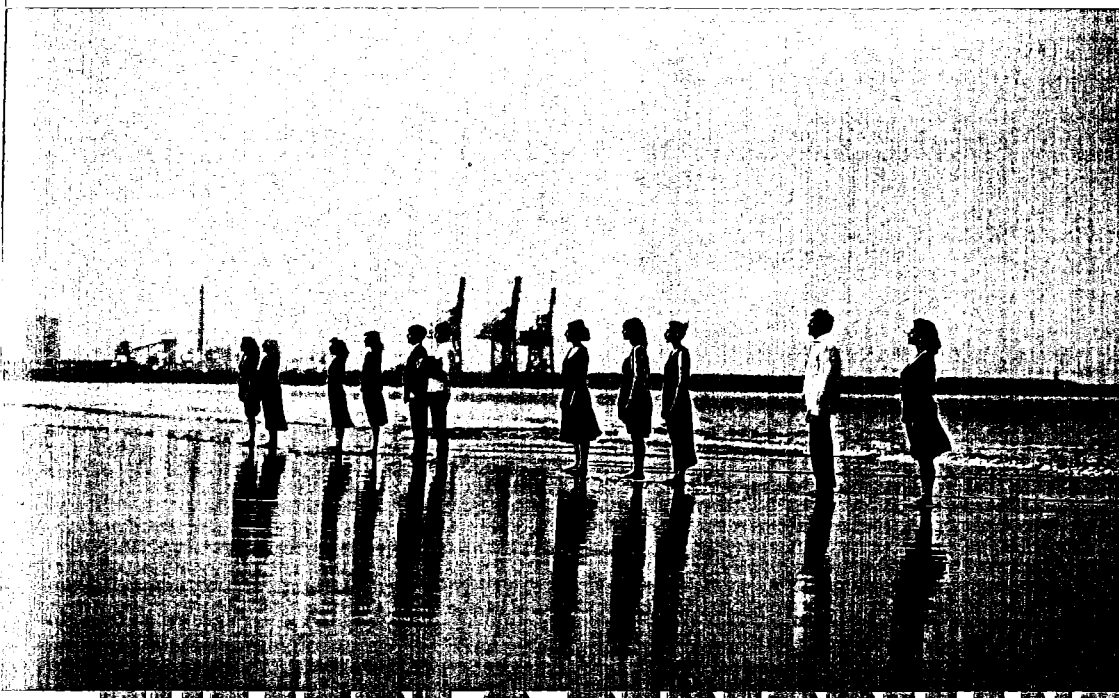

THEATRE & PERFORMANCE IN SMALL NATIONS

Edited by Steve Blandford

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intellect Bristol, UK / Chicago, USA

Chapter 6

A National Theatre in New Zealand? Why/Not?

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Culture is a sort of theatre where various political and ideological causes engage one another.

(Said 1994: xiv)

New Zealand does not have a national theatre as such, or even a singular, official theatre history. Instead, there have been a number of theatrical movements, arising over time and interwoven in layers, like the tukutuku panels that adorn the walls of Māori meeting halls. Rooted in the colonial past, almost entirely imported and explained from the British perspective, and now deeply influenced by film, telemedia and the Internet, theatre has only recently come to be seen as essential to who we are and how we communicate with each other, and the world, as New Zealanders. It seems past time to institute a national theatre – or perhaps two, one representing Māori and one representing the rest of us. But why? And why not? This chapter explores the question of national theatre(s) in the postcolonial context, looking at how, and to what possible effects, the loosely interlocked threads of New Zealand's theatres might be tied into a wider cultural frame.

