

STUDY GUIDE

The (Post)Mistress

Book, Lyrics
and Music by
**Tomson
Highway**



ROYAL
MTC
MANITOBA THEATRE CENTRE

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THE (POST) MISTRESS

Book, Lyrics and Music by Tomson Highway

STUDY GUIDE

Written by Nitasha Rajoo

Suitable for high school – ages 14 and up
Deals with some mature themes

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The Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre is proud to call Manitoba home. Royal MTC is located in Winnipeg on Treaty 1 land, the traditional territory of the Ininew, Anishinaabe and Dakota peoples, and the homeland of the Métis Nation. We are thankful for the benefits sharing this land has afforded us, and we are committed to the responsibilities of the Treaty. Hiy Hiy, Miigwetch, Wopida and Maarsii.

SYNOPSIS

“The (Post) Mistress is about love, love letters and love of life.” – Tomson Highway

Back when life was simple – if life was ever simple – people wrote letters. In the small town of Lovely, Ontario, every letter passes through the hands of postmistress Marie-Louise Painchaud. Cheeky and cheerful, Marie-Louise delights in living vicariously through the stories shared in letters mailed from all over the world. Featuring piano and saxophone, the musical stylings evoke these faraway places – samba, bossa nova, tango, Dixieland and Berlin Cabaret rap. Uplifting, funny and poignant, this one-woman musical by Tomson Highway (*Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, *The Rez Sisters*) reminds us that in life, you should never mail it in.

CHARACTERS

Marie-Louise Painchaud – the postmistress

SETTING

The post office in Lovely, a small town in francophone Northern Ontario. Friday, August 9, 1986, that is, a time before the internet, when people wrote letters on paper, frequently by hand and sent them by post.

ABOUT TOMSON HIGHWAY



Tomson Highway is a Cree writer and pianist/songwriter from Northern Manitoba. Among many others, his best-known works are the plays *The Rez Sisters*, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* and the bestselling novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. He lives in Gatineau, Quebec with his loving partner of 37 years where, together, they are busy, and very happy grandpas of two angelic young children. He is working on a hot new book that will be sure to shock the living daylights out of the world. You must read it.

REFLECTIONS FROM TOMSON HIGHWAY

Dear audience: thank you for being here.
A goodly chunk of my writing career addresses itself to the question of what I call the "Mother Earth principle," that is, the idea of divinity in female form. In Monotheism — i.e. Christian mythology — no such idea exists. What did was its predecessor, polytheism, that ancient Greek system of many gods. And goddesses. In that system, God had a wife. His name was Zeus, the King of the sky. Her name was Hera, aka. Mother Earth, the question being: what on earth ever happened to her? In polytheism, not only did God have a wife, he also had a brother. His name was Hades. The King of Death, he ruled over a region of humankind's existence called the afterlife. HE also had a wife. Her name was Persephone, the Queen of Death. This is her story...

— Tomson Highway,
Gatineau, Quebec
10 March, 2021

THEMES AND MOTIFS

- Mother Earth principle
- Supernatural
- Hope and humour
- Choices and consequences
- Life and death
- Relationships
- Identity and Community
- Intersectionality of multilingualism



INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR SIMON MIRON



What inspires and excites you to direct *The (Post) Mistress*?

I'm most excited about working on a play with Indigenous content written by a prolific Indigenous writer. I'm also most inspired by the incredible work of my collaborators. There are so many people who make theatre happen. The scenic painters, the carpenters, the stage hands, set, lighting and costume designers, not to mention stage management.

Can you share your artistic concept of the production?

After speaking with Tomson I did a bunch of research on some of the mythology that inspired him in the creation of the title character. We tried to incorporate a sense of Mythology into the design and into Marie-Louise herself, drawing parallels to Persephone in Greek mythos and the Trickster in Indigenous mythos.

Music and language play a big role in this production - how will this be captured?

This play is a musical play but it also lives in a kind of cabaret style. Tomson himself loves language and music very much and it's very apparent in his script. He loves to flirt and play with language and revels in the nuances.

What is it about *Lovely, Ontario* that invites and draws an audience in?

Like Winnipeg, the people make the town and Marie-Louise spend most of the show talking about them and their relationships with her and each other.

Can you describe Marie-Louise in 4 words?

Loving / Charismatic / Playful / Extraordinary

Are there any exciting production values that we can look forward to?

YES! But I don't want to ruin them. I'll offer that parts of the set are inspired by slag heap runs that come from waste after copper and nickel mining.

The play is set in 1986 when letter writing was a prominent means of communication. Are there aspects of this play, and of your particular production, that will resonate with our current state of the world?

