

# Native Girl Syndrome: Review by Timmah Ball



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## **Native Girl Syndrome**

Scattered toys, cardboard boxes, plastic tarp, old clothes and two prams haphazardly intermingle across the stage in what feels like an alcohol infused junkyard hell. Two women dance, glide and slip in a mess of empty beer cans. One of them slowly walks to the front row, gently touching the audience as if she is about to fall into their laps as the other struggles to pull up her jeans after brazenly urinating. The scene is raw and hard to watch at times. As the

woman finally has her jeans back up, she opens a new can of beer and I desperately wait for something else to happen as she guzzles back.

Music plays in the background, lulling you into a false sense of reality where at any moment the two women on stage will break out of their bleak circumstance and start to converse, or move in choreographed unison. But this isn't that type of show.

Created by Ojibwe/Cree Canadian artist Lara Kramer, *Native Girl Syndrome* seeks to expose the guttural trauma of colonisation. These themes are drawn from her Grandmother's experience migrating as a young woman from a First Nations community into an urban mainstream culture. Cultural disorientation and the consequence of assimilation explode as we witness the two women repetitively struggle.

This is difficult and challenging work executed with pain and suffering, which is hard to endure because you know it is commenting on real life and experiences that are all too recognizable for First Nations people. You can't watch the performance without thinking of the ongoing impact and trauma of colonisation. The women most explicitly convey the devastating effect the introduction of alcohol has had on Indigenous communities, but the sparse set also conveys colonial destruction. Plastic and garbage is all that is left, the settlers have successfully destroyed the native landscape as the women do their best to build structures from blue tarp.

In one scene a woman wraps herself in clear plastic and it is difficult to tell whether it is overwhelming her, or if she is managing to find some sort of pleasure in it. From certain angles it appears to be a blanket, but just as quickly it evokes the iconic image of Laura Palmer's dead body wrapped in plastic in Twin Peaks. These violent juxtapositions are further explored when the other native girl wraps herself in a throw rug: a much kinder image in some respects, but the clash of cultures re-emerge. The rug looks like a mass produced item from Target, but has a picture of a wolf and mountain landscape teasing her of the wilderness she no longer has. There were many times I craved a moment of pleasure or hope for these two women, and audiences may struggle with the lack of narrative, but a conventional stage play or neatly packaged storyline where good overcomes evil is not the point here. And it certainly wouldn't honour the horror that the women live in, a horror that is all too real. This is brave programming which reflects the urgency of Yirramboi. Without such festivals, productions like *Native Girl Syndrome* would be far less likely to hit our shores, even though they are desperately needed.