Of course, the question of a national theatre in New Zealand (as elsewhere) both presupposes and proposes a cohesive national identity – or at least an image of this country that is recognisable to a substantial portion of the population and can be offered up as a nation-representation abroad. It might even seem easier to achieve this goal in a small country, isolated at the edge of the South Pacific, than in more trafficked and (presumably) diverse parts of the world, and it seems a necessary step in the process of moving past the colonial period towards independent nationhood to establish a national theatre. It is a commonplace of theatre history, after all, to represent the emergence of a theatrical 'golden age' as the way the relationship between language and culture is consolidated into a more or less unified idea of national identity. (Indeed, this is the way I teach theatre history here: Greece, Rome, England, Italy, Spain, France, Germany, Norway, Sweden, the United States, New Zealand ...) But a small nation is, in many ways, like a small town, at least as is likely to provoke its citizens to claim essential differences as to incline them towards hegemony.

The beginnings of a theatre distinctive to New Zealand are tied to the pioneering plays and performances of Bruce Mason (1921–1982) and Mervyn Thompson (1935–1992), who between them engineered the shift to New Zealand stories and voices. Their signature performances – Mason's *End of the Golden Weather* and Thompson's *Coaltown Blues* – are significant in their original settings for the way they translated their coming-of-age narratives

into paradigmatic tales of New Zealand's coming of age as a nation still bound to Britain, but separated by geography and time, run aground – or, as George Parker says 'beached' – in the history of discovery, settlement and social awakening. These solo performances about coming to know themselves as New Zealanders conflated the personal and the social in a way that might be seen as a template for the past twenty years of performances about the tension between cultural identities – especially those wrought from living outside the English/Māori (i.e., coloniser/colonised) binary – and national identity.[1] In Edward Said's words, 'nations themselves *are* narrations' (1994: xiii).

It is impossible to think of a national theatre in New Zealand without thinking of *the* National Theatre (London) as a source both of aspiration and of limitation. The idea of national theatre, like the idea of nation, is not only an ideal; insofar as a national theatre may be seen to enact an idea of nation, it's an ideological construct, one that might be seen to be especially problematic in a postcolonial context.[2] Still formally tied to Britain and yet bound by the Treaty of Waitangi, Aotearoa New Zealand – as the name suggests – is not so much a bicultural country as a hybrid nation, as such no longer colonial, really, and yet not quite postcolonial, officially bicultural but both less and more than that in practice. In the twenty-first century, Aotearoa New Zealand as a nation-ist idea exists if not dialectically, then dialogically between Māori and Pākehā, between its indigenous peoples (tangata whenua, the people of the land) and the descendents of its early British settlers.

But these islands are full of other others: Pacific Islanders, East and South Asians, Africans, Europeans, and even Americans (such as myself). Many of us have washed up here with our own, at times fierce, conceits about the relationship between what might be seen to be our originary homeland(s) and this land, creating floating communities, islands of identity in what is supposed to be the post-identity politics era. The past twenty years here have seen the emergence of a series of signature theatre works, each signalling a new string of hyphenated identifications – Samoan-New Zealander, Chinese-New Zealander, Indian-New Zealander, Jewish-New Zealander, and so on – demanding inclusion while resisting any notion of a seamless integration into the existing Māori / non-Māori binary. As David O'Donnell has observed, writing as someone whose theatre work is woven into the narrative of New Zealand's theatre history: 'There has been a move away from theatre as an expression of a collective identity to theatre which not only expresses multiple identities, but questions any notion of a fixed identity' (2007b: 25).

In this small nation we seem sometimes to be perpetually remaking ourselves into ever smaller mini-nations-within-the-nation. Perhaps this is an inevitable development in postcolonial New Zealand. After all, the idea of theatre is, itself, historically a European construct, an instrument of colonisation in its own right, as noted by Edward Said, among many others: 'The great cultural archive [...] is where the intellectual and aesthetic investments in overseas dominion are made' (1994: xxiii). As such, it inevitably establishes a frame that has been extended (to my mind unconvincingly) to the diverse performance practices of non-European nations over the past century, and in the postcolonial context, further complicates any consideration of a national theatre in Aotearoa New Zealand.

