



The bicultural landscape & Māori theatre

Note: Teachers can decide for themselves when to provide this contextual material to their class in relation to the work on the plays – before (to set the context), during (as issues arise), or after (as a discovery from the plays) – depending on individual class dynamics and teacher planning preferences.

The interest in working with *Purapurawhetū* and *The Pohutukawa Tree* together is that they stand fifty years apart in the history of New Zealand theatre, and show fifty years of difference in the way they evoke New Zealand identity. We can take them as marker posts in defining our bicultural landscape.

A working definition of 'bicultural'

We live in a country that draws on both Māori and 'Western' cultures for its mainstream heritages. We call that two-fold cultural heritage 'biculturalism'. Although many diverse immigrant groups fit into the mix of New Zealand society, the value systems and history that define our national identity are Māori and 'Western'. The term 'Western' does not, of course, refer only the geographical west of Europe (which is the origin of the term) – it has become a way of naming the English-speaking global culture. In New Zealand we call it Pākehā.

The relationship between the two cultures, as we know, is not stable. It is always changing, just as the cultures themselves are changing. The term 'bicultural' describes this interaction, not a place of arrival.

This section of the project offers a brief history of the way theatre has approached bicultural interaction in New Zealand, and invites the making of new performances that describe that interaction – both as it has been in the past and as it may be in the future.

Bicultural relations in New Zealand theatre

Early colonial melodramas: In the late 1800s, overseas companies toured Australia and New Zealand with epic extravaganzas. Because it was so exotic and so dramatic, many of these plays incorporated elements of the New

Zealand landscape, such as geysers and the famous Pink and White Terraces. They also introduced Māori characters into their stories, particularly warriors doing war dances and beautiful maidens. These plays saw Māori culture totally from the outside, as something to be exploited for its local colour.

1920s & 1930s – Emergence of local New Zealand theatre: Taking part in World War One (1914–18) reconnected many Pākehā New Zealanders with their British roots. Many soldiers on leave in Britain found their interest rekindled in European literature and theatre. Those of the class with access to education and to theatre looked back to England as the source of their culture and their history. Back in New Zealand, writers imported British plays and looked to Britain as the model for their new writing.

At the same time, Pākehā playwrights saw themselves as a long way from Britain and Europe – the source of ‘culture’. This sense of distance and of struggle in a tough new land characterised many of the new plays that were written in the 1920s and 1930s. Māori had no place in these plays, just as they seemed to have no place in the new post-colonial society that was emerging.

1940s & 1950s – Pākehā searching for Māori: The period after the World War Two (1939–45) again brought change. For one thing, New Zealand writers began to see themselves as quite different from the British. For another, with the migration to the cities, Māori were becoming more visible in New Zealand society.

A handful of writers explored the impact on Māori of the colonial past. Among them was Bruce Mason, who was as interested in the current cross-cultural interaction as he was in the effects of the past.

Māori claim the stage

- 1960s:** Formation of the Māori Theatre Trust, and the development of a high profile for theatre that drew on Māori subject matter.
- 1970s:** Increasing degrees of protest by Māori about the social conditions that left them as the losers in society, and about the loss of land and identity that had taken place through colonisation. A number of Māori writers and co-operative theatre groups brought this protest onto the stage.
- 1980s:** Significant number of Māori now involved in theatre, bringing their stories to centre stage. Some Pākehā writers exploring cross-cultural relationships in their writing, but mostly Māori writers took the initiative to describe what it meant to live in New Zealand in the space between the two cultures.
- 1990s:** Fall in number of new plays in the country as a whole, largely due to sharp cut-backs in government funding for the arts.

Nevertheless, Taki Rua emerged as a theatre company that focused on Māori theatre.

The development of Māori theatre

Māori theatre has grown out of a number of traditions. It has roots in the performance practices of the marae – oratory, ritual and encounter. It also has roots in the meeting house itself, with the stories that are told inside it and the stories that are carved, woven and painted on its walls and rafters.

It draws on elements of traditional Māori performance, like haka, waiata, poi, and taiaha. It also draws on the traditions of Western theatre. In fact, Māori theatre could be described as an assimilation of Western theatre into a Māori perspective.

