

The Warrior Chiefs of 1862

Brian Mackrell throws the spotlight on the first Maori entertainment troupe to tour overseas.

Many will know of Maggie Papakura's 1910-11 Concert Party which gained acclaim on a tour of Australia and England where they took part in the Coronation festivities of King George V. Not so well known is a similar tour undertaken almost half a century before.

In July 1862 a Maori tour de force burst upon the Sydney entertainment scene. "Dr M'Gauran's Troupe of Maori Warrior Chiefs, Wives and Children exhibiting the sacred ceremonies, solemnities, festivals, exciting war dances, games and combats ... limited to twelve nights. To enable schools and families to witness this extraordinary exhibition four mid-day performances will be given," declared the advertisements.

The Sydney public loved the Warrior Chiefs. The intended twelve-day season had to be extended to thirty-seven days before the triumphant troupe could open in Melbourne. The twenty-one "aboriginal Thespians" came from a dozen major North Island tribes and all were billed as men and women of rank and influence.

"Great sensation" ... "Extremely exciting" ... "Rapturously received" raved the theatre critics. Australian newspaper editors were just as lavish with their praise.

"Excellent in physical development and full of intellectual activity, this noble savage has always commanded universal respect."

"There is no savage race so interesting as the Maori. He proves himself capable of education and civilisation ... The stern discipline and undoubted courage of their fighting men extort the respect of their opponents."

The plays in which the Warrior Chiefs, Wives and Children performed were genuine Victoria melodramas, "written for them by Mr Whitworth, with authentic scenery by Wilson."

In "The Pakeha Chief" Whakeau, the evil European leader of "a bad tribe", abducts sweet Miss Alice Mortimer and holds her hostage in a cave behind the appropriately named Falls of Weeping Water.

PITCHED BATTLE

Alice's father, boyfriend and a missionary, aided by "a good tribe", track Whakeau down and in a pitched battle with the final act the enemy are routed, and Alice re-united with her loved ones.

While the plot was trite, the European playwright demonstrated considerable ingenuity by including almost every aspect of old-time Maori life and custom as well as sweeping the action from an opening Taranaki scene (painted backdrop of the mountain) 200 kilometres north to "Tu Ka To-Te, Whero Whero's pa on the Waikato".

The Maori performances were awe-inspiring and Australian audiences called for repeated encores of such items as "launching the war canoe", "sanguinary battle between hostile tribes" and what was even then billed as "The Famous Haka War Chant and Chorus".



Some of the Warrior Chiefs in London, 1864. With them is Mrs Doratea Weale of the Aborigines Protection Society, who considered their performances "sinful and degrading".

A newspaper described the latter as: "Composed of a series of intoned solos, delivered as a kind of chant, each of which is followed by an extraordinary chorus, expressed in stentorous-like expirations, and accompanied with an obligato of outrageous gestures and postures ... their movements were as the parts of a machine acted upon by a single motive power ... they seemed inspired with real fury."

According to Dr M'Gauran, formerly Auckland Provincial Surgeon, the venture was not purely a theatrical speculation but designed to educate the Maori in European culture and vice versa.

One Australian newspaper praised his efforts "carried out at great personal expense to himself" and hoped they would "meet the just return so laudable and great an undertaking deserves." But it was not to be.