

As you prepare to study Reasonable Doubt with your students, it's helpful to know a bit about its structure. It's a 2 act play with a mix of short, medium, and longer scenes in each act. Words like "exposition, initiating incident, rising action, and denouement" just don't seem to work to describe this play.

Here's what comes to mind when people describe Reasonable Doubt:

- In an interview with the Globe and Mail, co-creator Joel Bernbaum said, "I was not trying to take a side. I was trying to get a kaleidoscope view" (Jan. 22, 2020).
- The Globe's Marsha Lederman sees it this way: "Reasonable Doubt is dramatic, but not a straight-forward re-enactment. It is more like a basket carefully woven with threads of disparate perspectives, opinions, and court proceedings, creating a vessel strong enough to carry some heavy truths" (Feb. 1, 2020).
- Saskatoon Star Phoenix writer Matt Olson commends director co-creator and director Yvette Nolan for "invoking dynamic relationships between these dozens of characters . . . stirring up empathy without being accusatory." He goes on to say, "Reasonable Doubt [is] a reflection of ourselves – we are suddenly presented with an inescapable look in the mirror of who we are as a functioning society" (Feb. 2, 2020).
- Joel Bernbaum suggests treating it like a magic eye puzzle. You look at it for long enough and another picture appears."
- Lancelot Knight, composer and ensemble member for the play, provides another metaphor still: "We are always pushed to believe that we're moving forward, but in a lot of ways, we're not moving at all. History in a play, a piece of art, sets an anchor down of realism to see, "Have we really moved forward?"

Nolan describes the structure of the play as "the weave." Initially, the weave had two strands: spoken words and music. Nolan recalls:

We knew that Lancelot's music was going to be a critical part of Reasonable Doubt. The material was so hard – hard truths spoken by real people about living together on this land – that audiences needed the music to create space to breathe and reflect. When words spoken by characters hurt too much, the company would sing, or listen to Lancelot sing. The words that were like weapons coming out of a character's mouth somehow were more palatable, comprehensible, even comforting, when set to music.

Later, Nolan explains, a third strand emerged: "We did not know, when we began the project, that we would eventually be weaving together not only the interviews of the Saskatchewanians and Lancelot's music, but also the trial transcripts from the murder trial of a white man who shot a Cree youth on his property. Once we had the three strands of the braid, the dramaturgy of the piece became how to achieve some kind of balance. 'How do we tell this story on behalf of a community? How do we honour all those people who trusted us with their words?'"

In an interview, Nolan shares an idea she attributes to Indigenous playwright, Daniel David Moses, “Very often, Indigenous theatre is not about a single protagonist; it’s about community, the story of the community.” While the trial itself centered on two individuals, the play decenters individuals to bring our collective story into focus. Joel explains why:

Racism is taught. We can just peg Gerald Stanley as an evil person. It becomes much more complex, even more disturbing, and somehow more hopeful if we realize that we are all taught the way we relate with people. Then, hopefully, we can start to unpack it. What if Gerald Stanley had been taught a different way of being?

There are so many voices in the play and in our communities; the main character is the issue; the ‘plot’ is our changing relationships to it.

Nolan explains how the feather, which appears three times in the play, helps us to see the line of the story: “The feather appears in the script several times. The feather became a really clear way of moving the story along because it set up the traditional Indigenous ways of knowing against the trial transcript – White ways of knowing. It gave us a balance and a tension that creates a story.”

In his essay, “The Ethical Space of Engagement,” Indigenous scholar Willy Ermine provides another metaphor which may help us to appreciate the structure of Reasonable Doubt – “ethical space.” Imagine that Indigenous and Western thought worlds are like two people or entities sitting on a park bench, as Ermine did when he read Roger Poole’s description of “ethical space.” Ermine explains:

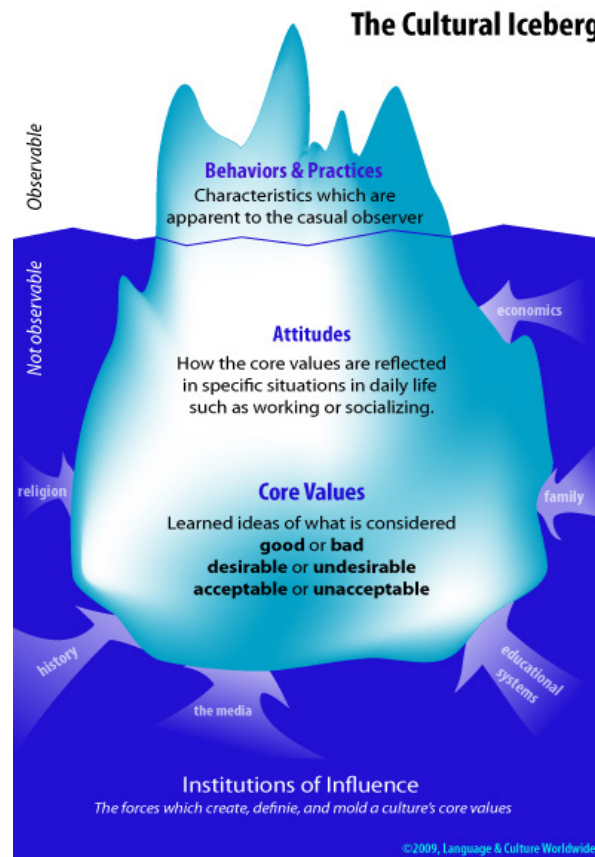
In Roger Poole’s description of ethical space, a photograph dating to the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia is presented. In the picture, two men are sitting on a park bench looking at each other. One man is dressed in army fatigues and is clearly representative of the dominant and occupying force, while the other man, dressed in civilian, peasant clothing, clearly represents one of the ‘occupied.’

At the superficial level of encounter, the two entities may indeed acknowledge each other but there is a clear lack of substance or depth to the encounter. What remains hidden and enfolded are the deeper level thoughts, interests and assumptions that will inevitably influence and animate the kind of relationship the two can have. It is this deeper level force, the underflow-become-influential, the enfolded dimension that needs to be acknowledged. (194-195)

Reasonable Doubt creates this ethical space and shows us what it looks like and feels like, step by step, for Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples to move from superficial to deep encounters with themselves and one another. Ermine describes this progression this way: “The space offers a venue to step out of our allegiances, to detach from the cages of our mental worlds and assume a position where human-to-human dialogue can occur. The ethical space offers itself as the theatre for cross-cultural conversation in pursuit of ethically engaging diversity” (202).

This description resonates with the ‘cultural iceberg’ metaphor. As Reasonable Doubt moves from its first scene to its last, the ‘waterline’ of what speakers are willing and able to see and talk about gradually lowers. At first, in Act 1, speakers see and talk about “the superficial level of encounter” between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples – observable behaviors and practices.

With each scene, speakers perceive and consider more of the “hidden and enfolded” forces that have shaped their “interests and assumptions”. In Act 2, the ‘waterline’ lowers rapidly, making speakers’ core values visible and available for discussion and change.



The essential activity in “ethical space” is dialogue. Thus, in Reasonable Doubt, which is designed to enfold actors and audience alike in a shared ethical space, dialogue itself is where the action lives. Bernbaum has experienced how “this type of play has the potential to create space that, itself, is a catalyst for creating dialogue between people. People who live in the same province that perhaps would never have or take the chance to meet are suddenly having a conversation on the stage.”

Ermine advises us to give our attention “to understanding how thought functions in governing our behaviors – to observing, collectively, how hidden values and intentions can control our behavior” (203). Many of the questions in this guide focus students’ attention on thought – its roots, functions, and transformations – as they journey through the play.

Thus focused, it is our hope that they will witness and participate in the actors’ and, indeed, our society’s, collective journey from the colonial story which is “running thin” to “a new song” of truth and reconciliation.

“There’s a lot of truth being told now. We, as a community, have to find out what we are going to do with these truths.”

-Lancelot Knight

Ermine, Willy. (2007). The Ethical Space of Engagement. Indigenous Law Journal. Volume 6. Issue 1. Pages 193-203.