Significant events in history of Māori theatre

- 1965:** The New Zealand Opera Company staged the musical *Porgy and Bess* with a huge cast of Māori singers and actors. Inia Te Wiata and Don Selwyn were in that cast. "For a lot of us," says Don Selwyn, "it gave us a real focus about the impact of theatre." Then Inia Te Wiata started talking "about the stories we had to tell". From that the Māori Theatre Trust was born.
- 1976:** Rore Hapipi wrote *Death of the Land*, a play about the continuing signing away of Māori land in the Land Courts. It was performed in community halls and marae around the country.
- 1977:** Hone Tuwhare wrote *In the Wilderness without a Hat*. The central story is about the clash on a marae between those who follow traditional Māori values and those who have replaced these with imported religion. The community itself is lost – "in the wilderness without a hat" – because its members have lost track of their history. But the carvings in the meeting house come to life to tell them their history. The play had to wait till 1984 for a full theatre production. By then Don Selwyn had set up a training course for Māori – *Tamaki Creative Arts* – which provided a base for the theatre production.
- 1979:** *Maranga Mai* was created and toured the country – performed at marae, in the open air during protest marches and in school halls. This performance was group-devised, and consisted of a collage of songs, enactments and oratory that protested about the loss of land and the on-going cultural colonisation of young Māori. Ranginui Walker describes it as "guerrilla theatre" that was "a direct threat to Pākehā definitions of reality".
- 1980s:** A number of Māori co-operative theatre companies were formed, including Te Ohu Whakaari. They toured extensively to schools and marae. Later in the 1980s, the Depot Theatre in Wellington became the Taki Rua Depot with a commitment to producing Māori work. Still later it became simply Taki Rua, and a clearly

Māori theatre venue. Since then, Taki Rua continues as a Māori theatre production company, but has closed down its performance space.

For more details about these events, refer to pages 20–29 of the *History of Bicultural Theatre: mapping the terrain* by Janinka Greenwood. (Christchurch College of Education, Research Monograph Series – No. 1, 2002). Note: this very useful booklet can be purchased through Playmarket at www.playmarket.org.nz.

Issues in Māori theatre

Qualities of spirituality, and the role of tradition

When artists talk about what characterises Māori theatre, and Māori art in general, they identify the importance of spirituality. As Don Selwyn points out, “in Māori plays there can be baddies, but there is always that very strong spirituality” (Greenwood, 2002, p33). He explains that everything has a mauri (life force) that gives it a different value than a simply material one.

The spiritual dimension is not necessarily about religion – it is a recognition of the wairua (spirit) that surrounds and charges everything around us.

Language and the quality of voice is one way in which this spirituality can be recognised. Language determines what can be talked about and how it can be said. Bringing Māori language into the theatre makes it possible to create on stage a sense of the inner landscape of what it means to be Māori.

Even English spoken by Māori has particular nuances. It has its own colloquialisms and rhythms, its own pattern of silences. Recognition of the mauri of the characters involves finding and using their authentic language.

Recognition of spirituality and of the vital life force within people means that theatre cannot simply follow the externals of traditional forms. Māori artists often distinguish between fossilised traditions and living culture. Culture is about identity and community. Looking back to traditional forms is an important way of making connections with the history that shapes identity and community. However, the forms themselves become empty if they are not used to reflect the changes that occur in the experience of the people.

Culture is a living thing. It involves change. It is, however, the people themselves who have to drive the change – otherwise it becomes cultural colonisation.

Political correctness

While Māori writers want to present Māori in a positive light, they don't want to get stuck in superficial issues of being 'politically correct' ('PC').

