

Sing of the Land: Māori Women in Performance

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Abstract

The purpose of this project is to develop an understanding of how some aspects of native Māori theatre, literature, and culture influences New Zealand theatre performance. This project is a continuation of research conducted while abroad in New Zealand in spring 2012; it will serve as a final summation and synthesis in a performance influenced by the knowledge gained through attendance at, and analysis of, Māori theatre while in New Zealand. The subsequent intention of this research is then to explore, through performance, the ideas of the female presence in Māori theatre and literature through both Māori drama, and contemporary Māori fiction adapted for the stage. The pieces will be in both te reo Māori (spoken Māori) and English. The aim is to see how the audience can relate to a foreign language piece, and identify with the female roles within the cultural history. Women in Māori theatre represent a connection to spiritual place and home. In particular, the story *Waiora* by Hone Kouka² expresses the idea of lost place and spiritual connection to place in a *waiata*, or song/chant¹⁸, which will be studied and performed. Māori theatre carries themes similar to Native American theatre in that “concepts of character, belonging, spirituality, time, and language all emanate from interrelated concepts of place” as Christy Stanlake observes in her *Native American Drama: A Critical Perspective*⁶. The Māori are thought to be one of the last native populations to experience Western settlement, as New Zealand was settled in the early 19th century by the British. Unlike in other colonized nations, the indigenous native language is still very much alive: Māori is the second official language of New Zealand, or “Aotearoa” in Māori. Because of its continued use the Māori culture stays alive and the language has been fluidly integrated into the Western culture of New Zealand. This includes integration into Western theatre practices of New Zealand. For example, a te reo Māori translation of Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*, developed in New Zealand by Ngākau Toa and translated by Te Haumiata Mason¹⁰, recently opened the Shakespeare festival, “Globe to Globe”¹⁵ in London that coincided with the Olympic Games. The adaptation also included traditional integrations of Māori performance, like *kappa haka*¹⁶, which simply means song and dance, into Western theatre. It is the goal of the research to tackle how the integration of the te reo language and Māori cultures work within the structure of Western theatrical conventions to convey the different cultural values, then to translate the observations and analysis from watching and participating in Māori performances while abroad into performance-based research that will specifically explore women’s connection to spiritual beliefs and ancestral place in Māori drama.

Keywords: Māori, Theatre, Women

1. Introduction

This study, conducted in two major parts, looks at how Western theatrical conventions influence the native Māori performance arts, specifically looking at what role women take in Māori drama. The study was conducted in an observation/analysis stage in New Zealand, primarily the Wellington region, and then shifted to synthesizing that information into a Western style performance back in the United States. For the purposes of this study, Māori theatre and Western theatre are compared through the six Aristotelian traits of theatre: plot, character, diction, song and dance, spectacle, and thought¹. These are explained later in detail. Traditional Western theatrical conventions are

also considered as performed on stage, for an audience where there is a beginning, middle, and end in plot structure, audiences are passive participants, the performance is on a stage with lights and sound effects, and the entertainment of the audience is a major focus of the performance. In contrast, traditional Māori conventions of performance are that performances are largely outdoors, with no major spectacle elements, performed ceremonially, and where audiences are frequently participants in performances.

2. Method

2.2 Observation

The methodology of this research comes in three major parts. The first was observation and study while abroad in New Zealand. Attending cultural events and speaking with native Māori about performance and different aspects of cultural context were key in understanding their integration with Western theatre ideals. One of the first events attended as part of the study, *First Contact 2012*, the opening of the New Zealand International Arts Festival in Wellington, February 2012⁷, quite literally mixed the Aristotelian idea of spectacle in theatre and traditional dance/chant. There are two common types of traditional Māori dance, one primarily performed by women in which they utilize a prop called a *poi*, essentially two soft tufted balls connected by a long string, and one by men called a *haka*, or traditional dance¹⁶.

Other methods of study include observation of different media: film¹², theatre^{7, 10}, and opera⁸. The first complete Māori translation and performance of a Shakespeare play, part of the bedrock of Western theatre, premiered at the New Zealand International Arts Festival before it opened the “Globe to Globe” festival in London coinciding with the Olympic Games^{10, 15}. The Māori opera *Hohepa* also opened at the festival, combining English and te reo Māori lyrics to tell the story of cultural confrontation between Māoris and Pākehā settlers⁸.

After specific experiences with Māori theatre in a Western setting, I ventured to find traditional Māori performance. Matariki, Māori New Year¹¹, occurs on the winter solstice, and is accompanied with celebrations of all sorts, usually held at a marae. A marae is the traditional spiritual meeting place, which is still used today in traditional performances. There they had a *hangi*—a buried meal—and representatives from Te Papa’s research collections, the national museum of New Zealand, brought traditional Māori instruments and did a demonstration for the attendees. The evening also included a performance by the marae’s youth kapa haka group, and a poi dance¹¹.

