

The Theatre of Te Rakau Hua O Te Wao Tapu and the Politics of Change

By

Alan Scott

National Academy of Singing and Dramatic Art

I first met Jim Moriarty when I was sent by the Christchurch Press to review Kia Maumahara at the Christchurch Women's Prison. I was impressed enough to offer my services as a voice tutor. Since then I have worked as a dialogue coach and voice tutor on sixteen of Jim's productions and eventually became a Trustee of his Company. What follows is not an academic analysis of the work of the Te Rakau Theatre Company, but an attempt by someone who is on the inside, but also reviews theatre from the outside, to explore some of the dimensions of Te Rakau's work and locate it in a wider context. More specifically, I am concerned to show the political elements that exist in the work. For all the talk of Maori theatre and rehabilitative theatre that surrounds Te Rakau, for me first and foremost, its work is a sterling defense of the "children of the poor," to use John A. Lee's phrase. What the theatre does is offer the dispossessed a voice and reveals to the audience the dark face of the capitalist economic system. While the theatre belongs to Te Rakau, these musings are my own. This is basically how I see the work.

The work of the Maori theatre in education company, Te Rakau Hua O Te Wao Tapu, is well known in New Zealand. Led by Jim Moriarty, the company works in prisons, youth justice centres and in the community, employing techniques from group therapy, anger management and addiction therapy to enable participants to present public theatre about their lives to a paying audience. Using Maori ritual, the company breaks with the cultural form of conventional Western theatre to produce a bicultural theatre practice.

In many respects Te Rakau is one of New Zealand's theatrical success stories. Despite a frequently hand to mouth existence it presents its productions to thousands of people each year, whether they are patrons of Arts Festivals who have to go into a prison to watch its distinctive brand of a theatre of cruelty, or whether they are school students who pack into gymnasiums to see people of their own age reenact life on the dark side of the hill. There can never have been a theatre company in New Zealand, or anywhere else for that matter, that has so moved its audiences to tears, for Te Rakau is the theatre where the lost and the damned reveal the pain of lives lived in a manner most of us can hardly comprehend. The productions are heart wrenching and disturbing, for we are dealing with often desperate people in appalling circumstances. At the same time, though, we know that these are not voices from some distant shore. They live around the corner or are a twenty minute drive from our nice, safe neighbourhood.

What makes Te Rakau's theatre so distinctive is the neat reversal of the convention which is at the heart of theatre for in Te Rakau actors are not pretending to be real people, rather real people are doing their best to be actors. People from the other side of the tracks act out the stories of their lives. In doing this they draw the audience into their world, but

achieve their own awareness by distancing themselves from it. This gives us both engrossing drama and transformational therapy. As Jean Paul Sartre said, "Human life begins at the far side of despair" and Te Rakau's theatre triumphs precisely because it reveals the pain and transcendence of such a philosophy.

The three prison productions in Christchurch, Kia Maumahara and Watea at the women's prison and Te Timatanga Hou at the men's, had an immense effect on their audiences. Unquestionably, people left after the shows in an altered emotional state. The plays were sojourns in the underworld, glimpses into the abyss for which most of them, paying their mortgages and going about their daily business, were not prepared. As the prisoners call into consciousness acts of bludgeoning violence and fearful degradation what becomes unbearable is the realisation that the actors are not playing roles but bearing witness to the destruction of their childhoods. They become, before the audience's eyes, yet another stolen generation, a band of little ones society was supposed to protect,. The one consolation left to the audiences is that the productions are also therapeutic processes which carry with them the hope of recuperation and rehabilitation.

It is this, perhaps more than anything else that connects with the audiences who watch Te Rakau's disturbing and explicit theatre; this sense of rebirth, of people whose lost souls are being born again. William Wordsworth expressed the promise of new life when he said:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting
The soul that rises with us, our life's star
Hath had elsewhere its setting
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God who is our home.

For Wordsworth being born is being born again. What he is alluding to here is the sense of possibility, of the potential inherent in all people as they begin their life. The baby has a chance to become "fully human" to use Paolo Freire's term. For Wordsworth this gift of hope, a gift from god, is the heart of the human condition. Te Rakau's productions succeed with audiences because they seem to return the participants back to the beginning, to a land of possibility, to a world of light.

At the same time what also impresses the audiences is that the theatre of Te Rakau Hua O Te Wao Tapu is consciously Maori theatre. It is not white theatre where racial issues are played out. It is self consciously and uncompromisingly marae theatre. Its use of karanga, waiata and haka helps to focus the actors, but it also announces the break with the cultural form of conventional theatre, and indicates to the audience the speaker's rights they will enjoy at the end of the play. While it is marae theatre it incorporates traditional elements from Western Theatre to produce a truly bicultural theatre experience. It is this

blending of certain elements of western theatre with Maori tikanga that makes Te Rakau's work so striking. The theatre draws on elements of Brecht's ensemble style, political theatre and Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, but to this it adds the Maori dimension of the whanau which makes it unique.