It must be admitted, before I proceed further, that my way of thinking about the question of a national theatre in this small nation has been predicated by my own arrival here, over 15 years ago, from New York City. One of the last productions I saw on Broadway was the Almeida Theatre Company's *Medea*, directed by Jonathan Kent and starring Diana Rigg. The first production I saw in Christchurch was the Court Theatre's *Medea*, directed by Elric Hooper and starring Geraldine Brophy. The production I saw in New York was emphatically asymmetrical, striking for its sense of physical scale – the rough rusty fortress walls towering over the actors, the apparently vast sands stretching the full width and depth of the stage – and the atonal scale plumbed by the chorus – three darkly draped women, moving in oblique patterns as if already in mourning for the soon-to-be-murdered king, princess and children.

What I saw in Christchurch was revelatory in its own way. It was as if the production I'd seen in New York had been uplifted from the vertically vast Broadway theatre, its imposing structure diminished, re-engineered into something resembling large heating ducts and pressed into horizontality in order to squeeze into the wide but short and shallow Court Theatre stage; the shadowy, ominous women of the chorus were converted into something babushka-esque, their song made harmonic, pleasing to the ear. For me, in my fresh-off-the-plane arrogance, this became a paradigm for New Zealand theatre: not simply derivation, more simulation than imitation, driven not so much by a desire for artistic epiphany as for conformation, a settling into bourgeois complacency. Why go elsewhere? Here we are as good as there. Or at least, what we take from there can be bent to fit the room in which we find ourselves, and if such strainings and stoopings often lead to Alice-in-Wonderland-like contortions, then what we see as a result is still more evolutionary than revolutionary.

The Court Theatre was founded in 1971, by Mervyn Thompson and Yvette Bromley, at a critical point in New Zealand's coming to see itself as a country, still attached to but increasingly distinct from its origins as a British colony. It wasn't the only theatre founded in the hopes of establishing a theatre that could represent the lived realities and cultural aspirations of New Zealand,[3] but it is the one that survived more or less intact, and it now claims primacy as the sole professional producer to maintain a core company year-round. From the start, the theatre teetered between two poles. As its name suggests, the Court Theatre Christchurch was deliberately modelled on the Royal Court Theatre in London – 'Britain's first national theatre company' with the word 'Court' reflecting, at least superficially, Christchurch's enduring affection for its not-so-distant colonial past (Royal Court Theatre 2010). In the beginning, the Court Theatre's founders drew inspiration from the Royal Court's relative radicalism: its commitment to presenting performances of plays that were driven by contemporary, local social issues, plays that challenged not only the status quo outside the theatre but also the hegemony of the 'great play' – the grandness of the classical repertoire – in British theatre of the time.

By all accounts, early productions by Mervyn Thompson, in particular, followed this radical impetus, but as the Court Theatre settled into the Arts Centre, it also settled into a less controversial mode of playmaking. It presents seasons that balance 'great plays' (i.e.,

the classics), current international successes and an annual summer musical, with one or two New Zealand plays – usually comedies, most often by New Zealand's most successful playwright, Roger Hall, who has been charting the foibles of the middle class here for many decades. That is, the Court's repertoire works much like the regional theatres of the US, or the National Theatre in London, albeit without the degree of critical self-reflection these theatres often claim to provoke. The Court does a wonderful job of pleasing its audience, making them feel at home in the theatre, reassuring them that as far from the bright lights of London or New York as they are here, they are seeing 'the arts of theatre [performed] to the highest international standard' (Court Theatre 2010). When it produces New Zealand plays – for example, a Roger Hall play, such as *Dirty Weekends* (a paean to the addictive pleasures of gardening, from one generation of middle-class New Zealanders to the next) – Christchurch audiences fill the theatre with the laughter of recognition, and they come prepared to be jolly, even when there's not so much to laugh about, as I observed during a recent performance of Gary Henderson's *Home Land* (an elegy for the 'Southern Man,' set in Otago).