Briar Grace-Smith talks about the pressure on Māori writers to be agents of positive social change – to be 'PC' – against the need to write true, vital stories:

It comes back to not being PC. I think, as a Māori person, it's really easy for us to buckle under pressure and write a too-good character that is very unreal. Or to say 'Oh look at Jake Heke' and say 'the damage!', because there's so many Jake Hekes now. What I don't want to do is start writing about unreal characters. I still want to write about people that I want to write about and not bow to that [pressure]. [from transcript of video interview with Briar Grace-Smith by Janinka Greenwood, 2002]

Neither Aggie Gray nor Mata in *Purapurawhetū* are exemplary characters. Mata, in particular, is a "real sleaze". Briar Grace-Smith explains:

I didn't really think about it until after I'd written [the play]. That was actually quite a risky thing to do. Until a couple of people said: 'But those people do exist – they're real!' So it's just about writing about your experiences. [from transcript of video interview with Briar Grace-Smith by Janinka Greenwood, 2002]

But she says that, because some of the inner lostness and confusion of Mata is captured in the characterisation, "You still feel for him".

Briar Grace-Smith contrasts her concerns as a writer with those of the pioneers in Māori theatre:

Early Māori theatre groups – like Maranga Mai – [had] a sense of urgency. They went out into the community with issues. Their plays are largely issue-driven and [have] a message to give to the people. [from transcript of video interview with Briar Grace-Smith by Janinka Greenwood, 2002]

In her own writing process, Briar Grace-Smith does not think initially about the audience or the message, but focuses on the truth of her own perception.

I don't like to think about the make-up of the audience that I'm trying to attract, because it could stifle my writing. I don't want to talk down to anyone either. If someone says to me: I want you to aim this at young people – gosh! I'm better just to write what I'm going to write that comes organically from me, and hopefully young people will get something out of that because suddenly you've got this big scary audience sitting in front of you and you think 'I'm going to have to connect with them'! Chances are you're going to anyway. [from transcript of video interview with Briar Grace-Smith by Janinka Greenwood, 2002]

Māori theatre or bicultural theatre?

In this context, there is a valid question to answer – are we talking about Māori theatre or bicultural theatre?

Both terms are frequently used, sometimes in different contexts. How does *Purapurawhetū* fit into these categories?

The answer is that it fits into both:

- It is clearly a Māori play – it's written by a Māori, it deals with Māori concerns, and it comes from a Māori perspective.
- It is also a bicultural play – it is part of a movement shifting the New Zealand framework of theatre out of the largely monocultural way of representing experience to one that is shaped by both Māori and Pākehā ways of seeing the world. It is bicultural because it brings a Māori perspective into mainstream theatre. It is bicultural because it invites both Māori and Pākehā to enter into the world it creates on stage.

Classroom activities: re-drawing the bicultural landscape

These activities are a way of weaving ourselves into the bicultural landscape and weaving the future of New Zealand theatre. The overall questions to consider are:

- How do we see ourselves in the bicultural landscape?
- How do we want to see our future?

Activity 1: Making a bicultural timeline

Devise a timeline for the development of bicultural theatre in New Zealand, placing on it not only the theatre events, but also the political and social events that are significant.

Activity 2: Re-drawing the bicultural landscape

Resources required: *Paper, paint and drawing equipment, OR a camera and access to outside spaces.*

Imagine the scripts of *Purapurawhetū* and *The Pohutukawa Tree* standing in a fairly bleak landscape. There is a rock and a clump of tussock, representing the natural elements of the earth. There is a fence representing both the partition of land and the division between peoples. The rest of the landscape is the concrete path and the buildings of an academic institution.

1. How would you design the bicultural landscape? How would your concept for it differ before and after working on the plays?
2. Draw/paint your version(s) of the bicultural landscape image, or represent it in an outside space and take photos. If you have access to a computer picture-editing program, you could combine elements from several images.

Activity 3: Weaving multicultural stories into the bicultural landscape – a ritual

Multiculturalism fits very comfortably with biculturalism. Multiculturalism acknowledges the wide range of cultures our New Zealand society comes from. Biculturalism recognised the role of the indigenous people of New Zealand as well as the immigrants. As people of multicultural origins, we all need to find ways of fitting in to the bicultural landscape.

Resources required: (1) Strips of material, or rope, a few metres long. One for each person in the group.
(2) A structure at the centre of the room to which the strips can be attached.

