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Native play enjoyable but hard to understand

OHSWEKEN — A couple of weeks ago, I went to see the play, *If Jesus Met Nanabush*.

It was being performed by the De-Ba-Jeh-Mu-Jig Theatre Group at the Woodland Indian Cultural Centre on Mohawk Street in Brantford. De-Ba-Jeh-Mu-Jig is Ojibwa for Story Tellers. This theatre group is from Wikwemikong First Nation on Manitoulin Island.

This particular group is a pioneer in native theatre with their 10th anniversary coming up. Two of their better known productions were *The Rez Sisters*, written by Cree playwright Thomson Highway and *Bootlegger Blues*, written by Drew Hayden Taylor.

If Jesus Met Nanabush was written by Alanis King-Odjig, a 1992 graduate of the National Theatre School of Canada.

Mr. Taylor is an Ojibwa from a small Indian reserve south of Peterborough. Ms. King-Odjig is also an Ojibwa (Anishnabeg).

Last summer, I saw Drew Taylor's *Bootlegger Blues* at the Lighthouse Theatre in Port Dover. It had an all-native cast. It was even funnier and more entertaining than I thought it would be.

Culture hero

Although there are dozens of small Indian reserves dotted across Ontario, they are nearly all Cree, Anishnabeg or Iroquois.

If this play had been written by a Cree writer he would probably call it, *If Jesus Met Wisakedjak*. A Six Nations Iroquois would name his play, *If Jesus Met The Peacemaker*.

Nanabush or Nanabozho is the culture hero of the Anishnabeg. He was not God (Gitchie Manitou) but rather a half-human, half-spirit being who could take the form of a man (or woman), an animal or even a tree.

There are many Anishnabeg legends about Nanabush. In some he is wise and kind but in others he is a trickster.

In this regard he is similar to the Cree hero, Wisakedjak

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(Wee-sa-kay-jack) who is also a trickster.

It is interesting to note that many indigenous cultures across North America and even into South America had culture heroes who were tricksters. They went under various names such as a Coyote and Raven.

On the other hand, The Peacemaker of the Iroquois was not a trickster figure. His mission was to stop bloodshed and bring peace to those who would listen to his message.

Performed miracles

As a result, The Peacemaker performed different kinds of miracles than Nanabush or Wisakedjak. If Jesus of Nazareth had met The Peacemaker, they probably would have gotten along just fine.

Unfortunately I don't know enough about Nanabush and other Anishnabeg beliefs to make a proper judgment about what might happen *If Jesus Met Nanabush*.

In fact, after watching this play I still don't know what happened — or why.

This is not a problem with me as I've seen a lot of modern non-native plays that I did not understand either.

I still enjoyed the dialogue and action and if I get a chance, I'd like to see it again.

Maybe I'll figure out this play yet.

Our Town is an Expositor feature which provides a forum for news and views from some of the smaller centres in the region. George Beaver is a freelance writer who lives on the Six Nations reserve.