2.2 Reading, Analysis

After the initial observation stage I conducted a dramatic literature analysis. This process included finding, purchasing, and reading Māori dramatic literature. New Zealand was one of the last colonized nations in the world with indigenous peoples, thus there already were resources and ideas of how to navigate the cultural divide between “Pākehā”, or Europeans, and Māori. This theme of indigenous identity is handled in two different ways generally: through language, and land connections. Most Māori dramatic literature is written bilingually, with little to no translated footnotes, but it also directly deals with the idea of European and urban ideals disconnecting youths from their Māori identity. During the 1950s-1960s, there was a fundamental shift from small rural Māori communities to urban areas without a connection to a marae, or a desire to connect with Māori roots. *Waiora* by Hone Kouka² takes up this theme with his character Rongo, a girl who is pulled toward the spirit world by a ghostly chorus of her tipuna (ancestors), and kept in the real world by her family, in a metaphor of the “old world” Māori ideas and the “new world” European ones. This play is just one example of the types of literature read. One of the monologues performed was taken from this play. Other readings analyzed included short stories from *Huiā Short Stories 8: Contemporary Māori Fiction*³; *Purapurawhetū*, another story about Māori connection to familial land³; and *He Reo Hou: 5 Plays by Māori Playwrights*, which included plays about land rights and appropriation to social issues⁴.

2.3 Theatrical Application

The theatrical application process of this project was a typical rehearsal process. I begin with a character and plot analysis of the character/scene being performed. Part of this process is looking up vocabulary, pronunciation, and researching the historical and cultural context of the scene. A large part of the preproduction work for my Māori scenes, because of their bilingual nature, was using the International Phonetic Alphabet to write the language out

phonetically. This assists a great deal in the memorization part of the process. After the written work for production is done, next is applying this knowledge in a theatrical sense. This is the physical rehearsal process, or getting the piece up on its feet, as it's known in the business. The rehearsing of the piece includes integrating the scope of the research, memorizing, blocking, and then finally performing the piece. It is very important to note that part of the theatrical process is assessing and giving meaning to the piece through the actor's choices. No actor, actress, or performer will make the same choices when approaching the same piece, and this is certainly true when working with native drama. A native artist would approach a piece with a different set of knowledge and background, and thus make choices that I, an outsider, did not. During this part of my method I made choices connected to the material to assign meaning to the traditional Māori conventions discovered in this study, which also helped me to understand them in relation to Western theatrical conventions.

3. Discussion

3.1 Aristotelian Comparisons

The scope of this research looks at women's connection to the land in Māori theatre in relation to Aristotelian, or Western theatrical conventions: plot, character, diction, song and dance, spectacle, and thought. The key observations in this study all fit within these categories, although in a somewhat different pattern of importance and organization than in Western theatre.

Starting with traditional Māori performance, there is a definite structure to the progression of the performance. When entering a marae, there is a welcome call and answer, called a *Te karanga*¹³, which begins the ceremonies. Both the callers are traditionally women, and the call and answer can go on for as long as either wants. It is a chanted dialogue introducing each party and their intentions; it sets the parameters of the meeting, similar to a prologue to a Shakespeare play, or the introductory strophes of the Ancient Greek texts. This convention carries over from traditional settings to more conventional ones, such as the opening of a building, festival, museum, or even film. After the opening dialogue has finished Hakas, and kapa haka events can vary in structure, but they both typically begin with the group addressing another group, or individual, and one person starts the chant. This person, or leader, will initiate the haka, with the men and women joining in in their separate parts. Both men and women participate in a true haka, which are performed as either a veneration, or show of respect to an important person or as a kind of intimidation against opponents, with the men taking up the most ferocious chest pounding and thigh slapping parts, and the women taking part of the chanting and challenge parts of the haka. The hakas can also be preceded by the trumpeting of a conch shell instrument. Modern kapa haka performances involve less of the traditional haka and more a capella waiata, or song, which can also be accompanied by guitar⁹.

Modern Māori theatre combines these traditional elements with the Aristotelian plot structure to form a performance that's more recognizable to Western audiences. Starting with plot, Māori authors have organized a traditional confrontation plot structure, with rising action, climax, and resolution or falling action, and fit in waiatas, hakas, and traditional Māori welcoming choruses into this structure. In the play *Waiora*, for example, inserts a chorus of tīpuna, or ancestors, to pull Rongo away from her family, and the play's climax comes as the family and tīpuna perform rival hakas to win Rongo to their side². There is structure to traditional Māori performance, but hakas, and waiatas, are usually performed with more purpose than to entertain, as was the case with much of Greek theatre. Hakas were used as a tribute, or a challenge, and now are used to honor someone or an event, as well as entertainment.

