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19 Jul 2008

DIVERSITY THE KEY in authoritative survey that is never less than challenging and enlightening

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PERFORMING AOTEAROA: New Zealand Theatre and Drama in an Age of Transition: Marc Maufort & David O'Donnell (eds.) P.I.E. Peter Lang, Brussels, 2007. ISBN 978-90-5201-359-6.

- reviewed by Laurie Atkinson

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With the notable exception of John Smythe's history of *Downstage*, books about New Zealand theatre have always been slim. *Performing Aotearoa*, which is the first detailed look at contemporary theatre in all its diversity in this country, approaches Smythe's *Downstage Upfront* for length, even if it is not always quite so easy to read.

In an article entitled *Writing about New Zealand Drama*, published in *Australasian Drama Studies* of October 1984, Howard McNaughton ended his historical survey with a warning that although there had been in the 70s and early 80s a great outpouring of writing about theatre in New Zealand, many writers were in danger of not distinguishing between research and journalism.

No such worries in this impressive volume which boasts 20 academic articles interspersed with seven interviews with playwrights and performers. The interviews are placed after an article about the interviewee's work or after more general articles about particular areas such as Māori theatre or Asian drama and its influence here. Ken Duncum, Gary Henderson, Rangimoana Taylor, Jacob Rajan, Lynda Chanwai-Earle, Briar Grace-Smith and Jean Betts are the interviewees.

What comes across most strongly after reading the book is the realization of just how much theatre has changed in the past few years as it reflects the major shifts that have occurred socially, politically and internationally. We are indeed in an age of transition. So don't expect essays on Roger Hall, Ross Gumbley and Alison Quigan.

Diversity is the key.

In *The Audience are Stones* John Davies writes movingly, and with great clarity, of his "restless search for a personally authentic technique with which to express my cultural perspective" and "to articulate an indigenous Pakeha voice" which he eventually found in Noh theatre after many years touring with Red Mole.

In *Cross-Dressing Women on the New Zealand Stage* Stuart Young gives a detailed analysis of Loraie Parry's *Eugenia* as well as looking at the surprisingly large number of plays on the subject by playwrights such as Bruce Mason, Greg McGee, David Geary, and Fiona Farrell Poole.

David Carnegie and David O'Donnell in *Māori Dramaturgy* pick their way with great thoroughness through Hone Kouka's merging of Ibsen's historical play *The Vikings of Helgeland* with "Māori performative rituals and post-colonial themes" in his *Nga Tangata Toa*.

This is followed by Hone Kouka's essay *Re-Colonising the Natives: The State of Contemporary Māori Theatre* which makes depressing reading, despite his upbeat ending when he contemplates the future with talented new writers such as Albert Belz, Miria George, and Whiti Hereaka.

While offering no details he declares that "the openness to engage and the generosity of thought that was prevalent in the 1980s and 1990s is gone, replaced with a pointed cynicism and an obvious disdain toward Māori and our work. The door to large state-funded theatres remains politely closed to us also and it is therefore no wonder that many of our practitioners have left to work at Māori television or in the film industry."

Māori theatre is also dealt with in an essay on the magic realism in the work of Briar Grace-Smith, an interview with Rangimoana Taylor, an essay on the Atamira Dance Collective, as well as Te Ahukaramu Charles Royal's *Orotokare: Towards a New Model for Indigenous Theatre and Performing Arts* and less specifically in *Mask, Moko and Memory: Identity through Solo Performance in a Post-colonial World* by William Farrimond.

Possibly the most provocative essay is Peter Falkenberg's *Theatre of Unease* which develops the "troubled reflection" of "two betrayed people living side by side in Paradise" which Sam Neill and Judy Rymer explored in *Cinema of Unease*, though he starts off with an example of unease by mentioning what seems to me an out-of-date Kiwi habit of always asking foreign visitors what they think of this country. Aren't we now a little bit more self-aware and self-confident than we were in the 1950s when I first heard of this habit?

However, David O'Donnell sums up the changes in his excellent essay "*Whaddarya?*" *Questioning National Identity in New Zealand Drama* with "The mixed ancestry of writers like [Toa] Fraser and Briar Grace-Smith contributes towards a richness of themes and diversity of biculturalism, infected by immigration, and saturated in languages, politics and a sense of self-deprecating humour specific to the post-colonial Pacific."

I have to admit my heart sank when I first glanced through the table of contents and saw an essay entitled *Advocating Interaction with "the Other": Robert Lord's Use of the Food Metaphor* and thought that academic jargon was going to spoil my reading. In fact, Susan Williams's article on Lord's plays is highly readable as well as providing an astute insight into the plays.

However, I am still grappling with the following from Marc Maufort's article on magic-realism in Briar Grace-Smith's work: "The violent expressionistic projection, indeed concretizations of the 'Ich' of the protagonist in the stage set or design, through a Christ-like 'stationen' drama, does not entirely apply, in its messianic and psychological overtones, to the more collective, societal or mythical, concerns expressed by the magic realism of Native literatures."

While there are articles on TV drama (by Trisha Dunleavy), the NZ International Exhibition, Christchurch 1906-7 marking the beginning of a pan-Polynesian cultural identity (Christopher Balme), dramatic monologues (William Farrimond), and a highly informative and fascinating account of the work of Tom McCrory at Toi Whakaari by Bronwyn Tweddle, there is nothing in any detail about the other half of any performance: the audience.

Peter Falkenberg sees Kiwi audiences as being "middle-aged and from the middle classes, and slowly fading away" and it's an audience that expects in the theatre that "their performance in life is being reflected and approved of on stage."

This is possibly true of audiences for the established community theatres such as Circa, Downstage, Auckland Theatre Company and Court, but what of all the students studying drama at the drama schools, even secondary schools, and the degree courses, the playwrighting courses and the courses for directors at the universities, as well as the young people who attend theatres such as BATS and Silo? What of audiences for amateur theatre or the very talented actors, dancers and singers, who one assumes are theatregoers too, that I saw performing recently in Wellington with a high level of technical skill in slick, professionally mounted musicals such as *High School Musical* and *Cats*?

What is the racial mix of audiences? What do they expect from their theatregoing? What type of theatre excites them? How often do they go?

Can they afford to go? How many of them are there? Why does Indian Ink get sold out at the New Zealand International Arts Festival this year and fill the Opera House in Wellington a couple of years ago for a season of its trilogy but a leading playwright fails to attract large audiences despite excellent word-of-mouth publicity and rave reviews?

I happened to be reading, just before I was sent *Performing Aotearoa*, Andrew Gurr's *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London*. It occurs to me that we know more about Elizabethan playgoers (Gurr prefers the term to 'audience') than we do about contemporary audiences.

Gurr prefaces his book with a quotation from Francis Bacon's *The Advancement of Learning*: "The action of the theatre, though modern states esteem it but ludicrous, unless it be satirical and biting, was carefully watched by the ancients, that it might improve mankind in virtue, and indeed many wise men and great philosophers have thought it to the mind as the bow to the fiddle, and certain it is, though a great secret in nature, that the minds of men in company are more open to affections and impressions than when alone."

Gurr goes on to write that audiences are an active part of the performance, 'that intricate social exchange in which the immediate playhouse occasion is a conjunction of many inflowing streams of thought.' Not to try to know it better, he believes, is 'to accept falsification of the whole exchange.'

While it's a pity that audiences or playgoers are not considered in any detail in *Performing Aotearoa*, the book is never less than challenging and enlightening, and it provides an authoritative survey of the theatre in a turbulent period 'of many inflowing streams of thought' in the years just before, during and immediately after the millennium in Aotearoa. -----

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