Waiora – A Circle Of Stones Under Maungawhau

by

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The Personal and the Professional Journey – Into the Wind

Waiora ¹ by Maori playwright, Hone Kouka, was performed by a Year 13 Drama class at Epsom Girls Grammar School as part of its class work, with an all-female cast 29-31 August 2005. Year 13 represents the final year of study in the New Zealand educational system.

The instigation of the Arts in The New Zealand Curriculum makes it possible for New Zealand secondary school students to study Drama as a subject from Years 9 -13 ². In doing so they work towards achieving an internal standards-based assessment called The National Certificate in Educational Achievement. ³ Students studying Drama from Years 11-13 engage in high-stakes risk-taking by creating a public performance for assessment at national level. The play, Waiora, provides material which allows for analysis and interpretation of a scripted text to support students sitting an end-of-year written drama examination; Achievement Standard 3.4 (90610) NCEA drama level 3. It engages socio-political theory and post-colonial perspectives.

“The year is 1965. A Maori family, recently migrated to the South Island from the North Island’s East Cape, prepares to celebrate a birthday with their Pakeha guests. Yet origins cannot easily be forgotten.”⁴ This is the plot outline of the play, Wairoa.

My journey towards directing Kouka’s work was fed by writing curriculum and qualifications materials and through the teaching of drama for 20 years. It was deepened by a ‘culture of forgetting’ which involved adoptions within my own family and revealed a ‘shadow whanau’ (family) with whom we have made connection in recent years. The personal discovery, that my cultural heritage included someone of Maori descent, together with the requirements of my own professional work, have meant that ideas of loss of identity, moving away and coming from elsewhere have taken on a special significance. In 2005 I visited and stayed at Parihaka, (an important Maori site in spiritual terms) as part of a teaching fellowship that took me to New York, London, Barcelona and Bangkok looking at theatre and technology. Parihaka for me is a site that engages dialogue over the nature of passive resistance in Aotearoa and affirms the process of struggle to locate my own identity in a post-colonial society. It becomes both a physical place and a sign in that process.

Some of my poetry, (www.nzpoetsonline.homestead.com/) connects to the wairua (spirit) of that visit. I also wrote about Parihaka and was filmed during the investigation as part of a unit of work in Elizabeth Anderson’s Drama resource called, ‘Sharing our Stories’.⁵ The resource explores the concept of passive resistance as it was expressed by the Maori prophets, Te Whiti, Tohu and the residents of Parihaka in Taranaki during the late nineteenth century. www.tki.org.nz

Embarking On A Cross-Cultural, Cross-Gender Production

One of the results of developing a Drama Curriculum has been a growth in the number of community theatres and drama facilities interfacing schools and their communities.⁶ Epsom Girls Grammar School is a state (public) girls school in Central Auckland. In 2005 the school opened a modern community facility filled with useful technology: the Raye Freedman Arts Centre. www.eggsevents.org.nz

The cast consisted of thirteen 15-17 year old young women. Characters include: Hone (the father), Wai (Su) (the mother), Amiria (the elder sister), Rongo (the younger sister whose name translates as ‘peace’), Boyboy, (the abused son), Louise Stones,(pakeha teacher), Steve (Hone’s pakeha boss at the timber mill), The Stranger (a prophetic figure) and the tipuna (ancestral chorus). The play deals with loss of culture and language and exposes levels of violence and frustration that beset the family.

Conventionally speaking, the cast required three male actors and so we set out to establish whether or not we could produce the play with an all female cast of Year 11-13 students and still give credible committed performances. In order to overcome initial student self doubts and fears about the requirements of the play: to play older, younger, ethnically different, to speak or sing confidently in an unfamiliar language (Maori). Accordingly, I decided to establish a clear production process. Gender stereotyping and traditional school administrative structures worked against these possibilities.

**Casting Off**

It is difficult to take young women out of desk-bound classrooms, away from computer screens and have them debate issues, look at subtext, examine history, learn new language and connect with one another’s cultures through their own bodies, discussion, performance and reflection in journals and group feedback sessions. Students needed to achieve all of these things and much more within a weekly five-hour framework and around 24 extra hours in terms of after school or weekend practices. They needed to commit to at least one weekend of rehearsal near to the performance date and work on their parts outside of school and in lunchtimes. This was in effect their ‘homework’ time for the classroom subject of drama.

Our initial production meetings had offered three possible productions – *Waiora*, (New Zealand) Jean Betts, *Ophelia Thinks Harder* ³ (New Zealand) and Caryl Churchill’s *Top Girls* ⁸ (Britain). There was significant dissent within the class of ten. Half of the group indicated they could not do *Waiora* because there were no boys and they did not speak Maori. Of these, one student was Maori and the others Pakeha, (New Zealand European). Two students were undecided, three favoured *Waiora* and one or two were regularly absent abstained from any kind of decision-making or commitment. It was clear that I would need to push hard to encourage an outcome and find ways of including extra participants from outside of the class if we were to pursue the production.

