

Maori Theatre Review 1980/81

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1980/1981 has seen a resurgence of Maori theatre if one takes account of "Maranga Mai" and "Te Whanau" — two young theatre groups which sprang from social conditions in our country — together with two stage plays and a film, each of which deals with Maori points of view.

"Maranga Mai" has its roots in "The Engineers Mistake" or the Auckland University "Haka party incident" and the Bastion Point "Occupation". For reasons unknown "Maranga Mai" was not chosen to represent New Zealand at the 1980 South Pacific Arts Festival hosted by Papua New Guinea even though the organisers there welcomed their presence and had gone so far as to timetable them in at certain venues.

"Maranga Mai" had toured various marae in rural areas and also gave performances at Parliament and some secondary schools. Reactions to their show varied. The Minister of Education, Mr M. Wellington wanted them banned, Mr Norm Jones, M.P. wished their show to be televised, and Mr Winston Peters, then M.P. for Hunua objected to their historical view of events.

"Maranga Mai" was not saying anything new. The views they put forward have been well known in Maoridom ever since the coming of the Pakeha. What is new is that young people are getting up and voicing them in theatrical terms.

Te Whanau — different

"Te Whanau" is slightly different in that its roots seem to come more from professional theatre. Half of its players have been for some time in the mainstream of New Zealand theatre which is largely Pakeha-oriented, and had tired of continually portraying English, Irish, American, or whatever characters but rarely ever any Maori characters. "Te Whanau" performed at Waiatarau, Freemans Bay, Maungarei, Mt Wellington, Rotorua, Hamilton, and Waahi Pa, Huntly, before travelling as part of the New Zealand contingent to the 1980 South Pacific Arts Festival in Papua New Guinea.

A music and drama critic Terry Snow had the following to say about the two groups:

Maori banned

"It's a long way from the days when speaking Maori was banned in schools, to the present young vocal Maori theatre groups using satire, song and predominantly Maori language for forceful emotional expression."

"To the loud approval of the crowd, Parihaka, the Wairau massacre, Raglan golf course and Bastion Point became living dramatic symbols in a theatrical expression hitherto denied this audience, remote as it has been from the traditional theatre's largely European-oriented set of values."

Music essential

"Music is an essential part of the emotional tenor of the show, as it seems to be of all the groups in this burgeoning Maori theatre movement."

"Maori theatre already has a natural audience and seems to be shaping a natural and original form for itself, one which will rightly require of its audience a working knowledge of Maori and Maoritanga."

"Many Pakeha New Zealanders may not like what this style of theatre is saying, but they cannot ignore its emotional and dramatic validity for a lot of people, nor pretend it will go away."

Terry Snow's comments are a vindication of what the groups are trying to do, that is, to give dramatic expression to Maori views in a uniquely Maori way.

Alaskans perform

Te Whanau continues to perform sections of the piece taken to Papua New Guinea. In late 1980 at an evenings entertainment put on by the Auckland branch of the Maori Writers and Artists for the touring Alaskan group Tuma Theatre from Alaska University, Te Whanau helped entertain with sketches, songs, readings, a section from "Hanga Hou", and a haka. The Alaskans presented a show that gave dramatic expression to their indigenous history and legends. Before returning to Alaska they performed in Auckland, Rotorua, Wellington and Christchurch.

Fundraising concert

Te Whanau also performed at a fundraising concert for Turakina Girls College held at the Logan Campbell Centre in Auckland on 5 December, 1981, together with Sammy Dee as compere, Deane Waretini and his regular backing group Contact, the Lightwood family recently returned from a successful tour

of the USA, Bonnie and Noel Clarke, and talented newcomers Georgina Te Whata and Angelina Karini.

Others to take part were: Te Manawa Cultural Group from Rotorua, the Auckland Yugoslav Society of Kolo Dancers, the Maungarongo family from Ohakune, a family of Maori ancestry who specialise in dances of Tahiti, Hawaii, Tokelau, and Rarotonga, and the father and son from Chile.

Mauri hikitia

The concert had been organised by George Tait who had taken the ancient philosophy of "mauri hikitia" and used it as a medium to uplift New Zealand's distinct cultures within his concept of entertainment. George Tait died at Auckland Hospital, two weeks before the concert. However, George Tait was there that night, his presence was everywhere. He was present in the opening and closing of the show which was the Rangi and Papa section performed by Te Whanau and written by him.

He often said of the section, "Look — I didn't write it. My ancestors did. I just put it on paper."

He was present in Deane Waretini's songs which he had also written.

Each performer and each group had at some time been given support and encouragement by George Tait.

Unforgettable

Unforgettable is the only way to describe the gentleman from Chile who walked into a spotlight centered on an empty chair and explained in halting English how he had come to New Zealand 15 years ago.

One of the first people he met was this man who recognised he was different. This man wanted to know what sort of songs Chileans sang, he wanted to know what sort of dances Chileans danced. This man then encouraged him to perform them so they would not be lost and forgotten.

"That man was George Tait, my friend. This chair is for George and I play this for him."

He and his son then played a slow but hauntingly beautiful Chilean lament with a small flute and drum.

The originals

The original "Te Whanau" Players began in 1980 with:

Don SELWYN as director,
George TAIT as kaumatua and writer,
Dawn UNDERWOOD as technical director along with:
Faenza REUBEN from Ngati Porou who played Rangi,
Merata MITA from Arawa who played Papa,
Paki CHERRINGTON from Ngapuhi who played Tane Mahuta,
Robert POUWHARE from Tuhoe who played Ruaumoko,
Hone EDWARDS from Waikato who played Rehua,