The Court, it seems, is not so much a national theatre as a neighbourhood playhouse, one that stages a sense of being at home in the world without risking the safety of our seats. There's even a place for those other others, in the Court's smaller studio theatre, which these days is called The Forge and has been recently dedicated primarily to producing plays by New Zealand playwrights, including a number of Pasifika artists. As with regional theatres in the US, and the National and Royal Court theatres in London, the geography of the Court Theatre in Christchurch thus reproduces dominant cultural values on the mainstage while preserving room at the margins for the more marginal. The tangled threads of New Zealand's diverse cultural narratives are smoothed into a soothing theatrical framework that preserves, at its heart, the aspirations of its leading citizens – like a piano carefully transported by ship to be given pride of place in the settler's parlour. The odd notes that are sounded as a result are not necessarily heard as such by those whose ears are tuned as much by nostalgia as by lived experience.[4]

Theatre in a small, postcolonial nation such as New Zealand can, it seems, be seen to enact a kind of 'rite of return' in which the newcomer (or newer comer) stages a process of coming to terms with the here and now within the set frame of the there and then. This is true not only of explicitly Britophilic theatres such as the Court, but also of many of the smaller theatre companies that dot New Zealand's artistic landscape. How can it not be, when the very framework of the theatre always already hearkens back through the arc of European theatre history which defines it and gives it value? My Canterbury colleague, Peter Falkenberg, rehearsed this issue in a recent issue of *Theatre Topics* from the perspective of a European theatre director who, as founder and artistic director of the Free Theatre, has been making avant-garde theatre in Christchurch for the past 30 years (Falkenberg 2005: 39):

> Coming to New Zealand from Germany in the 1970s, I encountered a theatrical scene that was very conventional, colonised 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 colonisation.

Instead of claiming the moral high ground, Falkenberg catches himself in the trap of theatrical colonisation:

> When I was asked to make theatre here, I tried to counterbalance this colonisation with another kind of colonisation 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.
>
> (Falkenberg 2005: 39)

Recognising the impossibility of starting with a clean slate and resisting the impulse to make a theatre of denial, Falkenberg uses the rest of this slight polemic to outline his current thinking about a devising process that might preserve and, through a strategy of juxtapositioning, expose the ambivalence of making theatre in New Zealand:

> 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 colonisation 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?
>
> (Falkenberg 2005: 40)

Falkenberg's Free Theatre productions are presented as acts of ongoing enquiry by company members, working with everything from classical texts to personal narratives, between theatre and film, song and dance, to create theatrical experiences that leave the audience with more questions than answers.[5] Seen as a kind of Turnerian social drama, these productions, at their best, eschew the comforts of the 'rite of return' and *communitas* in favour of an uneasy sort of liminoid open-endedness.[6] This approach to making challenging theatre about the essential problem of living here now has a number of obvious pitfalls. Leaving the audience to figure out what the performance has to do with them can lead them to grasp at straws, as happened during the recent production of *Distraction Camp*, a devised work that played with recycled playtexts and live reproductions of film scenes, much as the

Wooster Group does. Audiences loved it, for the most part, but the production was accused of excessive didacticism, even though the actors' most vehement proclamations explicitly engaged in, and linked, flagrant anti-Semitism with sexism in a way that should have made it hard for anyone to find prescriptive.

Most of the theatres in New Zealand seem to fall somewhere between these two extremes. The repertory (or community) theatre tradition here is a direct legacy of the colonial period, when settlers not only flocked to tours of British companies but also picked up playtexts and performed them for their own entertainment in community halls. Not so much has changed. In Christchurch, as I write this, while the Court Theatre is about to open Chekhov's *The Seagull* and the Free Theatre is about to open its revisioning of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, we are also looking forward to seeing Sir Ian McKellen in *Wating for Godot* at the Isaac Theatre Royal, while just a few blocks away the Repertory Theatre is following up its sell-out season of *The Diary of Anne Frank* with *Journey's End*, both productions being labours of love for their many on- and off-stage participants and loved in return by the families, friends and acquaintances who make up the majority of the audience.

