

Maori and Cook Island Maori put their stamp on the dance

Tai Royal, Warren Douglas, Willy Thompson. Just three names but they're being seen as part of the political awakening of the Maori people.

How can that be when all three young men would say they are just dancers.

The three young polynesians made their dancing debut in the Maori world at Ratana Pa early in 1984.

Willy: "We were invited to perform at the Maori Artists and Writers Hui at Ratana so we put on three pieces that had a maori flavour. The choreographer used haka movements as a starting point and our movements in dance were based on her interpretation. The response just brought the house down, we were totally unprepared for that."

After that performance, the Maori world was abuzz with korero about the new Maori dance group who'd combined traditional Maori dance with modern western dance. Most who had caught the Ratana Pa performance were enthusiastic about the ihi that had been captured by the dance trio. However some viewers had reservations about authenticity of the cross-over form of dance.

Since that time the dance trio have resumed training at the New Zealand School of Dance and have tried to get on with putting their feet down in preparation for graduation this year and a trip to the South Pacific Arts Festival in Noumea this December.

Tu Tangata magazine talked with the trio prior to the Noumea trip to get an idea of what it's like to be the centre of Maori eyes, at least in the dance world.

First of all the group is adamant there is no big political statement intended despite young Maori people seeing all sorts of political messages or stances in their dance. Warren: "We are performers first with an individual message. People expect all of it to come from the Maori side. It's not like that."

Tai: "Our movement comes from our background, Maori and pakeha. Because we are Maori internally we have an understanding in the way we interpret movement."

Tai says this interpretation of movement is what makes the trio's dance alive to Maori eyes and equally exciting for pakeha.

"When Gaylene and Piri Sciascia were choreographing for the Impulse dance company they discovered pakeha dancers found trouble with earthy movements, movements that required being close to the ground.

The dancers couldn't do it because they're so used to being light and airy

and above the ground. That's where we are capable of being very earthy."

If this is what Maori people identify with in the trio's dance, it's not been carefully calculated format at all.

Willy: "It's not that we thought it all out, we just dance. Ruby Shang, who choreographed the haka piece, asked

Tai Royal

us to do some haka movements and she then took it over. She was able to do this because she has the feeling to relate to other cultures. She is Chinese/American and was out in New Zealand on a teaching grant."

Do the trio have plans now to actively cultivate a new Maori/pakeha style of dance?

Tai: "A kaumatua from home, Irirangi Tiakiawa has offered to teach the use of the taiaha and patu but I haven't taken up the offer yet."

Warren: "As long as we understand the original meaning of the Maori dance then we can interpret it for ourselves."

