

Why Devise, Why Now? Why New Zealand?

Peter Falkenberg

Coming to New Zealand from Germany in the 1970s, I encountered a theatrical scene that was very conventional, colonized by British expectations of repertory theatre and a Shakespearean kind of rhetorical performance, with received pronunciation—a kind of theatre that was not a specifically New Zealand theatre. There was some specifically national New Zealand theatre in content, but its form remained mainly locked into colonial models, and what I saw did not reflect what one would have been experiencing in Europe and the United States at the same time. In my view, New Zealand theatre served to represent middle-class domination and British colonization. When I was asked to make theatre here, I tried to counterbalance this colonization with another kind of colonization by bringing in European, continental texts and physical theatre methods—starting with *King Ubu*, Dada, and Surrealist theatre—trying to emancipate the theatrical scene from this kind of British theatre and, through these “antitheatrical” texts, to create a tabula rasa in order to be able to start anew.

But to do theatre that is rooted in this country, I felt that the only way was to work with writers from here—or better, directly with the actors, to find out what they were actually contributing in terms of performance text. For me, this was a search as well as research, a way of finding out about New Zealand.

At the same time, I had gone through a sort of delayed culture shock. Everything that initially seemed familiar, provincial, and boring somehow did not quite fit; it became strange, *unheimlich*. What at first appeared to be civilized—more English than the English, as Christchurch prides itself to be—showed glimpses of being shockingly not. In Pakeha (i.e., European) New Zealand I perceived a kind of exoticism in reverse. Fierce and strange Maori war dances I could understand, as I expected them to be that way, but I did not expect the dominant white culture on closer inspection to be so strange and opaque in its own right.

In order to understand, I began to work with master texts of colonization, with *Robinson Crusoe* and the Bible, and reading them closely I found them also strange and opaque (*Crusoe: A Lapsarian Mass In Twelve Movements* and *Samson Airline*). They are supposed to be familiar to us, but when we go back to them they don't read as we remember them or think they ought to read. They are boring, obsessed with propriety and minutiae, at the same time that they are fierce, savage, and *unheimlich*. Like the people I met in New Zealand, they don't quite fit against the image. I also began to see my actors as texts—as familiar but also very strange embodiments of colonization. Devising theatre in New Zealand became for me an act both of investigation and of provocation and communication.

I started to work with Maori artists to explore the other side of the colonial equation. I put a European provocation to my Maori collaborators and left them to create their own aesthetic response. In a collaborative, bicultural opera, *Footprints Tapuwae . . . Return of the Native*, which brought Wagner's *Ring* into collision with Maori myth, I created a structure in which people or cultures could talk to without necessarily understanding each other, using two completely different languages, performance practices, and theatrical companies, juxtaposing, echoing, but never fusing.

In New Zealand people don't reveal themselves easily, even if you know them for a long time. In devising work they have a chance to overcome their native reticence without becoming too personal. Devising theatre acknowledges an ongoing process of coming to understand where one lives, a reciprocal way of finding out about an Other who is not necessarily revealing itself as Other. In New Zealand, the dominant culture values conformity or sameness. The exotic difference of the Maori is primarily displayed as decoration for official rituals or tourists. But it's not the exotic Other that I want to explore, but the exotic disguised as familiar, that doesn't know it is Other.

Perhaps instead of conforming to a fixed script which is always in danger of being frozen in some other place, time, and ideology, it is better to look for identity through a provisional art, where texts and participants become the material of performance in a dialectical process. It may be, in the present situation, that there are no pure local identities any longer—if there ever were. A country that is built upon colonization must be seen in the act of continually devising an identity for itself. How else to represent such acts if not by following the same provisional path? Ephemerality is always being denied through text. Maori only have an oral tradition, and written fixed text—even if it preserved their own language—was used as a colonizing instrument on them. Their tradition of performance can be seen as devising and redevising their cultural identity in a constant process through the generations. Perhaps we can learn from the Maori, and not just in New Zealand. Perhaps it is time to see devised performance as a way of keeping the freedom as well as the relevance of the art, which is always fleeting . . . like identity, like life.

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