It's the same in other New Zealand provincial centres. Each has at least a quasi-professional company at its heart (for example, the Fortune in Dunedin, Centrepoint in Palmerston North). Each has a company or two operating at the fringe with a more radical – or at least provocative – premise. Each welcomes international touring companies with excitement at the opportunity to see stars live onstage and for a high culture experience but also a certain ambivalence about what it means to import such entertainments, the reflection of provincialism that is cast upon the audience and the reminder that it is far indeed from the Empire that produced such great plays.

This ambivalence toward the theatrical artifacts of British civilisation is at the root of the Pākehā New Zealander's theatrical experience, as Australian theatre scholars Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins recognise in their groundbreaking book *Post-colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics*: 'History is a particularly fraught issue for settler societies because of their ambivalent positioning in the imperial paradigm as both colonisers and colonised.' Postcolonial drama, they believe, must both reveal and deconstruct 'any continuing colonialist power structures and institutions' – an admittedly elusive objective whether one is queuing to see a knighted actor perform at the Isaac Royal Theatre or looking to a local, community theatre production of *Journey's End* (1992: 3, 113).

But for Gilbert and Tompkins, the theatre's role in confronting the legacy of colonisation is imperative: 'Post-colonial theatre's capacity to intervene publicly in social organisation and to critique political structures can be more extensive than the relatively isolated circumstances of written narrative and poetry' (3). Ironically, perhaps, given the central thrust of this chapter, one of the first stages in the journey from colony to country – if not the establishment of a national theatre – seems to be the theatricalisation of a national identity. For Gilbert and Tompkins: 'The multiply-coded representational systems of theatre offer a variety of opportunities for the recuperation of a post-colonial subjectivity which is not simply inscribed in written discourse but embodied through performance' (109).

Closer to home, University of Auckland academic Murray Edmond explicitly links theatre and nationalism in his personal history of the burgeoning experimental theatre movement during the 1970s and 1980s – if only to decry the slow coming of age of New Zealand theatre: 'Inasmuch as we wanted to produce a new theatre, we were part of a second coming of nationalism in the arts in New Zealand. The first coming of nationalism, in the 1930s and 1940s, had failed to achieve anything for the theatre when compared with, say, writing or painting or music' (Edmond 1996: 3).

Edmond stages the conflict between the colonial and the postcolonial as a struggle against the British theatrical tradition: 'For the experimental theatre, the new theatre had to destroy the old. But here, in New Zealand, the new theatre also had to be something of this place, of here' (23). There is, of course, something of a paradox in attempting to turn the theatre – an inherited art form and an instrument of colonisation – against itself as a way of breaking free of the colonial past. The problem of nation and theatre, separately and in relation to one another, is that there is no possibility of starting with a clean slate, even if one leaves Shakespeare and Shaw on the shelves. And yet, Edmond reports, this is what they tried to do: 'The self-created work was also the work of creating the self' (25).

Perhaps imagining that theatre and nation can be created by looking in a narrowly focused mirror becomes possible only on a small group of islands in the South Pacific – perhaps even more so in the relative isolation of the years when travel was expensive enough to mean that one was either here or there, and the distance was not mitigated by the Internet. Edmond and his collaborators sought to use theatrical practices as a way of finding out about New Zealand identity. Calling themselves the 'Town and Country Players,' they decided to 'take shows and workshops into the countryside, to schools and country halls, to be billeted with people, to set up a kind of cross-cultural contact with theatre as a means more than an end. The life of the country, its divisions as much as its unlikely coherencies, attracted us. The "theatre" would create a meeting' (Edmond 1996: 4). Devising theatre in and with rural communities in order to elicit a sense of national identity and communal purpose was not, in itself, so original by the 1980s, but at a time when New Zealand's identity was still largely bound up in its British exemplar, to assert that conversations over tea in a rural community hall might be a truer form of New Zealand theatre might have been no less radical in some ways that Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed was in its own context.

