

20 June 2015

I've been asked to write about my impressions of post-earthquake developments in Christchurch theatre.¹ I see it as problematic that the city has changed radically, whereas the theatre almost not at all.

A review of reviewer's comments for the Court Theatre's past season reveals the continuance of the status quo (ante): a reassuring mirror held up to a white, middle class perspective in New Zealand with conventional staging designed to make an audience feel (socially and politically) safe:

Ache: "middle class contemporary urban culture, where bright young professionals can get away with indecision and 'malaise' before the realities of life put the nips in."

Stag Weekend: "Simon (Cameron Douglas) is a nice, middle-class, Pakeha guy: a bit vanilla, risk-averse, up for a few drinks, and more at home in the city than traipsing through the bush. He's also about to get married, and Stag Weekend charts his attempt to make it through his pre-wedding rite of passage by heading to a West Coast hut to prove his masculinity by bagging a stag."

You Can Always Hand Them Back: "He is described in the programme as 'the postman of New Zealand theatre', on the grounds that he always delivers the goods. To extend the image, one could say Roger Hall is also spot on when it comes to selecting the post to engage with and appeal to his middle class recipients, in this case probably those in their 'golden years'."

Le Sud: "It is laughter all the way, with an occasional 'oooh' as decorum is broached before the funny side of things inevitably reasserts itself. Thus we enjoy the slightly distanced perspective of comedy, while chortling at absorbingly familiar absurdities, for the 2015 version of the play has been significantly updated from its 2008 beginnings."

Niu Sila: "Both writers have a serious perspective on the way brown and white New Zealanders share their daily round, but it is the laughter above all which charms us in this play. The team at The Court makes sure of that."

Why would the lion's share of funding for theatre go towards ongoing distractions for a white middle class audience that, although getting older and living longer, is not a true reflection of the city as it is or is becoming? Isn't this the place where you should be testing out the active role the arts can play in city-making – encouraging more diverse, engaging attempts of community-building rather than falling back on past stereotypes that are not reflecting our lifestyles any longer?

Niu Sila is a case in point. Already undermined within the frame of the conventional kiwi comedy, Oscar Kightley's critical perspective is especially blunted in this rehashed version. Why did they decide to stage it? Friends who saw it said it felt dated as the usual audience laughed along at the telegraphed jokes about themselves. What is the Pasifika experience in contemporary Christchurch? Talking with locals, including groups like Pacific Underground, a different view emerges to all

¹ The article was requested by the editor of the annual NZ Playmarket Journal. While this article was not published in 2015, an updated version is to appear in the 2016 Annual.

the joking – or different jokes – especially as a number have been living in the east of the city. Others are frustrated that central city community facilities/gathering places that were lost are nowhere acknowledged in official rebuild plans.

The Court is an important part of this city. I have great respect for co-founder Mervyn Thompson's search for a distinctly New Zealand theatre. How wonderful if in keeping with this search a richer more diverse ecology of professional contemporary theatre was playing an active role in the city becoming – an onus on experimentation and renewal rather than restoration of the old and lost.

It speaks volumes however that three of the five plays I was asked to consider were produced by The Forge. Tagged as the “experimental” wing of The Court, promoted as providing alternative voices and ideas of theatre, but these conventional offerings reflect a New Zealand culture that does not take theatre seriously as an art relative to say the visual arts, film, music or literature. Perhaps it is because theatre can be especially politically efficacious, employing multiple perspectives to challenge mainstream white, middle class views that New Zealand theatre funding encourages endless TV facsimiles.

The diversity problem arose at a recent CreativeNZ focus group reviewing theatre funding. A number of marginalised groups – especially Maori and Pasifika but also experimental/ contemporary theatre artists – criticized attempts by Totara organisations to meet funding criteria by trying to represent voices from the margins. The question kept being asked: why is this necessary when other groups exist to produce this kind of work and project these voices?

Christchurch has a special opportunity to rethink the role of art in helping urban communities function successfully in an age of scarcity and huge social, economic and ecological challenges. Unfortunately, the input from Ministry of Culture and Heritage (a performing arts venue report) and Creative New Zealand (a report on ‘community theatre’) feels like the cart leading the horse. There is a preoccupation with venues that reflect old notions of theatre rather than a surveying and questioning of the place and purpose of the arts in the flatlands, where the identity of the place has changed so much already.

Conversations need to start here.

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