Prevailing attitudes were expressed in some of the following comments:

- ‘We don’t even speak Maori.’
- ‘*Top Girls* is a much easier play and we can relate to it more because it’s more about us.’
- ‘I don’t mind one way or another’ (delivered with a subtextual glance to suggest the participant did mind).
- ‘It would be hard to do the tipuna (ancestor).’
- ‘What about the male roles?’

These comments raised the following issues within the group:
• Some students were fearful and were averse to trying to speak Maori even though they might have described themselves ethnically as being Maori.
• Some students could not see the direct relevance of a work drawn from their own cultural heritage and a lack of vision with regards to historical influences, race relations, socio-economic and linguistic identity in Aotearoa/New Zealand. There was an obstacle in ‘hearing our own voices’.
• Limited awareness of post-colonial attitudes and associated debate may have limited the roles students were prepared to try out for in audition.
• The need to encourage tolerance, trust, courage, optimism and a willingness to debate, providing strategies to engage thinking and emotional intelligence among the students.
• A recognition that a deepened commitment to address these issues would be likely to bring believable outcomes in performance and a deepened understanding of issues.
• A recognition that best practice would develop processes and metaphors which in turn would bring about a deeper commitment to the play.

Setting Sail

The drama classroom strategies which worked to enable the production of Waiora to move forward were as follows:

1) Open debate. By openly debating whether we would take on Ophelia Thinks Harder, Waiora or Top Girls the class addressed fears, differences and their own status issues.

2) Casting through a process of open audition with self-selected pieces. It is easy to allow the ‘star syndrome’ to carry the ‘best actors’ into lead roles. It is more difficult to encourage the potential talent. Students self-selected an audition piece and indicated they would collectively agree to my final casting decisions for the ‘greater good’ of the play.

3) Physical and emotional warm-ups that drew on the both the Maori and English languages within the play. For example finding the ‘animal impulse’ behind the work, using it, moving it and bringing that energy to the performance. Open circles connecting the sound of the words freely through offers from the actors and connecting participants so that aspects of the play would flow together – choosing a line or word, call, making eye contact and running with energy to someone across the circle. In this work students who are reluctant to call out, use their voices or run freely. They are able to access small pieces of language within the play and to try out some Maori words, some of the language and ideas of the play and begin to take part in the group’s use of words. This means they are ‘allowed’ to speak the language – one of the key issues raised in the play itself.

   In this way each rehearsal would begin with a synchronous exercise with lateral connection to the play. As this process progressed each lesson would create new aspects of environment or character through imagined objects, offstage spaces, mimed, discussed, sketched, shared and spoken about.

4) Appointment of a motivated leader to engage the tipuna (ancestral chorus) – This connection needed to come from the heart. Students ran a lengthy discussion to select a leader and create a connection with the Maori Department in the school. In the end a student with integrity was chosen and her friend supported her. A pakeha
student, Rebecca Shepherd, and a Russian student, Julia Dorofeva, accepted these roles and visited Whaea Briar Cornwall in the Maori Department to show her the text of the play and to ask if she would be prepared to help source, identify and teach the karakia (chants), waiata (songs) and haka to themselves.

5) Connection with the Maori Department in the school began. Briar agreed and approached students in her department to volunteer to be part of the show. Another several students from Year 11 worked with Becky, Julia and Briar during lunch hours to learn the work. This process was frightening at times because two of the original group decided the task was impossible and did not want to give up their own time to practise. Discussions centred on finding the courage to continue and the possibility that the tipuna could be a group as small as two or three. Strength of purpose finally meant there were five tipuna.

6) The two students who had chosen not to be involved soon made a reappearance and requested other roles in the production. One became prompt. The other helped backstage with costumes. The tipuna worked independently at times and then came together with the cast to block their moves under my direction and to encompass the theatre using different entrances, side passages and doors through the auditorium. Safety regulations prevented us from pushing the work into the rigging of the theatre as we might have wished to.

7) The inclusion of an external co-director for workshops supported the production. It was helpful to have an outside eye work on sections of the process with students. Hilari Anderson visited and worked the storytelling connection with students - in particular the flashback sequence where Wai recounts meeting Hone at the pictures when she was young. Students brought stories of their own, shared aspects that made them laugh and told tales of meeting from within their families.

8) Physicalisation of the text included blocking the moves onstage and owning the space. Questions raised included - Where shall I come from? Where shall I go to? How fast? How slow? What patterns do our bodies make on the floor of the stage? What is the world offstage? Let us begin to imagine and describe it …. use it to show where the car is, where the beach is. Where the kai (food) is…. Why might the waiata (song) be in a different position from the hangi (earth oven) and meat preparation areas?

