

## An Indian Plan on a Larger Subject

In July 1975, Indian and Métis leaders in the Northwest Territories issued a statement of rights which demanded their people be recognized as a nation. This fall they presented a formal demand for political jurisdiction over their traditional lands. There are about eleven thousand people of Indian ancestry in the Mackenzie Valley.

The original statement passed by the Indian Brotherhood of the Northwest Territories and the Métis Association of the Northwest Territories said, in part, "Our struggle is for recognition of the Dene nation by the Government and the people of Canada and the people and governments of the world." (*Dene*, pronounced Den-nay, means "the people" in the language of the four major

tribes in the area.) In presenting the formal proposal, Georges Erasmus, president of the brotherhood, said the Indians of the north wished to function politically as "a nation within Canada. . . . as a government roughly equivalent in status to the provincial level." He said that the brotherhood was in no way "challenging the legitimate jurisdiction of the federal government." He stated that the proposed agreement would restore Indian rights lost in earlier treaties. "We are calling for a radical change in the relationship between aboriginal people and the people of Canada," he said. "Furthermore, we do not see why our rights to self-determination cannot be met within the Canadian Confederation."

## A Short Life in the City

Playwright George Ryga is of Ukranian descent and grew up on a prairie farm. His abiding interest is in the "stunted strong," the "natives," people who are exploited directly and indirectly, deliberately and unintentionally by the organized invaders. He is most particularly interested in the Indians of Canada. His plays, to use an inadequate word, are experimental: mélanges of sound, music, songs, dialogue and set speeches. His greatest achievement so far, *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, is the story of an Indian girl, arrested in Vancouver for prostitution; her boyfriend, Jamie Paul; a police court magistrate and a four-year-old child that the magistrate once saw alone and lost in the Cariboo.

The child is perhaps Rita's, or perhaps the child she and Jamie Paul never had, or Rita as she once was, or all Indians in their acceptance of nature and their inability to adjust to urban rules and contrivances.

The play has an almost mystic air; time is not in sequence, and the end—Jamie Paul's death when hit by a train, Rita Joe's in a rape—is clearly implied from the beginning. Rita's confusion grows as the case against her grows clear:

*I was going home, trying to find the highway . . . I knew those two were cops the moment I saw them . . . I told them to go f . . . fly a kite. They got sore then and started pushing me around. . . . They stuffed five dollar bills in my pockets when they had me in the car . . . I ask you mister, when are they gonna charge cops like that with contributing to delinquency. . . .*

*Jamie—why am I here? . . . is it . . . because people are talkin about me and all them men . . . Is that why? I never wanted to cut cordwood for a living . . . Never once I thought . . . it'd be like this. . . .*

The magistrate—white society trying to judge—is perhaps Rita's greatest scourge. His speeches are interrupted by Rita's answers and comments, but he might as well speak his piece all at once:

*Now it's your word against this (the folder of Rita's arrest papers) you need references . . . people who know you . . . who will come to court to substantiate what you say today. This is the process of legal argument. . . .*

*What are we going to do about you, Rita Joe? This is the seventh charge against you in one year. . . . Laws are not made to be violated in this way. . . . Why did you steal?*

*Don't blame the police, Rita Joe! The obstacles to your life are here, in your thoughts (touches his temples), . . . possibly even in your culture. . . .*

*You can't go now. You've broken a law for which you will have to pay a fine or go to prison. . . .*

*Rita Joe . . . it is against the law to solicit men on the street. You have to wash. . . . You can't walk around in old clothes and running shoes made of canvas. . . . You have to have some money in your pockets and an address where you live. You should fix your hair . . . perhaps even change your name. And try to tame that accent that sounds like you have a mouthful of sawdust. . . . There is no peace in being extraordinary!*