Character may be the largest difference found between the two styles. Traditionally the "characters" of the haka performers were simply the performers themselves, now the hakas and waiatas are performed in concert with a character in the play, or made to fit the situation or adaptation as with *Troilus and Cressida*¹⁰. This translation of one of Shakespeare's tragedies offered an excellent opportunity to integrate traditional Māori performance into a traditional Western story. The story is of two lovers separated by their warring tribes. The play sets up perfectly for the cast to perform rival hakas, make use of conch shell horns and other traditional instruments, and the ideas of mana—manly pride.

One of the clearest distinctions between Māori and Western drama is the use of diction. Diction is the word choice, or language in the play. Māori diction is different from conventional Western drama because there is dual language in most Māori plays. Most Māori drama is performed in both English, and te reo Māori. While there may be some spattering of languages other than the main spoken language in Western drama, it does not compare to the true dichotomy in Māori drama, in which entire monologues, often without any translation offered, will be in Māori. This dichotomy of language represents the dual culture of New Zealand. Since Māori is the second official language

of the country there is a wide use of te reo Māori; it's taught in schools, and there's a general goal to keep the language alive. Māori diction also makes an appearance as a theme in Māori drama; *Waiora* focuses on the time in Māori history when Māoris purposefully stopped teaching and speaking the language, all in an effort to assimilate to Western culture. Recently there is even a trend toward completely te reo Māori drama, for example, the translation of *Troilus and Cressida* into te reo Māori, which was an incredibly popular and successful production¹⁷. The dichotomy of Māori diction in drama is a primary difference between Māori and Western theatre.

The next Aristotelian concepts pair together in Māori drama: song and dance. As previously mentioned, hakas, waiatas, and use of instruments affect the other categories, but they also become their own category in song and dance. Traditional Ancient Greek theatre had song and dance, but since then Western theatre has used song and dance more symbolically to refer to the staging, or movement in a piece. Māori drama takes it back to the literal sense of song and dance—in fact a literal translation of the Māori “kapa haka.”¹⁴ As traditional Māori theatre diverges from the Aristotelian idea of diction, the opposite is true of song and dance; Western theatrical ideals have changed, and merged with, traditional Māori performances of kapa hakas. Traditional waiatas were only chants¹⁹, but with the introduction of Western music and instruments, such as guitar and piano, waiatas have now become harmonized group songs with accompaniment. Waiatas, once performed as part of ceremonies or on special occasions, are now performed as part of events, contests, and entertainment⁹. Hakas are performed in a similar vein, ceremoniously, for entertainment, and even at sporting events. Each category has traditional male and female roles, however women now make up the majority of waiata performing groups, and play larger roles in haka groups. The dance part of Western convention can also relate to staging direction. Māori staging also differs in small ways from Western staging conventions. One staging convention from Māori theatre is a shaking of the hand by the actor's side. This movement, which may be taken as nerves by Western audiences, is a convention in Māori theatre called *wiri*, and signifies a connection to your ancestors and the land around you¹⁴. Connection to the land is another strong theme in Māori drama. In almost all the Māori plays read, and seen, as part of this study there was some connection to the Earth.

Aristotle said very little of spectacle, the next convention, when he wrote *The Poetics*¹, but now Western audiences go to a show with a high expectation of spectacle, or special effects like lighting and sound. Western audiences have also come to equate spectacle with some of the other elements, such as song and dance, when they go to see a show. Māori theatre has embraced many of the Western standards of sound and lighting design and conventions into their drama to help denote change in time, place, and the overall feel of a piece. Though, this is the standard now, some Māori theatre remains true to the basic ideas of unified setting and time, so there is little spectacle needed. The song and dance conventions alone stand for much of the Māori spectacle.

Thought, by Aristotle's definition, means the theme of the play, or overall argument of the play¹. While this Aristotelian concept does not directly relate to traditional Māori performance, in that traditional Māori performance doesn't have an extended storyline, it certainly applies to Westernized Māori drama. Some of the major themes aforementioned include: connection to the *tīpuna*, or ancestors, and connection to the land. Both of these themes connect to Māori cultural identity in the 21st century. In *Waiora* is the thought is “is it worth losing your cultural identity and connection to your tīpuna to fit in with the Pākeha?” *Hohepa*'s thought is similarly about if it's right to deny your cultural heritage to appease the Pākeha's land demands, or should you honor the friendships you've made with individuals. *Purapurawhetū*³ is another play that looks at the Māori spiritual connection to land, but in a modern sense. It regards the inheritance of an iwi's (tribe's) land, whether it should go through the greedy but natural born son, or a spiritually pure, but adopted, relative.