I think letter writing is a really intimate thing that we should bring back. Communication has become very impersonal these days and I think there is a lot of value in spending time to write a letter or even a note by hand, put it in an envelope, seal it, stamp it and mail it.

PRE-SHOW DISCUSSION

1. Why do you think the town Lovely is named Lovely?
2. What is a postmistress?
3. What is a monologue? What might be some reasons that we speak our thoughts out loud?
4. Can you list all the ways people communicated with one another before the internet and modern technology?
5. Why is letter writing such an important style of communication?

ENRICHMENT ACTIVITY

The (Post) Mistress has been staged in a French version titled **Zesty Gopher s'est fait écraser par un frigo** and a Cree version titled **Kisageetin**, although *The (Post) Mistress*, a predominantly English show which retains some French and Cree lyrics, is the most widely produced version.

Audiences will hear English, Cree and French in this production. To advance the understanding of the community and characters in the production, the following activity will help engage students into the history of our land.

Instructions: Divide class into three groups. Using the internet and other research tools, have students research the following: They may create a power point presentation, poster or other for their research:

- Francophone presence in Ontario
- Métis people of Canada
- Cree language and culture (*Nēhiyawēwin, Nīhithawīwin, Nēhinawēwin*)

Share your discoveries with the class.

- What do these communities and cultures have in common?
- Why might Tomson Highway introduce different languages to the listener?
- What impact do languages and culture have on shaping our identity?

ACTIVITY 1

The town of Lovely

Marie-Louise shares the following about the town of Lovely:

“...here in my hometown of Lovely, a small farming town near Complexity, Ontario, and just spitting distance from the legendary Riviere Armitage, the long and winding, cliff sided river that connects Lake Mahji-di-ate to Georgian Bay on Lake Huron, so you can just imagine how beautiful it is, maple trees for miles. You know of Complexity, of course. Copper mining city known for its penny the size of a church that sits on a hill as you approach it from the west? Well, Lovely is one hour east of Complexity. A village really. Population just two thousand.”

Based on what Marie-Louise shares, draw a set design of what you think the town of Lovely looks like. Questions to consider:

1. What clues are there in the extract that share what the natural environment looks like?
2. What stores might be in a small town?
3. What do the houses look like?
4. What features do Georgian Bay and Lake Huron hold?

Consider colours, costumes and props

Alternatives to a set design:

- Collage
- Mind maps
- Poster design



ACTIVITY 2

Letter Writing – Creating a Time Capsule

Instructions:

Letters and Languages are a big part of the play.

Have students write a letter to themselves in the future. It could be for the end of the school year, the end of high school or at their school reunion. As languages play a prominent role in the play, you might encourage students who are fluent in more than one language to write their letter in another language.

Have students consider the following to help personalize their letter:

1. What are your views of the world right now?
2. What are some of your prized possessions right now? Why?
3. What are your interests right now? Hobbies? Favourite foods? Clothes? Music?
4. What are relationships like with family, friends at this moment? How do you hope these will flourish in the future?
5. What are your hopes and dreams?



ACTIVITY 3

Let's Sing and Dance

Instructions: Divide the class into small working groups. Using print or internet sources have groups research the following musical styles:

- Samba
- Bossa Nova
- Tango
- Dixieland
- Berlin Cabaret rap

Research the following:

1. Geographically where does the style originate from?
2. Historically, how did this style develop over time?
3. What are some key facts or details about these musical styles?
4. Who are some well-known artists from this genre?
5. Can you find pieces of music to share with the class?

Share back with the class and discuss the similarities between styles.

POST-SHOW DISCUSSION

1. What do we learn about the characters from the letters through their own words?
2. How does *The (Post) Mistress* explore cultural interactions, such as those through the use of Cree, French and English and through interactions with other Canadian cultures?
3. How do the songs, lyrics, and music tie into identity?
4. How is humour and song used to diminish pain?
5. What is your perspective of Lovely now?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Tomson Highway:	https://tomsonhighway.com/
Manitoba Metis Federation:	https://www.manitobametis.com/
National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation:	https://nctr.ca/map.php
Legacy of Hope Foundation:	https://legacyofhope.ca/
Indigenous Languages of Manitoba:	https://www.ilmb.org/

Manitoba Curriculum

First Nations and Indigenous Education

<https://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/docs/support/its-our-time/full-doc.pdf>

<https://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/abedu/cur.html>

Arts Education

Dance

https://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/arts/dance/framework_9-12.html

Music

https://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/arts/docs/music_9-12.pdf

Drama

https://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/arts/drama/framework_9-12.html

English

<https://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/ela/framework/index.html>