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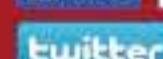
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MUCH TO ADMIRE, MORE WORK TO BE DONE

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HOKI MAI TAMA MĀ

By Tainui Tukiwaho
Directed by Gerald Urquhart
Presented by Te Rēhia Theatre

at Forum North, Whangarei
From 31 Jul 2014 to 2 Aug 2014

Reviewed by David Stevens, 1 Aug 2014

The two great wars of the twentieth century are seminal, nation-defining events in the history of this country, because of the experience of the troops while they were away – and what happened when they came back.

This schizophrenia – what they had seen there and what they had here – is neatly, if simplistically captured in the title of the old song, 'How You Going to Keep 'Em Down on the Farm / After They've Seen Paree?'

Going away, in itself, was mind-blowing for those who had never left home, and coming back was, for many, worse, and this may be especially true for Maori, who had so little concept of 'over there' in their consciousness.

It was defined is Robin Hyde's extraordinary, revelatory book *Passport to Hell* (1931), detailing the First World War experiences of Starkie – described by some as the quintessential NZ hero; dark-skinned, but not Maori – in the First World War. Perhaps the most disturbing image happens close to the end. On their return to NZ, on a troop ship, one soldier jumps overboard and deliberately drowns himself in sight of Wellington Harbour. His reasons are never explained, the death itself raises little comment and yet many of the returning men seem to share an understanding of why he did it.

Perhaps Hyde's book was, in itself, a red light to others. She went where few have dared to go and what she saw was bleak. Perhaps we don't want to know about that New Zealand?

Otherwise, 'the wars' are a sort of hallowed ground, exemplified by Gallipoli and the Anzac legend. Young men (mostly) went away, experienced dreadful, life-changing events and then came back to take up where they had left off. There has been too little examination of the change that happened to those men, or of what, these days, would be called 'post traumatic stress disorder', at least of the WW1 generation, the seminal generation; nor the remarkable rise in the power, however tacit, of women. The temperance movement, for example, was not a result of the war but the six o'clock closing of the pubs (and the attendant six o'clock swill) was, an attempt to tame the beast in man, and it helped to define who we were.

So when it becomes clear that these issues of returning soldiers are the core of HOKI MAI TAMA MA, my interest sparks markedly, and those aspects of the play (the present day aspects), with its complex concepts of identity, maintain my interest throughout.

The question – who am I? – is visceral for all of us. The need to know who we are and where we are from is part of our grounding, our roots. I, on the other hand, was born in a country that no longer exists, and so I feel a constant sense of displacement – where do I belong?

No such questions bother Bella, for my money the central character of the work. Bella is confident and secure in herself and in her bloodlines, her lineage, her genealogy her place: her whakapapa. Bella knows who she is and the shock to her (and to us) at the climax of the play is that she isn't who she believes herself to be.

Bella's cousin, Tama, has returned from a surprising and unexpected visit to Italy looking for his Koro, his grandfather, and comes back with Koro's diary, which, he says, will explain his absence. So far, so fairly good, but now the play takes an unexpected and structurally difficult zag.

Two masked Maori soldiers, warrior-like, appear, and in comic show Koro's diary is bought to life, and the intent of the creative team becomes apparent.

The combination of the forms of commedia dell'arte with the Maori language is provocative and tantalising – if no great leap. I vividly recall Richard Campion's electric production of *He Mana Toa*, where moko did duty for the masks. I loved it and was surprised that it was effectively a one-off; that it did not become the basis of a thrilling stream of New Zealand theatre.

So I don't need any convincing about the concept of Maori masked theatre, it is not the form that concerns me with *Hoki Mai Tama Ma*, but rather the execution of it, because it seems divorced from the naturalistic, present-day play we have been watching. That first (mask) scene is a considerable zag, in style if not in content, and I might have been much more at ease if the connection to the present day play had been clearer – if Tama had started to read the diary aloud and the masked soldiers had assumed the action being described – something, anything, that would meld the two stories together much sooner than presently happens.

The play progresses in this tandem form and there are several things to admire. Some things about identity are said which are important and are very seldom discussed, but while much of the masked show is mildly entertaining, at least until the climax it stays divorced from the present day story, which seems to be treading water.

I begin to feel that the present day story is being made subordinate to the idea (the masks), rather than the idea illuminating the play (the identity issue).

At the same time, I respect and admire the intelligence and imagination of the creative team, and especially the writer, Tainui Tukiwaho, and the four actors – Regan Taylor, Amber Curreen, Ascya Maybury and Rawin Jobe – because eventually the two strands do connect and coalesce and in a satisfying way.

The scene of the buckets is a lovely piece of theatre, some of the later mask work is yearningly beautiful and the introduction of the Italian elements (the Pulcinella /Punchinello mask) is a most welcome piece of the jig-saw.

The climax – Bella's discovery that she is not who she thinks she is – is extremely good, and I could have done with more of it, or at least, of its implications for Bella. How does she cope with the new and radical information about herself?

So while there is much to admire, there is still more work to be done, because I think the priorities are skewed. If drama is forward action, then it is how Bella deals with the discovery about herself that is the well-spring of the play; the past is simply the backstory. In this version, it is almost the other way around.

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