One of Edmond's critical observations is that the flames of nationalist fervour in 1970s New Zealand sparked the simultaneous founding both of conventional theatres such as the Court and of experimental theatre troupes, including, perhaps most famously, the Red Mole Theatre Ensemble by Sally Rodwell and Alan Brunton in Wellington in 1974 (Edmond 1996: 3–4). Red Mole quickly became notorious for the way they incorporated agit-prop and cabaret, clowning, masks, songs and dance, rejecting the conventions of British accents and vocal intonations – that is, the Britophilic pretentions common in New Zealand theatres of the time – in favour of their own regional accents and intonations, to produce satires on issues drawn from the local headlines. Their manifesto

was driven by the exuberance of discovering themselves as New Zealanders, politically and theatrically:

1. to preserve romance;
2. to escape programmed behaviour by remaining erratic;
3. to preserve the unclear and inexplicit idioms of everyday speech;
4. to abhor the domination of any person over any other;
5. to expend energy.

(Edmond 1996: 304)

Red Mole were committed to discovering New Zealand onstage, touring throughout the country, gathering stories and company members peripatetically. They were social, theatrical and political magpies, interweaving local community-centred concerns, British popular performance traditions and European radical theatre theories and social philosophies. Yet, like Murray Edmond, Terry Snow, writing in 1978, essentialises New Zealand national identity as something that can be unearthed directly by turning away from the British past:

> It is this originality, this unwillingness to rely on received theatrical words or frameworks, combined with a happiness to embrace the first premises of popular theatre and the evolution of a recognisable local style stemming from the regular company, which has resulted in the unique contribution of Red Mole Enterprises to the New Zealand theatre scene.
>
> (Snow 1978)

Ironically, Snow's essay appeared as the company was departing for foreign shores. It is telling that Red Mole's identification as a quintessentially New Zealand theatre company came about after they landed in New York for an extended residency, testing and consolidating their theatricalised version of a New Zealand identity as they travelled throughout the US and Europe throughout the 1980s. That is, to be seen as a New Zealand theatre company, by New Zealanders as well as by the international theatre community, Red Mole first had to be identified as such by non-New Zealanders first. Murray Edmond writes:

> Overseas, Red Mole found they could trade on their specific, local version of exoticism. In New York being from New Zealand had more currency than being from New York. From being alienated at home, they became ethnic overseas, but without losing their alienation. They doubled their value.[...] The doubling of value did not simply happen *over there*, it also happened *back there*. Red Mole in New York took on a mythic status at home. On their first return to New Zealand in 1980, Red Mole was able to sustain, even enhance their mythology. In New York they were wandering players from 'a small island in the South Pacific' – in New Zealand they are wandering heroes from the big, bad, seductive Apple. This logic worked well so long as their transient, 'on the road' status was maintained.
>
> (Edmond 1996: 358)

In fact, Red Mole's international reputation meant that they were consistently cited by my New York colleagues as a great reason to move to New Zealand, and it was to my chagrin, as a geographically challenged American, that I discovered upon my arrival on the South Island the distance between Christchurch and Wellington put Red Mole essentially in another world. Fortunately, the other company most cited in New York, Pacific Underground, was based in Christchurch.[7] In fact, one of the first performances I saw here was a parody of *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* in a community hall at the Youth Centre in Manchester Street. The room was full of Polynesian families, children racing around, adults chatting among themselves, laughing uproariously and talking back to the performers. It was the epitome of rough community theatre, indifferent to outsiders, and totally at home with its audience.

Founded in the early 1990s as a collective of musicians, writers and performers of Samoan extraction (including Oscar Kightley, Erolia Ifopo, Michelle Muagututi'a, Simon Small and Michael Hodgson), and as such situated outside the Māori–Pākehā binary, Pacific Underground are not so much troubled by the national identity question as with their own history of exclusion and oppression, having exchanged one island homeland for another, being neither Māori nor Pākehā, 'the Samoan predicament' (O'Donnell 2007a: 308). In his survey of Pacific theatre, David O'Donnell (2007a: 328) singles out Victor Rodger, who in plays such as *Ranterstantrum* and *My Name is Gary Cooper* confronts

> the discourses of racial separatism and strongly questions the popular perception of New Zealand as a racially tolerant society where white and Polynesian peoples live together in harmony. Rather than Aotearoa the 'bi-cultural paradise,' he depicts a post-colonial community fraught with divisions and misunderstandings. [...] There is real anger there, stemming from a collective 'mistaken identity,' a deep-seated inability among closed Palagi communities to recognise and to live alongside their Pacific neighbours.

