

Historica Canada Education Portal

Jay Silverheels

Overview

This lesson is based on viewing the Jay Silverheels biography from [The Canadians](#) series. First Nations actor Jay Silverheels struggled to establish himself as a serious and diverse actor despite being typecast as the "Indian brave" in roles like Tonto in the "Lone Ranger."

Aims

Through a variety of creative and theatrical activities, students will examine Jay Silverheels's career and accomplishments while exploring the broader issues of racism, stereotyping, typecasting, and images of First Nations in film and television.

Background

"Me do, kemo sabe."

Who knew that the faithful Indian sidekick to the Lone Ranger cringed inside each time he said these words? Mohawk actor Jay Silverheels played the monosyllabic, stoic Tonto with poker-faced perfection. In 1949, at age 35, he became the first Indigenous actor to play a Native American on television, and he became the symbolic "Indian" to a generation. While the handsome actor would later play alongside some of Hollywood's finest, found a school for Indigenous actors and prove himself a talented thespian, he would never escape being typecast as "the Indian brave."

Jay Silverheels: The Man Beside The Mask takes viewers into the life of a young man who was determined to escape what he believed would be a dead-end life on the Six Nations Reserve in Oshweken, Ontario. He left behind seven brothers and two sisters, with the dream of making a life as a professional boxer and lacrosse player in Buffalo, New York. In the midst of a successful lacrosse career in the late 1930s, the handsome Silverheels was told he could make it in movies by comedian Joe E. Brown. Silverheels moved to Hollywood, bussing tables by day and studying Shakespeare at night in his tiny apartment.

But as the years went by, Silverheels never got to use any of the Shakespearean monologues he memorized. He was continuously cast as an “Indian” extra in Western movies, which led to speaking parts and finally the coveted role of Tonto, in the first Western series to be shot for TV, “The Lone Ranger.” While Silverheels had mixed feelings about the character he played, it was a steady job, he was newly married, and the part would eventually lead to something even better, he rationalized. But after Silverheels's five-year stint on the hit series, he found himself forever typecast as the “stoic Indian.” Playing the “Indian warrior” or “squaw” were the sort of limited roles all Indigenous actors faced.

Silverheels decided to do something about it. With fellow actor Will Sampson, he founded the Indian Actors' Workshop in 1966. His goal was to see Indigenous actors get decent parts in films, and he set up free nightly classes in an L.A. church basement, teaching everything from stunt work, to elocution, audition etiquette, and proper nutrition.

Silverheels helped train the next generation of crews and actors, but was partially paralyzed in 1975 by a series of strokes that would eventually kill him in 1980. It was an especially unjust illness, hitting just as Silverheels was finally beginning to get large parts in films like *Santee* that allowed

the public, and Silverheels himself, to see what a fine actor he truly was. But Silverheels left behind a legacy that is still being felt, and fought for, by a new generation of Indigenous actors. Tina Keeper, Michael Horse, Peter Kelly Gaudreault, and Tom Jackson speak about how Silverheels inspired them and helped forged a path that is still being followed, and improved upon, by Indigenous actors, writers, and directors today.

Activities

Time Allowance: 1 - 4 hours

Procedures:

1. Your class has just been hired as the screenwriters for a new television production, *Jay Silverheels: The Mini-Series*. Working in groups of four or five, students are assigned to develop and present ideas for the pilot episode for each segment of Jay's life. For example, five students could work on *Part 1: Growing up on a Canadian Native Reserve*, while another group could chronicle *Part 3: The Lean Years in Hollywood*. Each group should incorporate aspects from the documentary of Jay's life into their presentation. Students should not however, be discouraged from taking some "creative license" with the story. Groups must also identify the segments of Canadian society they are targeting in the "trailers" for their episode. Perhaps Episode 2 could be crafted as a "romance," while Episode 4 seeks to capitalize on the "action" of western life. When the groups are ready, each episode should present their "trailers" and make a pitch for funding dollars to CBC television executives (the rest of the class).

2. Assign students a range of perspectives from which to write an obituary column for a newspaper: all projects should include ten major

facts/events from Silverheels's life. (For examples of obituaries, refer to your local newspaper or go to [The Globe and Mail](#).)

Students should consider how the story might change if it were told by Jay's wife Bobbie as opposed to one of the actors from the Indian Actor's Guild, or a fan of western television shows. What might the character they have been assigned wish to emphasize or omit? Why?

3. Direct students to create a tableaux in groups of four. Each scene should depict a stereotypical Lone Ranger moment.

Lone Ranger promotional posters are great fodder for tableaux. These can be seen at various points in the video.

For each tableau, students should take turns "unfreezing" and describing their thoughts and perspectives on the scene. What would Tonto really be thinking when the plot directs him to get "roughed up" by the bad guys yet again? How might the Lone Ranger have felt about Tonto's demand that they be given proper dressing rooms? What might some of the "bad guy" Natives on the show have thought of their own characters?

A variation of this activity would have the class take turns asking questions of the players in the tableaux. The reflections which the students prepare may be humorous, but students are expected to respond "in character."

4. Brainstorm stereotypes of First Nations people as seen in television shows such as "The Lone Ranger" with your students. What images of Native people do these programs project? Where do these stereotypes come from? Examining the list of Hollywood characters which Silverheels was allowed to play might be helpful in this process. Jay's filmography

can be accessed at [IMDB](#).

In discussing stereotyping, a helpful tool can be to discuss community perceptions of your school. If these perceptions are positive, are they always accurate? If they are mixed, is judging young people by the stereotypes of the school they attend fair?

You may wish to show students a clip from the film *Dances with Wolves*. What similarities and differences do students perceive between the type of character which Canadian actor Graham Greene plays in *Dances with Wolves* and the role of Tonto in "The Lone Ranger" series?

5. Students create a mind-map on the following question: Should only First Nation actors be allowed to play Native roles in movies and television? Have your students recall Silverheels's perspective on this issue as portrayed in the video. These mind-maps can then be used for a full class discussion or debate.

6. What might life in the Six Nations community have been like in the 1920's when Jay was growing up? What might life be like today? Inviting a guest speaker from a Native community to speak to your class might be an excellent strategy for gaining historical perspective and dispelling stereotypes.

7. Direct your students to research the background of lacrosse. Why is lacrosse still referred to as Canada's National Game? Students can use the information they learn to create a poster highlighting the history of lacrosse in Canada. The fact that Jay Silverheels first tasted fame as a lacrosse star may figure prominently in students' posters. If your school has appropriate equipment, students might also enjoy practicing throwing and catching with lacrosse sticks.

Required Materials:

A selection of simple props would be useful for the the third activity.

Resources

[Jay Silverheels Worksheet](#)

[Jay Silverheels - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[Hi-Yo, Silver](#)

Several photos of the Lone Ranger and Tonto as well as a free download of the Lone Ranger theme (Rossini's William Tell Overture).