gentlemen,  
Let nothing ye dismay,  
For Jesus Christ our Saviour  
Was born upon this day,  
To save us all from Satan's power  
When we have gone astray-

D Ooo, hoo hooo! That part really scares me!

S Let's do it again.

Simultaneous, D & S:  
To save us all from Satan's power  
When we have gone astraaaaay-

*They laugh and spook, then carry on.*

Simultaneous D & S:  
O, tidings of comfort and joy  
Comfort and joy!  
O, tidings of comfort and joy!

D Again!

## SCENE 7

*D and S softly sing as Angela stands slowly.  
She picks up the suitcase.  
She looks up at the ceiling.*

A Higher, even, than the aqsarniq.

*She walks upstage.*

*Before she leaves, she drops the suitcase.  
She disappears behind the screen.*

SOUND: A chair is dragged across a floor.  
Wooden beams creak.  
The chair is kicked over.

PROJECTION: Close on feet swinging, cutting through daylight.

*D & S stop singing and look out to auditorium.*

*S becomes a teacher again. She stands.*

S Angela? Angela, we missed you in Home Economics. Angela?

*S runs behind the screen.*

S (shriek)

PROJECTION: The swinging feet whiteout to gone.

*D steps towards the small suitcase. He opens it towards the screen.*

PROJECTION: Seemingly from the suitcase beams unimaginable aurora borealis,  
dancing across the room.

## SCENE 8

*D steps away from the suitcase.  
S returns, and sits again, in a chair.  
D returns to his chair.*

D Seems unfair to be sitting here telling my story when so many never will. But... hopefully our telling will honour them somehow. Huh... y'know? My first day of school? I didn't think I'd be staying overnight. And it turned into so many nights. But some kids never went back home, ever again. So many lost.

S When kids disappeared, you learned not to ask questions. I wondered, though, what their parents were told.

D When I did go back home for good, I realized I couldn't get used to being treated with kindness. Kept expecting the next fist to fall. Never did get good at sleeping, either. My dark thoughts. And fear. Seemed wrong in that warm little house.

S I couldn't even speak Michif anymore. The school had turned me into a stranger among family.

D Didn't know how to be a son, so I didn't ever bother becoming a dad. Hell, I can't even talk to a girl. How could I? I went twelve years only ever seeing them from far away.

S I was grown up before I learned it was the law. That parents had to send their kids to those schools. I spent all of my years there wondering why my parents didn't fight for me.

D Didn't know how to fish or anything. Made me feel out of place at home. I knew how to rebuild an engine, though. But my folks still didn't have a car! Not one car on the whole reserve. So I moved to town.

S Our people have plenty of fight. I know now, if I had seen them fight for me, I would've fought all of those years at school. And might not have got out of there alive.

D And I never went back.

S Sometimes I wonder if I have. Gotten out of there alive.

D Those schools did what they were supposed to. Took us from home.

S That school. Took me away from myself.

D For good. (Beat.) Sorry.

PROJECTION: Hammer home some archival images?

SOUND : Harper's apology on some creepy loop? "And we apologize for having done this. And we are sorry. And...etc."

END OF PLAY