Mixing satire with drama, pulling its theatricalities from television as well as sketch comedy and European realism, Pacific Underground's theatre work defines the wider New Zealand culture oppositionally. In contrast, many of the musicians, including Scribe and members of Fat Freddy's Drop, who have emerged from Pacific Underground's early performances have become iconic; their eclectic conflation of Pacific Island sounds and beats with hip hop, soul, R&B and funk has come to represent New Zealand's musical identity both nationally and internationally.

At base, the debate about New Zealand's identity – inside theatres and out – remains centred on and revolves around the Treaty of Waitangi, which is officially considered the nation's founding document. Despite its actual diversity, New Zealand culture continues to be defined by the colonial encounter between Māori and the first wave of British settlers, a bicultural drama that is played out between their descendents in a way that leaves many of us, unofficially at least, on the sidelines. It is the presence of Māori – their tribal histories and cultural practices – that distinguishes New Zealand from other postcolonial nations. After all, without the haka, the All Blacks would just be another rugby team representing a

far corner of the former British Empire. This chapter's preoccupation with the relationship between the theatre and New Zealand's national identity necessarily culminates in a look at how the theatre, as a European art form, has been appropriated and developed on Māori terms in order to reflect and shape ideas about Māori cultural identity against the backdrop and oppressions of New Zealand's colonial history and its not quite postcolonial present.

Like the haka, Māori theatre seems to have come to dominate the international imagination about New Zealand's national identity, albeit in ways that are perhaps less about empowerment than about branding. Prominent New Zealand playwright, director and producer, and Māori theatre activist, Hone Kouka is probably best known for a series of plays he wrote in the 1990s. In his recent essay, 'Re-Colonising the Natives: The State of Contemporary Māori Theatre', Kouka (2007: 240) recalls being inspired in 1990 by *Whatungarongaro*, a play by the Māori theatre collective He Ara Hou, that he says, convinced him 'that this innovative Māori theatre really had no boundaries'. He goes on: 'For the first time in a piece of Māori theatre, I saw traditional Māori concepts and Western theatre practice integrate seamlessly and become a healthy theatrical hybrid.' An anonymous reviewer in the Te Pūtātara newsletter describes the production's innovations:

> It is not just the theme and the actors and the theatre that are Māori; but the kaupapa of the play, its internal structure and its presentation are totally Māori. Gone is the structure of the European play with its one, two or three acts and rigid adherence to linear European time. This play is presented as a single act, switching between future, past, distant past and present, with each event linked to the one before and to the one after, but in which the passage of time is coincidental. Time on this stage becomes Māori, telescoped into a single event. Linear time is relevant only in the passing of the seasons and of the generations.
>
> (15 November 1990)

Inspired by *Whatungarongaro*, Kouka interwove Ibsenian realism with aspects of Māori protocol in *Nga Tangata Toa* (1994) and in the plays that followed, establishing a model for Māori theatre in which the social issues facing Māori found expression in the interplay between European and Māori language and performance practices.

In his reflections on Māori theatre in twenty-first-century New Zealand, Kouka also looks to the development of Marae Theatre by Jim Moriarty and others as another way of negotiating theatrically with the impact of colonisation:

> This practice was entirely based around Māori tikanga and kawa (laws and rules), stipulating that, when audience members came into the theatre, they were treated as if they were entering a wharenui (traditional Māori meeting house), and therefore a Māori world. [...] I understood that Māori theatre can only be a hybrid, as in traditional Māori society the concept of a 'theatre' was foreign.
>
> (2007: 241)