9) The donation of relevant props formed a physical and symbolic commitment. Each student brought their own stone to add to the circle of fire which is a central part of the set. The stone came from the local maunga (mountain) - Maungawhau under which the theatre is built, from their own homes up north, from Parihaka and from the school grounds. These stones formed a circle onstage into which the imagined fire was projected and each held its own story. The actors also found a large net to break the fourth wall and worked out ways to string it out across the orchestra pit and create a sense of Tangaroa – the sea. They suddenly became engaged in creating a set through the use of real and yet symbolic props. In doing so they came to understand the metaphorical power of Hone Kouka’s text.

10) Finding costumes – Students hunted for cardigans, old cotton dresses, gumboots, enamelled pots, authentic beer bottles, wooden crates, swandri bush-shirts, walk shorts
and other items of clothing to indicate status. They did not sew their costumes but found
them in second hand stores and old wardrobes, including the drama department’s own
carefully gathered store of costumes and props.

11) The three young women who took on male roles worked well and committed fully
without ‘corpsing’ or forgetting lines. They worked to learn their lines in different ways.
Techniques included pairing and support for one another, taping and listening to those
lines, moving through blocking and working with objective co-relative – objects that
would contain meaning to allow the part to be chunked down. Directional delivery also
allowed somatic memory to support the learning of lines and this was supported by
exercises to ‘break the fourth wall’, seek anchor points in the auditorium, create back
stories for the characters and visualisations of an off-stage reality. Two of them
admitted to a level of difficulty and embarrassment and the group needed to text, talk
and support by encouraging attendance and offering friendship, sharing line-learning and
chunking lines into manageable pieces for one student in particular. The student who
played Boyboy put aside her dyslexia completely to deliver the part with energy
conveying the issues that underpin this difficult role.

11) The inclusion of a poet from the community. One evening I attended an exhibition
of work by Riemke Ensing, a New Zealand poet, at the New Works Gallery. Ensing
had collaborated with artist Tara McLeod to make carved wooden and painted
poems. Most of the poems seemed relevant to the themes of the play so I consulted
the students who were keen to ask her if they could use the work as a set item at the
beginning and the end of the play and have her read on their opening night. Riemke
agreed to do this and allowed me to photograph her work, which then became a
projected backdrop for the opening of the play.

12) Riemke Ensing brought with her kuia (elder) Amiria Whitehouse who spoke with the
actors and offered a blessing before the show on opening night.

13) The performance ran over three nights.

14) Full and frank verbal reflection took place on the process of involvement by myself
and others focussed on questions that would allow students to know what they had
done well, what they would do better next time, what they admired in the work of
others and the collective and what they would have preferred others or the group to
do differently.

**Anchoring**

The results of this process touched the edges of possibility for a number of students. Many who
gained NCEA credit points through commitment found other subject areas difficult to achieve in.
For some students this was the only way they gained any credit points throughout the year as this
style of learning and collective commitment meant they were willing to take part.

As the rehearsals unfolded the issues of gender and role seemed to evaporate through commitment.
It was as if students had discovered they contained each gender within them in no small measure
and could both explore the aesthetics of movement, the boundaries of their ability to deliver with
depth and step into the shoes of a character of different gender provided they owned belief in that
character and had applied a range of internal research questions in order to build that belief.
The answer to our initial questions came on opening night. The performance, poetry, language, roles and season were successful culturally, educationally and financially. Members of the Maori community from within the school enjoyed the performance, willingly took part and gave time to developing understanding of the kaupapa of this new theatre by working to strengthen understanding.

As a result of taking part in Hone Kouka’s *Waiora*, the students who identified as Maori felt affirmed and welcomed in the department and in the school theatre. Further initiatives between the two departments will continue this year and extend into the school as Epsom Girls Grammar hosts the theatre company, Te Rakau Hua o te Wao Tapu with its production of *The Battalion* by Helen Pearce Otene, thereby putting New Zealand theatre at the heart of the curriculum for all senior level classes.

Our audiences did not exceed 70 on any one night, but the heart of commitment, performance and altered attitudes showed learning. Finally, two of the students, including the stage manager, have gone on to study directing and drama at tertiary level at New Zealand focused institutions, while the remainder of the class have shared new learning and new perceptions of history; through their encounter with te reo and tikanga Maori and drama.

References


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1 Kouka, H. *Waiora* Performance rights may be obtained from: www.playmarket.org.nz
2 Years 9-13 students in New Zealand are aged 13-18 and generally study year long courses in the Arts choosing Drama, Dance, Visual Arts or Music.
3 NCEA is a national modularised standards-based assessment system. Students sit both internally and externally assessed standards. www.tki.org.nz
6 Advice about the development of Performing Arts facilities in schools is provided by the Ministry of Education. www.tki.org.nz
7 Betts, J. *Ophelia Thinks Harder*
8 Churchill, C. *Top Girls*
9 purpose
10 Maori language and customs