Performing Aotearoa in an Age of Transition

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Over the last three decades of the twentieth century, theatre and drama in Aotearoa/New Zealand have experienced remarkable growth. This anthology of essay attempts to document the diversity of these multiple dramatic voices, as they reflect the evolving New Zealand identity in an age of transition moving towards twenty-first century globalization. This volume comprises a wide range of essays analyzing how, in the past thirty to forty years, New Zealand identity has been increasingly performed as what Stuart Hall describes as a perpetual process of change (Hall 392-403). At the dawn of the twenty-first century, New Zealand identity evades the rigid imperialistic, exclusively Pākehā discourses of the past to extend into a fruitful hybridization of different races, classes and genders.

This extraordinary productivity of the New Zealand stage has not received its full scholarly recognition thus far, nor has the drama of Aotearoa been granted its rightful place in the official canon of English-language playwriting. We cannot offer an exhaustive review of all the critical literature about New Zealand drama in this short introduction. Notable pioneering efforts to increase the visibility of New Zealand playwriting include Peter Harcourt’s *A Dramatic Appearance. New Zealand Theatre, 1920-1970* (1978), John Thomson’s *New Zealand Drama, 1930-1980* (1984), as well as Howard McNaughton’s seminal study of the work of one of the founding fathers of New Zealand drama in his 1976 monograph *Bruce Mason*. Nonetheless, McNaughton’s more comprehensive book, *New Zealand Drama* (1981), offers a more thorough historical survey of the pre-1981 period. McNaughton subsequently published an important updated overview of the history of New Zealand drama in Terry Sturm’s *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English* (1998). In the same year, David Carnegie wrote a chapter about New Zealand theatre since 1945 in Don Rubin’s *The World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre* (Vol. 5: Asia/Pacific). In 1999, Christopher Balme published his groundbreaking *Decolonizing the Stage. Theatrical Syncretism and Post-Colonial Drama,*
Performing Aotearoa which contains a significant analysis of Māori performance devices. More recently, Veronica Kelly guest edited a special issue of *Theatre Research International* on Australasian drama, which comprised three major contributions about New Zealand theatre (2001). Maufort’s 2003 *Transgressive Itineraries. Postcolonial Hybridizations of Dramatic Realism* included chapters on mainstream, multicultural, and Māori drama at the end of the twentieth century. In addition, essays about New Zealand drama have regularly appeared in the journal *Australasian Drama Studies* since it first began to appear. Nonetheless, the editors of this volume felt that a comprehensive collection of essays about the recent developments on the New Zealand stage was lacking. *Performing Aotearoa* therefore seeks to offer a broad range of perspectives on the history of New Zealand theatre and drama in the past forty years or so, combining dramatic, theatrical, historical, gender studies, and dramaturgical perspectives. Scholarly essays are counterpointed by statements by or interviews with prominent artists, which the editors hope will provide a wealth of resource material for any one interested in pursuing further research.

Opening with O’Donnell’s introductory historical analysis of how late twentieth century New Zealand drama has enacted changing Kiwi identities, the volume offers a trio of essays centering on theatrical issues. Balme’s contribution examines the formation of a Pan-Polynesian identity at the New Zealand International Exhibition in Christchurch in 1906-07. Edmond’s essay concentrates on the legacy of “Autonomous theatre” on New Zealand dramaturgical practice during the period 1970-75. It locates its roots in the international influence of such theatre practitioners as Lecoq and Grotowski, while focusing on such companies as Amamus and Theatre Action. Edmond shows how this tradition is continued in the more recent work of Red Mole or Indian Ink, discussed elsewhere in the volume. Tweddle sheds light on physical theatre training as “flow” at the leading Toi Whakaari: New Zealand Drama School, drawing from her interview with tutor Tom McCrory.