In his essay, Kouka's primary concern is for the way the Māori theatrical voice – which seemed to prevail in the 1990s – has somehow again been submerged. He argues that Māori social and political issues are being ghettoised by the dominant, Pākehā, culture, once again suppressed or, as in this article, channelled by non-Māori writers:

> I read an article involving a cross section of New Zealand playwrights, in which a particular paragraph caught my attention. The Pākehā writer claimed that Māori and Pacific Island work was great currency for the international market place and these same Māori and Pacific Island stories and characters were very much considered as commodities. The words stung and reminded me of the land grab in New Zealand in the late nineteenth century or the self styled protectionism of anthropologists taking Māori taonga for our own good or the kehua of paternalism that still haunts us as a people today.
>
> (Kouka 2007: 238)

The theatre company that Hone Kouka directed for many years, Taki Rua, is still operating, along with his newer company, Tawata Productions, still generating new plays by and for Māori, provoking debates on contemporary social issues by experimenting with theatrical forms. Like the other theatre companies and artists considered in this chapter, the work done by Taki Rua sits successfully within its own community where a serious conversation about Māori social and political issues, as well as the nature of theatre in a postcolonial context, carries on largely out of the sight of the rest of us.

New Zealand does not have a national theatre, but it does have a National Drama School: Toi Whakaari. Toi Whakaari has evolved over the years, taking on a Māori name, for example, and intertwining aspects of Māori performance practice with more conventional forms of European theatre training. Students' work culminates in a series of devised solo performances, which presents them to the wider community simultaneously as individuals and a kind of representative group, the newest generation of New Zealand theatre artists. And then they scatter, intent on making careers within the limitations of the theatre, film and television industry here or they venture overseas. For a moment, though, in the graduating class, it is possible to catch a glimpse of what New Zealand looks like in the bodies and voices of its theatre aspirants, performing their diverse stories and identities in roughly the same structure, sharing the same stage, albeit not at the same time.

What might a national theatre in New Zealand look like, and what might such an institution accomplish that cannot be achieved by each of these groups on their own? Drawing together the threads of its own theatre history, a New Zealand national theatre might stage itself as a meeting place. Less concerned about the eyes of the world, and more curious about how theatrical ideas can be seen to shape as well as represent social ideas, a national theatre here might allow us to experience a more fluid sense of what it is to live together on this small, relatively isolated cluster of islands, to build a national identity that is not necessarily singular or unified but understood as composed of complementary, sometimes even divergent strands of

historical movements, and to find new ways of weaving our individual performances together in art as in life.

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Notes

1 For an extended examination of the relationship between solo performance and national identity, including analyses of Mason and Thompson's work and impact on the development of New Zealand theatre, see George Parker's recent PhD thesis, *Actor Alone: Solo Performance in New Zealand* (Theatre & Film Studies, University of Canterbury, 2008). Academic studies of New Zealand theatre and performance are only now emerging, with *Performing Aotearoa: New Zealand Theatre and Drama in an Age of Transition*, a collection of essays edited by Marc Maufort and David O'Donnell (2007), the first major publication to survey the field with some depth. In particular, the essay by David O'Donnell, '"Whaddarya?" Questioning National Identity in New Zealand Drama,' addresses the history of New Zealand playwriting from the perspective of a New Zealand director and dramaturge who has been working at the heart of the issue for several decades.

2 See, for example, Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* (1994) and Benedict Anderson's discussion of 'Official Nationalism and Imperialism' in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (2006).

3 For example, the Mercury Theatre in Auckland and Downstage in Wellington.

4 This image is drawn, however awkwardly, from a well-established trope in NZ literature and film, especially *The Piano* (dir. Jane Campion, 1993).

5 For their manifesto and a list of productions, see the Free Theatre website: www.freetheatre.org.nz.

6 See Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: the Human Seriousness of Play* (1982).

7 See their website (http://www.myspace.com/pacificunderground) and also David O'Donnell's brief survey of their history and four key playtexts in 'Re-claiming the "Fob": The Immigrant Family in Samoan Drama' (2007a).