3.2 post-performance reflections

The performance research was presented in two different settings: at my Senior Capstone Performance, and at the National Conference for Undergraduate Research (NCUR), which are two very different venues. In the first, an evening of many short scenes and monologues, I performed pieces without explanation and received many positive audience reactions afterwards. A common reaction was that, even though the audiences couldn't understand the different diction in the pieces performed, they were able to recognize and empathize with the character in the piece. This empathy with the character invokes another Aristotelian quality called catharsis, or emotional purge. There was also an audience interest in the conventions of Maori theatre, such as the *wiri*, and some of the other symbolic movements. NCUR, on the other hand, was an academic setting where I explained beforehand the conventions they would see. When specifically asked how they were able to relate to the diction of the piece, the audience responded similarly in the manner of my Capstone audience. They couldn't understand the words, but that in no way impacted their empathy with the characters, connections to the thought of losing home and their connection to their ancestors.

Other audience comments, while relating to the specific New Zealand issues in the drama, also brought a larger question about our own Native dramatic literature. Maori culture and theatre are widespread and influential in New Zealand in comparison with Native American theatre here. Even though there are similar themes in both categories of Native works. Christy Stanlake, for example, points out the platonic theme in Native American drama⁶.

For me, the performer, there are many takeaways from the performances. They have broadened my cultural awareness, and sensitized me to many different instances in theatre in which there are colonial influences. The major idea that informed my reflections was the awe and intrigue of the audience; their comments after the performances about how touched they were by my characterization of the Māori pieces were kind, but also interesting to me. It didn't matter that audiences couldn't understand the words, because they understood the emotion of the piece—a dynamic characteristic of almost all types of Western drama. There were still so many questions left in my mind after the performances, and topics left for me that I would wish to explore in future .

4. Further Study

This research, as it is, is the first step on a journey to greater understanding of Māori drama and conventions. There are many areas that were not touched in this research, such as the rehearsal process of learning the waiatas, hakas, and Western style drama. There is very little discussion of the poi in this research, which is a very complex form of Māori dance. If I were to return to New Zealand I would find a kapa haka group to apprentice with and learn, in detail, their process.

To further the line of investigation of this paper in particular, there are several possibilities to explore. These include performing longer pieces, whole plays, or creating more adapted pieces. Another continuation of this research would be to take audience surveys, have extended talkbacks or workshops to understand the audience relationship to the works presented. This idea includes reworking how to ask the questions of audience relatability to the piece, and figuring out just how to measure that, or if it can be quantified. Yet another way to improve it would be to incorporate other actors into the performance, either Maori actors or Western performers, or integrating both sets of performers.

Another area of research related to this would be to see how the integration of Māori culture in New Zealand compares with the rest of the world, and if it is comparable with other native dramatic works. All over the world, in Asia, Africa, and the South Pacific, there are native forms of theatre and performance that have been influenced by Western conventions. It would be an ambitious, and relevant project to collect and document native forms of performance and how they've been affected.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to identify whether audience could connect with the values in a piece partial performed in a foreign language. While there was no formal survey of audiences, or true talkback to gather data, there was lots of anecdotal evidence from audience members' reactions to say that yes, audiences can identify with ideas in a foreign language piece. Even if they can't understand the words, they understand the underlying emotions, and will identify with a conceptual convention if explained, even if it's not explained they can identify that it has meaning and purpose.

This research in cross-cultural theatre lays groundwork for me, a performer, to further experiment with the idea of communicating different sets of cultural values and ideas through the medium of theatre. Western theatre's influences have ranged far and wide as a result of Europe's colonization of the rest of the world. Part of this cultural diffusion was a melding of art forms. New Zealand gained much from Western theatrical influence, but also lost much. It is almost impossible to separate the ideas of "performing" in the Western sense (which is largely perpetrated for entertainment's sake) from traditional Māori performance. This is good in some ways because it spread the Māori culture around the islands, and even the world. It keeps the culture alive and relevant in New Zealand as well as in other countries. Māori women have also benefitted from the influence of Western theatre conventions in that they have more of a voice and greater role than in some traditional venues. Māori women, with the aid of public performances for entertainment, now perform in larger groups, at more varied events than traditional ceremonial settings. The poi, waiata, and haka are all integrated into contemporary New Zealand culture, and especially into contemporary native New Zealand drama and performance. With this knowledge I can now

venture to explore other native cultural theatres, and how melding them with Western theatrical values could produce greater cultural awareness throughout the world.

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