The Pohutukawa Tree at Panguru

A report on a site-specific 'promenade' performance in a Te Rarawa community

by

Hilari Anderson

The play, the Pohutakawa Tree by Bruce Mason, was produced by Mina Pomare-Peita, the Principal of a Northland Area School, Te Kura Taumata o Panguru, with some directing support from Hilari Anderson, freelancing in 2005 and currently Chair of the Auckland region of Drama New Zealand, Mahi Whakaari o Aotearoa. In 2006, Hilari Anderson is a teacher of senior Drama at Auckland’s, Diocesan School for Girls.

The content of this report comes from an e-mailed interview with the Principal/Producer (extracts in italics); on-going discussion between the guest director and Mina Pomare-Peita; observations of a part of the rehearsal process; student journals, the programme; a video clip and digital photos of the performances on November 9 and 10, 2005.

In Term 4 2005, Mina Pomare invited Hilari Anderson to North Hokianga for three days. The purpose was to help her senior students move Bruce Mason's classic text off the page into a theatre performance. Mina had already been working with her Year 12 English students on The Pohutukawa Tree, about the value of land, explored through the interplay of cultural, religious and generational tensions.

This play was chosen by Mina, 'because the issues were still relevant for us as Maori... the students... warmed to it. The Roy McDowell and Queenie bits my students found funny and real at the same time. And the Aroha – Queenie pregnant revelation scene was also well received. (See video clip). So, well, I had to see what we could do with this play and develop their understanding by really close reading ... as I had them all so keen...'

On first going into the main entrance to the school, one notices the prominent display of both a taiaha and a picture frame of 'Jesu'. The key props of the play, representing the Mataira's home, have long been a focus in the school's foyer. Thus the symbols of Whetumarama and Christianity are already embedded in the Maori Catholic community. This welcoming wooden veranda also features on the school's website. (www.panguru.school.nz). It seems to invite a site-specific staging of The Pohutukawa Tree, with its range of exits and entrances: to the beach, stage right; to the orchards, stage left.

After two day's intensive work on the play, we did a 'dress-rehearsal' on this site, using what was available in terms of costumes, set and light; simplicity from a 'performance technology' perspective. This run-through was a chance to check on the play of natural light in the late spring early evening and to get a perspective of the whole show in action. Even at this stage, the performance was holding together as a drama, despite Johnny falling off a large, live horse and Sedgewick picking up the script for the first time.

From this rehearsal, we noted that the students needed to work more 'downstage', using the levels of the steps, and that the Act 1 scene changes would flow better if the 'wedding' shifted from the front of the veranda to a canopied lunch area, 'al fresco' style, with covered trestle tables, bows and all, set up by the busy production crew. Mina thought through the logistics of this set change and realized that it was easier to 'promenade' the audience as guests to the 'marquee' so the stage hands could adjust the veranda set during the ceremony. Then they could clean up after the 'feast' once the audience followed the Morris Minor honeymoon car, with its 'Just Married' sign and a trail of white painted cans, back to the drive and
the veranda, adapted for Act 2.

The Panguru community knows how to put on a good show for a wedding. 'Kaumatua Bob' opened the ceremony with a mihimihi and the guests got a chance to toast the bride and groom and to eat the wedding cake. The speeches were delivered with confidence and the songs with style: Aroha's waiata, Queenie's pop tune and Johnny's drunken version of “You are my sunshine” interrupting Bertha's operatic number, delivered with aplomb by the Principal herself. (See photo). As the formalities disintegrated, the production crew enjoyed yelling out responses, in role as unruly guests. This proved to be a favourite scene for many locals.

Mina knows her students well, shown in her astute casting. (See programme) It is difficult to find a 16 year old who can take on the mana of Aroha's role. Mina gave this opportunity to a young woman who developed a focused, staunch performance, helped by using her grandmother as a role model. Aroha's son was played with stroppy energy and humour by another young woman who had the physical bravado to gallop into the first stage entrance from 'the beach', bareback and cowboy-hatted, on a horse from a nearby paddock.

Two weeks before the performance, the netballer playing Sedgewick, was off school with a shoulder sprain so this was a chance for staff-member, Brother Bryan, to get involved, a matter of shifting from Marist priest to Anglican Minister. He took on the challenge with serious intent and complemented the young cast with a mature presence in this moral messenger role.

Apart from 'Kaumatua Bob', other adults were invited to participate at significant points. At the end of the play, when Aroha dies, two kuia from the community, heightened this moment by wailing, as if at a real tangi, bringing the emotional journey of the play to a compelling finale. Mina commented that, the students are brought up with this custom so were not fazed by it and the audience know these two women as the real deal on the marae anyway'. The authenticity of such ritual made this performance of the play convincing, not just the death of Aroha and the formalities of a wedding breakfast, but also the informal teenage ritual of Queenie and Roy flirting.

