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## SKILL AND CONFIDENCE BRINGS NEW INSIGHTS

[PRINT VERSION](#)*Hamilton Gardens Arts Festival 2015****SOLOTHELLO***

By William Shakespeare and Regan Taylor

Directed by Craig Geenty

Presented by Te Rēhia Theatre Company

at Te Parapara, Hamilton Gardens, Hamilton

From 14 Feb 2015 to 22 Feb 2015

[1 hr]

Reviewed by [Gail Pittaway](#), 15 Feb 2015

Te Rēhia Theatre Company has been experimenting with the use of Commedia dell'arte masks and Māori storytelling for a couple of years now and this new development, back to the Bard, makes for a fantastic piece of entertainment.

Regan Taylor performs a solo version of *Othello*, using only a low box, few masks and a white sheet to retell and transplant the great play of betrayal of trust into a Maori context. Taylor is a superb performer, shifting shape and voice to match each mask: the gullible Roderigo, the duplicitous Iago and the trusting, beautiful, Desdemona who is characterised only by a high humming voice and stylised, dance like movements. The white sheet hangs over a simple line, to change place and pace, or becomes the nuptial bedding, a tavern, the scene of a fight, the cursed 'ocular proof' of a handkerchief, the death bed for Desdemona and Othello – a smear of blood marking the transfer from wedding night to murder.

The masks themselves are exquisite taonga, each carved and shaped with painted moko. The men's masks are very much in the Commedia del Arte fashion, with chin and tongue free to speak and move, giving Taylor maximum opportunities to have Roderigo's droopy tongue a feature of his characterisation – something that might not be so apparent without a mask.

Desdemona's mask is full facial and painted with simple lines and a delicate chin moko. Taylor's eyes, too, seem to change behind each mask – flashing as Iago, dulled as Roderigo and questioning, for Desdemona. He is a skilled performer in this art and makes the old tale fresh and relevant to this time and place.

In a short mihi at the beginning of the evening, Taylor refers to the Waikato River which flows alongside the Hamilton Gardens, barely 20 metres down the bank beyond Te Parapara Garden which is such a perfect space for this particular performance, with its ceremonial gateway (waharoa), palisade fencing and ancestral carved pou, themselves decorated with faces and masks. He quotes the well known saying:

Waikato taniwha rau, he piko he taniwha.

Waikato of a hundred taniwha, every bend a taniwha

and brilliantly offers this as the informing motif of this production; a metaphor for the twists of trust and distortions of belief that characterise Othello's decline into jealous rage. It's a breath-taking connection, and it works.

The play script is abridged and many passages and characters are left out, including my own favourite character, Emilia, while others are invisible but present, such as Brabantio, Desdemona's father and Ludovico, the Venetian diplomat who becomes the witness for the final blood bath.

Yet the transference to a Māori context adds new insights, even new comedy into the play, as when Iago takes on several of the lines from Othello's clown-like servant and puns on words such as 'lie', or introduces Michael Cassio (Casio) as being "good with numbers": a most successful gag.

In all it's a risk that only a highly skilled and confident actor would take on and Taylor is both of those. Ka pai!

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