This theatrical section is followed by essays in dramatic literature, predominantly, but not exclusively, about Pākehā playwrights. Contributions collected in this section show the continuity between the tradition established by the founding fathers of New Zealand drama and contemporary artists. Williams’s analysis of Robert Lord’s use of the food metaphor as a means of advocating interaction with marginalized racial, class or gender groups invites a reassessment of an important Pākehā playwright whose career began in the 1970s. Peterson’s examination of the evolution of the dramatic monologue as an expression of an evolving Kiwi identity encompasses the work of such writers as Bruce Mason, Mervyn Thompson, Briar Grace-Smith, Jacob Rajan, Lynda Chanwai-Earle, Toa Fraser, and Dianna Fuemana, playwrights
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also considered elsewhere in the volume from different perspectives. Maufort’s consideration of family structures in three significant works by Pākehā playwrights Stephen Sinclair, Ken Duncum, and Gary Henderson, is counterpointed by interviews with Ken Duncum and Gary Henderson. Young’s study of transvestism in New Zealand drama explores gender issues in works by David Geary, Lorae Parry, Greg McGee and Jean Betts, whose interview constitutes a useful companion to this scholarly approach.

A further group of essays centers around the significant Māori Renaissance on the New Zealand stage, which emerged in the 1970s. Royal’s study of whare tapere ceremonials examines pre-contact performative traditions. He explains how they are incorporated in Orotokare, a non-profit organization dedicated to indigenous performing arts and theatre. An interview with Rangimoana Taylor offers insights into the theatre practice of one of the major artistic figures of Māori theatre. A dialogic essay by Carnegie and O’Donnell explores the controversial notion of Māori dramaturgy in the hybrid aesthetic of Hone Kouka’s groundbreaking Nga Tangata Toa, while documenting its relationship with its Western source, Ibsen’s The Vikings at Helgeland. A statement by playwright Kouka subsequently examines the new avenues which seem to open up for Māori theatre in this new decade. Maufort’s essay concentrates on the nuances of magic realism in Briar Grace-Smith’s recent productions, including The Sojourns of Boy (co-authored with Jo Randerson), Haruru Mai, and Potiki’s Memory of Stone. This scholarly view is counterbalanced by O’Donnell’s interview with Briar Grace-Smith. Mazer’s contribution explores the hybrid aesthetics of the “Atamira Dance Collective” as a conclusion to this Māori section.

Falkenberg’s “Theatre of Unease,” with its provocative discussion of New Zealand identity, constitutes an apt transition into the next part of the volume, which deals with the dramatic developments recording the new expansion of Kiwi identity beyond the binary Pākehā-Māori model. O’Donnell opens this section with a discussion of family structures in immigrant Samoan drama, focusing on the work of playwrights such as Rodger, Wendt, Urale, Kightley and Small. Warrington discusses the broad spectrum of Asian drama in Aotearoa, exploring works by Lynda Chanwai-Earle, Sonia Yee, Jacob Rajan, Those Indian Guys and The Untouchables. Her piece is usefully complemented by interviews with Lynda Chanwai-Earle and Jacob Rajan. Asian elements also resurge in Davies’s account of how Noh theatre shaped his own theatre practice. As a conclusion to this section, Farrimond’s essay documents how the Māori art of facial tattooing, Moko, is echoed in the use of masks in solo performance works by Rajan, Divers and Davies. A general conclusion to the book is offered by Dunleavy’s analysis of the construction of a
national identity in locally-produced television drama, a popular medium clearly oriented towards the future of performative communication, despite the commercial challenges it inevitably implies.

All in all, the essays collected in this anthology illustrate the throes of identities in transition enacted in the diverse dramaturgies of contemporary Aotearoa. The syncretic predicament represented in the plays discussed in this anthology, as well as their hybrid aesthetic, will hopefully shed light on an hitherto neglected field of English-language drama. By extension, the depiction of contemporary New Zealand theatre and drama this volume seeks to offer will hopefully provide new vistas from which to study the postcolonial condition in the wider context of the contemporary Commonwealth.

Works Cited