Other adults in the community contributed to the preparations of the play. For example, a local artist, Mina’s ex-student, worked on the design challenge of how to lower the pohutukawa branch over the veranda before Act 3. The local 'op shop' came up with some classic 'mid-last-century' outfits, including the wedding dress. The bridal pair looked stunning and the core cast used the wedding as an excuse for a 'smarter' costume change. (See photographs).

Generous collaboration was evident during the process of this production, especially with the students helping each other learn lines. Smith (1998) says that, ‘to be able to share, to have something worth sharing, gives dignity to the giver. To accept a gift and to reciprocate gives dignity to the receiver. To create something new through that process of sharing is to recreate the old, to reconnect relationships and to recreate our humanness.’ (p.105)

As the guest director, it was a treat to talk through aspects of the play with such a passionate teacher and planner as Mina Pomare-Peita. We discussed the feasibility of adapting the text from Te Parenga after the Second World War to Panguru in 2005. However, we felt that the original context still speaks strongly so we just edited some of the speeches for manageability, as her students were not used to acting lengthy roles.

The students were enthusiastic about the new experience of doing drama warm ups and focused on interpreting the play with fresh energy. They discussed the racism and teenage pregnancy issues and made thematic links with the Ngati Te Rarawa court-case over the Wairea land claim. They were receptive to activities such as exploring the world of the characters through creative visualization. And, most of all, they took seriously the extensive written journal requirements for achieving NCEA Drama. The significant roles of Aroha, Queenie, Johnny and Clive Atkinson gave them the opportunity to achieve Level 2. Other members of the cast and the production crew had the opportunity to achieve Level 1.
Mina comments that her students, 'gained a lot of confidence… ‘they shocked themselves that they could learn so many lines…’ The community feedback was awesome. They thought ‘the students acted so well…’, ‘they were really funny…’, ‘really involved…’, ‘they suited their parts…’, ‘it was so different to see them doing something else in a performance role and not just kapahaka’…. ‘which is what most of us are used to seeing our students doing…’.

Here are some overall journal reflections from the Year 11 student who played the small role of Claude Johnson:

‘Well, I didn't believe I would have enjoyed playing Claude as I wasn't very interested in the play but the more I got to know my lines and the story, I started to get into it. I felt really good after our performances and I think it was because I had a lot of support and confidence and also good vibes before and after our performances. Every time our cast did a scene or a run-through, we would all start with the ‘warm-ups’ and prayers, followed by a speech of positivity and wisdom by Whaea Mina. All I can say is that if anyone asked me to be a cast member in The Pohutukawa Tree play again I'll do it all over in a heartbeat.’

So the fortnight before the two public performances, the students continued their commitment to warm-ups, such as ‘The Greeks’ as a vocal exercise. They took to heart the ancient karakia, “I am but a humble actor, who offers the work to the world and to the Gods”. Their world is Panguru and the “the Gods” and the Far North sunshine smiled on their performance. ‘Bruce Mason would have been proud’, is one comment from Queenie's mum, who had typically studied The Pohutukawa Tree for School Certificate English:

Ironically, Bruce Mason's texts have recently resurfaced in national NCEA assessments. The Pohutukawa Tree is used as an exemplar for the Level 3 Drama ‘class production’, Achievement Standard 3.5, version 3, published in November 2005. The world of Te Parenga also features in Part A of the external 2005 Level 2.6 exam, where the three extracts from the solo work, The End of the Golden Weather, have caused some controversy due to 'the choice of text'. Bruce Mason wrote The Pohutukawa Tree over fifty years ago; it has yet to reach the half-life of the tree itself. However, the Panguru production has shown a fresh vigorous branch blooming in the Hokianga whenua. Meanwhile, with the new growth of Maori plays by Maori playwrights, such as Briar Grace-Smith, the future for indigenous theatre looks promising.

Most of the students' drama journals speak positively of “the next time”. The rewards of this learning experience anticipate their collective potential in creating a class drama “next year”. Meanwhile, Mina is considering the site of the local Catholic Church, rich in the culture of her whanau and iwi…poetry readings? …a Mystery Cycle or a Morality play? And Shakespearean characters have long inhabited the curriculum of this area school. Will King Lear come down from the local mountain and face hubris in the manuka 'heath' below? How about 'promenading the audience even further, maybe a hikoi to the foreshore of Mitimiti for a site-specific performance of Hone Kouka's Waiora? The students sound like they are ready for their next theatrical challenge.

Kia ora, Te Kura Taumata o Panguru... Personally, I don't want to miss “this next time”.

Footnote

The Pohutukawa Tree was written by Bruce Mason in January-February 1955, and first presented at the New Zealand Players Theatre Workshop, 247 Adelaide Road, Wellington, on 1st August, 1957, for four performances. (Bruce Mason played Dr Lomas). The play was also produced for BBC Television in 1959 and for the New Zealand Broadcasting Service in 1960.

References