

# Mana Wahine; Hoki Mai Tama Ma

By Sam Brooks  
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*Okareka Dance Company*  
*Q Theatre, Auckland | July 3-5; touring until August 16*

I CAME OUT of *K Rd Strip* last year as a full-fledged fan of Okareka Dance Company. Throughout university and since, dance has been a medium that I've been open to but have rarely found accessible. I find myself amazed at the performers and often moved by the synthesis of movement and music, but have found it hard to get meaning from it. *K Rd Strip* was a close to transformative experience for me, mixing the myth of one of Auckland's hotspots with the reality and allowing both to exist in the same space.

**Mana Wahine** is undoubtedly a step up from *K Rd Strip*, and I would call it the best dance show that I've ever seen without hesitation. Inspired by the true story of Te Aokapurangi, a young woman from Rotorua who was captured in battle by a tribe from the North, but returned many years later to single-handedly save her people from slaughter, *Mana Wahine* is less a narrative experience and more an emotional one.

Even on a technical level, Okareka Dance Company seems to have stepped it up with this new work. There is innovative use of projection, from the striking opening image of Tui Matira Ranapiri-Ransfield that ushers us into the theatre, to the movement of the dancers with projections of women onto them, movement that is frame-perfect in its synchronization. It's not only a technical feat in terms of projection, but in terms of these performers who keep up with the projections and make them seamless in the show's construction. These projections, which reoccur throughout the show, are a constant and clever reminder that these performers are representing not only the story of Te Aokapurangi, but also the stories of the many women, both Maori and non-Maori, who follow her.

*Mana Wahine* is an absolutely gorgeous work to watch, and it's one that lingers long afterwards. The show appears to tell a story of Maori women throughout the years, from Te Aokapurangi to the women of today, telling of their strength and resilience in the face of adversity, both historical and masculine. The moment where the performers embrace masculinity while remaining staunchly feminine is a hauntingly powerful one. There are images throughout, courtesy of basically everyone involved, that deserved to be framed and hung up in a gallery somewhere.

Credit must first go to co-authors Taiaroa Royal, Taane Mete, and Malia Johnston for giving us a work that is profoundly moving and yet incredibly accessible. I understood what was going on and did not feel left out of the conversation, and I felt like I could appreciate this show as much as somebody who had trained in dance their entire lives. This is a huge achievement in my eyes, and one that should not be underrated. Through them, this is a piece that feels alive, modern, and contemporary while honouring the past at the same time.

On the craft side, it's no surprise to see more genius costumes from Elizabeth Whiting, who can do no wrong, and a very subtle but effective set design from Tracey Collins. I am less familiar with the work of Rowan Pierce, whose AV design is so necessary to the piece and so exquisite in its minimalism that you can't imagine the show without it, and it makes me keen to see more from him. Vana Karolczak's lighting design is one of the most beautiful I've seen this year—less a design and more like painting the stage in unison with the dancers, to great and emotive effect. I am less qualified to judge the compositions of both Victoria Kelly and Tui Matira Ranapiri-Ransfield, but the music crosses genres while still remaining within the scope of the show, and providing a dynamism that the rest of the show ably rises to.

Finally, props to all the performers, Maria Munkowits, Nancy Wijohn, Jana Castillo, Bianca Hislop, Chrissy Kokiri, and Jana Castillo, who give the show the fierce emotion and commitment that any show needs to succeed, but marry it with an artistry that is awe-inspiring.

Even if you're not into dance—and honestly, I can take it or leave it most of the time—*Mana Wahine* is an essential experience. It's one that I can see having a very long life through tours and festivals across the country and the world. It is a show about women, largely by women. The insight it provides about women from all backgrounds and cultures is not to be missed, and are to be discussed about at length in the foyer and on the way home. Don't miss out.

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*By Tainui Tukiwaho*  
*Presented by Te Rehia Theatre*  
*Mangere Arts Centre, Auckland | July 3-5; 9-12 (Herald Theatre)*

SOME SPACES ARE KIND to shows regardless of their form. Both of The Basement spaces are easy for shows to adapt to; the space is malleable enough that with few exceptions it seems to morph to whatever is in there on any given week. Somewhere like The Musgrove Studio is much less so, it's hard to shake the feeling that you're in a drama studio.

Mangere Arts Centre is a curious beast of a space. On one level, it's an incredibly unforgiving space. There is no space between the performers and the audience so there's nowhere to hide or nowhere for the energy of either group to go except at the other. This goes the other way as well, for a lack of energy on either part can drown a show before it even gets past the first scene. On another level, it's a large space that is also an incredibly intimate space. Small gestures feel huge, and huge moments can be as small as the expression on an actor's face.

The space is initially not forgiving to new show **Hoki Mai Tama Ma**. The set is a little bit confusing and it's hard to place exactly where we are in both space and time. The play also starts off with a very low energy, and I'm uncertain of what genre this show is sitting in or of the relationship between the characters. We are following Tama (Rawiri Jobe) who has returned from a month in Italy after being sent there by his koro on what appears to be a wild goose chase, and he finds his cousin Bella (Amber Cureen) and girlfriend Patricia (Ascia Maybury) less than pleased. However, Tama comes back from Italy with a secret.

It doesn't take long for the show to amp up, though, and by the time we get our first Maori mask scene, the energy is there and the chemistry is sparking between the actors. The audience is into the show at this point, and the show never flags again throughout.

The phrase 'Maori mask' needs a little explaining, as it is not a genre of theatre. It is a genre that *Hoki Ma Tama Ma* is pioneering, and one I can see having a future with this show and beyond it. Maskmaker Tristan Marler has created masks that sit somewhere between the traditional commedia dell'arte and Maori moko to create a style that this show uses to great effect. The mask scenes detail Tama's koro's experiences as a POW in Italy during World War II, and it helps distinguish the play from previous stories about those left behind by war, and future generations dealing with that.

Towards the end of the show, *Hoki Mai Tama Ma* says some fascinating and prescient things about cultural identity and heritage, where the two intersect and why it matters that they do so. In the last act, the characters get into some hairy material that is both political and personal, and it's fascinating to see it play out. The actors rise to this occasion, especially Cureen, who manages to convey the experience of holding something very close while also rejecting it, and in these moments playwright Tainui Tukiwaho engages in potent discussion of what matters in retaining our heritage, and also why it doesn't matter.

The actors fare well throughout, seamlessly moving between the more naturalistic, almost sitcom-esque proceedings of the present day and the more stylistic mask scenes. Rawiri Jobe is an incredibly likeable lead as Tama, and the other three cast members play off him admirably, especially Regan Taylor in two of the most appealing roles in the play: Tama's best friend Nuku and a sympathetic Italian guard.

It's not a perfect piece of theatre, however. At a little over an hour, it's still running a little long and there are long passages where plot is sacrificed for character development that doesn't progress the script in the long run. The tone of the present day scenes is not well honed, at times it feels akin to *Shortland Street* while at other times it's closer to *Friends*, which sometimes leaves the audience in a no man's land between the two. Gerald Urquhart manages the shifts between styles very well, but more could be done with the blocking in the present day scenes to give the piece some more dynamism and life.

It's a special experience to see a show at what feels like the beginning of a long life, and with both time and development, I can see *Hoki Mai Tama Ma* becoming a standard of New Zealand theatre. For the flaws that are in this production, the discussions it raises about cultural identity and heritage are not to be missed, and are something to value in a country that seems so unwilling to talk about it. ■

*'Mana Wahine' and 'Hoki Mai Tama Ma' are touring New Zealand as part of the 2014 Matariki Festivals.*

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