Over and above its explicit intention to heal and rehabilitate individuals, Te Rakau is also making a statement about the importance of political theatre which is meant to challenge our traditional notions of Western theatre. Political theatre is not about the well made play and dry white wine at the interval; it aims to alter the conventions of writing and viewing. While it is all too easy to stigmatise theatre as high culture for the well to do, and while there are playwrights like Tony Kushner, for example, whose politics are uncompromising, a sense of theatre as a museum where we find ourselves exhibited is hard to shake off.

Political theatre takes several forms. It can take a stance and be polemical, a theatre of protest. It can raise issues and explain: a theatre of education. Or it can give a voice to the silent, the unheard and the down trodden: a theatre of the oppressed. Lastly, it can take its plays into, and make them among, the community: a theatre of the people. While the productions are anything but polemical, they engage in all the other approaches to a politics of performance.

The integration of the alienation techniques of Bertolt Brecht, the most influential and the most political director of the twentieth century, is clearly evident in the theatre of Te Rakau. For Brecht both the actors and the audience had to go beyond mere emotional feeling or response. They had to distance themselves from the content of the play so they could come to assess or judge it. As he put it: "Epic Theatre turns the spectator into an observer, but arouses his capacity for action, forces him to take decisions... the spectator stands outside, studies." (Brecht, 1964) The three key elements of theatre – the text, the presentation and the audience – would be unified through a method of playing which brought out the social and economic base of human life as opposed to the merely psychological dimension. Like all of Brecht's theatre Te Rakau questions the notion of individual responsibility, rather seeing human action as a complex interplay between the personal and the socio-political. Personal, dysfunctional behaviour is analysed within the contexts of race, class and gender issues. The question for the audience is what is happening within civil society that allows people to learn to kill, rape, prostitute themselves, steal, lie and cheat? What Te Rakau's prison theatre reveals is that the old structure versus agency debate is at the heart of any analysis

Traditional theatre consciously explores the human condition, that essence of soul or spirit that helps or hinders us in our journey through the cosmos. For Brecht, it was the material reality of people's lives under the capitalist mode of production that was the key. The human condition was itself derived from the conditions humans lived in. Bourgeois theatre, for Brecht, was shot through with bourgeois ideology, but it never made this plain. This ideology was hidden between the lines of the text, built into the fabric of the

theatre itself, into the way plays were presented, and into the whole process of production.

Hence the need for a new style of playing, for a theatre that was artistically honest and politically revolutionary. Bourgeois theatre, as he saw it, was not neutral but reactionary. The new theatre of the working class must take sides. While many New Zealanders might balk at the idea that Te Rakau is the new theatre of the working class, it is unquestionably the theatre of the underclass, the lumpenproletariat in Marx's terms and it does take sides. It is also certainly true that if the participants in Te Rakau's productions have in common the fact that they are Maori, they equally have in common backgrounds of poverty and deprivation. From Brecht's point of view traditional theatre, which he called "a bourgeois narcotics factory", internalised in the characters of a play the conflicts built into a capitalist society. It expressed as psychological states what were really social states. The problem was that it took these psychological states at face value; it never once revealed them for what they really were. The purpose of Te Rakau's theatre is to precisely reveal what psychological states really are. Indeed, Brecht's concept of *gestus* is explicit in the way the "actors" play their parts. The fact that the "actors" have probably never heard of Brecht or *gestus* makes it all the more intriguing.

A key element of Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed underpins Te Rakau. For Boal conventional theatre is a monologue which gives all the power to the actor and needs to be replaced by a dialogue between spectator and performer. Boal's theatre literally assigns parts to the audience whereas Te Rakau gives audience members the opportunity to converse with and question the actors.

Historically, middle class audiences and liberal academic commentators have rejected the insistent theatrical message if it was utopian, in other words socialist. The development of a theatrical or any other art form in the western liberal democracies has happened simultaneously with the development of the concept of a plurality of positions. Thus, the contribution of theatre to politics has centered not on creating the paradise at the end of the rainbow, the vivid re-enactment of a specific political dream, but rather on establishing a means for the free dissemination of all ideas whether political, moral, religious or otherwise. While theatre may not, in a truly political sense, be said to be radical we should not underestimate its commitment to the cause of free speech.