1. Working individually, prepare a story of how you came to be part of this bicultural landscape. (The story may be a story of your or your ancestors' arrival in New Zealand, or it may be a story of some time when you felt a particular connection with a place or a part of the land.)
2. Having prepared your story, find a phrase or a line of a song that captures the essence of your story.
3. Form a circle with your fellow students, holding the fabric or rope in your hands. Tell your story to the group.
4. While repeating the line of song or the phrase you chose (in 2 above), attach your strip of fabric or rope to the central structure in a ritualistic manner.

Discovering sightlines

'Sightlines' is a term that is being increasingly used in contemporary theatrical theory. It refers to the fact that every work in theatre, both in terms of writing and production, comes from a specific point of view – it is never all-encompassing and universal. The point of view is focused by the maker's background, experience, cultural framework and knowledge.

So in looking at a work of theatre, it is significant to ask the following questions:

- What sightlines are involved?
- Whose point of view does the work come from?
- Whose story is being told on the stage?

Purapurawhetū is a story about passions, conflicts and longings that are universal – love, loss of a child, envy, desire for power, revenge, and the longing for restitution and regeneration.

However, as well as being universal, the story unfolds within a Māori framework. All the characters are Māori. The action involves events and concerns that are distinctively relevant to Māori:

- Hohepa searches for pāua;
- city-raised Ramari tries to find her identity on the marae;
- weavings are being completed for the opening of the new house;
- there is a struggle over land, leadership and mana;
- a tāonga has been wrongfully taken;
- a name has been withheld;
- an ohākī brings an old woman back.

The final resolution is one that grows out of a Māori sense of spirituality.

In addition, Māori language is used, as is chant and movement from Māori performing traditions. So the sightlines in *Purapurawhetū* are strongly Māori.

Classroom activities: exploring sightlines and finding limits to our knowledge systems

The following three activities are offered as 'ways in' to an understanding of the ideas that accompany a discussion of biculturalism. They are intended to raise consciousness about our perception.

Activity 4: Discovering sightlines

- 1.** In small groups, discuss the plays you have seen or studied this year to find the gender or cultural focuses that shaped their sightlines.

- 2.** In small groups, discuss what makes a play into a Māori play. What sightlines do you think are specifically Māori? Discuss your group's findings with the whole class.

Activity 5: What I hear

- 1.** Stand in a circle, with eyes closed. Students will be able to hear each other, and perhaps sense each others' movements, but not see what the others are doing.
- 2.** Taking turns around the circle, each person says their name, while playing with the sound of it and allowing their body to move as spontaneously as possible to the sound. Let the movement flow out of the sound, rather than coming through conscious decision.
- 3.** After hearing the sound, the rest of the group – still with eyes closed – copies the sound and the movement.

Students doing this exercise often find that they become increasingly willing to rely on their intuition instead of trying to 'get it right'. When they check with each other, they find that, although the movement they performed as a copy may have been physically different from the original, it often had very similar energy.

Activity 6: What I see/don't see

This exercise is done in pairs. The first time, perhaps only one pair might work while the others watch. Later several pairs might work at once.

1. The first person in the pair moves freely anywhere in the room, in any style. (To start with, it may be easier not to move too fast.)
2. The second person follows, starting a few metres behind the first, and copying the movements exactly as long as they can be seen.
3. When the first person moves out of the sightline of their partner, the partner stops and does not move again until the first person has come back into sight. (The exercise becomes stronger if the partner keeps eyes centred, and focuses on copying rather than anticipating.)
4. The rest of the group watches, noting the gaps in the follower's movement.

Experiencing sightlines

Sometimes it is necessary for the teacher to draw the group's attention to the turns of the head and the body that remove the partner out of sight. At first students may anticipate their partner's turns, but as they focus on centring their eyes and stopping whenever they can not see their partner, the gaps in movement become more marked.

If we follow only the movement of the follower, we see only fragments of the first person's movement – so there are gaps in the narrative, where significant sections of the story are, as it were, erased.

This understanding can be applied to the idea of cultural, or gender, perspectives. We can only report what we perceive. When things happen out of our view, we don't know about them. What we report may give a limited, or even false, account of what really happens.