A free theatre, like a free press, is a fundamental requirement in an enlightened, democratic society. As parliaments increasingly turn to mud slinging and witch hunting a chamber where ideas can be debated vigorously, honestly and openly seems ever more essential. In New Zealand, to take an example, the furore that greeted Cabinet Minister Tariana Turia's statements about the treatment over the years of the indigenous Maori demonstrates the danger of closed debate in western societies when neither parliamentarians nor media commentators seem able to speak with a free, unmoderated voice. She talked of a Maori holocaust and while her choice of the word "holocaust" might be arguably inappropriate her essential thesis that history has a long hand seems worthy of discussion and not derision.

Coincidentally, Martin McDonagh's play, the Beauty Queen of Leenane, which tackled this very thesis, was doing the rounds as the political controversy blew up. Exactly what any author means by his play is always open to argument, but it seems clear from the opening dialogue about the English being "the crux of the matter" that McDonagh is suggesting, or at least hinting, that a barbarous colonisation process will live on in the twisted, brutal even psychotic psyches of generations to come.

It seems a fairly unexceptional claim to make and it is particularly ironic, in the case of the New Zealand parliamentarian, that she was castigated for speaking her mind about the effects of history. For the propensity to speak one's mind is not merely a psychological disposition. It is equally an historical construction, built solidly in our collective consciousness by events like the French Revolution.

McDonagh was exercising his right to speak, for playwrights, like university lecturers, are entitled to academic freedom. It is the boldness with which they display this freedom that often leads them into controversy. The university enshrines the life of the mind, but the theatre depends on the life of the imagination and it is the audacious, imaginative response to the world that sets the tongues wagging.

Edward Bond, in his 1966 play, Saved, trotted out a well worn thesis about the alienatory effects of the class structure in capitalist societies. It was his symbolisation of this theme in the stoning of a baby on stage that caused an uproar which led to the banning of the play. The point, of course, is that an image for Bond is worth a thousand lines of rational thought.

A strength of theatre is its ability to instantaneously pierce through the cotton wool our minds are wrapped in, but the result is often pain, or shock or anguish. The ending of John Broughton's play, Michael James Manaia, made the audience want to crawl under their seats as they realise the awful truth, that the protagonist of the play, a veteran of the Vietnam war, is cutting off the deformed head of his baby. The desperate gesture was thankfully painted in words and not enacted on the stage, but it was painfully harrowing, nonetheless.

There are, of course, plays that are overtly political in the sense that they self consciously aim to raise social issues rather than directly probe psychological matters or simply entertain. David Mamet's Oleanna, for example, dealt with sexual harassment, Ariel Dorfman's Death and the Maiden with the problem of forgiveness in societies where political violence was rife while David Hare's play, Skylight, attacked the Thatcherite notion of enterprise culture. We should not underestimate either the ability of, or the necessity for, theatre to polarise for us in a stunning clarity some of the central debates of our age. There is nothing quite like theatre for making the mind think.

A play like Skylight, though, highlights a key argument many critics make about theatre when they assert that the play is an exception that proves the rule. They wonder where famous dramatists like Tom Stoppard were during the Thatcher years. With audiences

guaranteed by their previous successes and undoubted talents did these writers not have a responsibility to deal with the very issues that were on everyone else's lips?

The mistake in following this line of argument is to assume the uninhibited creative response will also sit with an equally uninhibited political response. The fact is that is that while people in theatre might happily shed their clothes in public they are no more likely than anyone else to shed their blinkers.

What is interesting about Te Rakau's work is that the shedding of the blinkers is its modus operandi. The theatre is political theatre, challenging actors and audiences to analyse where the responsibility for crime lies, to try and see the world for what it is. Like John McGrath's 4711 theatre Te Rakau takes an issue to the community, but goes one step beyond for it then takes the community to the very site of the issue. It takes their twenty dollar bills, pens them up in a dismal corridor, and then leads them through a thickly barred grille into the gymnasium of the prison. There Te Rakau goes as far, perhaps, as it is possible for political theatre to go, for what it presents to the audience are not actors performing a play, but people playing themselves; the angry, the violent and the feared recast as the hurt and the maimed, owning their guilt, but asking a painfully political question. Where were you when our childhood was taken away?

References

- Bond E. (2000) *Saved*. Methuen.
- Brecht B. (1964). *Brecht on Theatre*. 37. New York: Hill & Yang.
- Broughton J. (1994) *Michael James Manaia*. University of Otago.
- Dorfman A. (1994) *Death and the Maiden*. Penguin.
- Hare D. (1997) *Skylight*. Samuel French.
- Mamet D (1993) *Oleanna*. Methuen.
- McDonagh M. (1996) *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*. Methuen.
- Sartre J (1989) The Flies in *No Exit and Three Other Plays*. Vintage.
- Wordsworth, W. Ode: Intimation of Immortality from *Recollections of Early Childhood*.