



REVIEW: Hoki Mai Tama Ma (Te Rehia Theatre Company)

Cross-Commedia Clarity [by James Wenley]



Te Mata Kōkako O Rēhia

The masks, masterfully crafted with aroha by maker Tristan Marler, are exquisite. The etched mokos glimmer with detail under the stage light. The performers tongue flicks out from under the half mask. It's as if the ancestors, carved on the beams of the whareniui, have jumped off and sprung into fresh and blood life. It is these masks that make *Hoki Mai Tama Mā* special, a new artform Te Rēhia Theatre Company call Te Mata Kōkako O Rēhia, blending Maori tikanga and the Italian art form of Commedia dell'Arte.

It's remarkable that somebody hadn't thought of this before. Indian Ink are the immediate touch point that in this country that have been experimenting and localising mask form, more recently embracing Balinese mask in *Kiss the Fish* (indeed, Justin Lewis assisted the company). Regan Taylor wondered what would happen if a Commedia mask spoke Te Reo, and the result is

the new tangata whenua form from playwright Tainui Tukiwaho and Director Gerald Urquhart.

In *Hoki Mai Tama Mā*, two storytelling forms play opposite each other – the world of Mata Kōkako, and a more usual naturalistic drama (sans masks) – which finally merge at the end of the play in a refreshingly unexpected way. Tama (Rawiri Jobe) has returned from Italy, just in time for Matariki. He went there to track down his Koro, who had gone awol overseas, however Tama had neglected to tell anyone, and neither his cousin Bella (Amber Curren) or girlfriend Patricia (Ascia Maybury) are very happy with him. [Reviews](#) from its opening week at the Mangere Arts Centre indicated that the play's opening was problematic. While its second week at the Herald Theatre seems to have increased the energy, the focus in the opening scenes seems to be in the wrong place. The conflict is generated around Tama's absence, and the initial one-dimensional characterisation of Patricia as the pissed off Pakeha girlfriend is at odds with the more nuanced and supportive character revealed later. In short, it's not the most engaging opening, and the heat surrounding Tama's travel soon disappears. What drives the play's engine is the mystery surrounding why Koro went to Italy, and it is question that the conflict could be more meaningfully associated.

We learn that Koro has instructed Tama to read his old war journal, which is meant to hold the clue as to why he left, and the Mata Kōkako is used as the medium to tell his World War Two experiences. What we first see are two Maori warriors (Jobe and Curren) posturing and trying to show how brave they each are in a comic introductory scene. They are captured by an Italian officer, and we get a series of lazzi-esque scenarios of two Maori in a commedia Prisoner of War camp (lazzi being the improvised stock scenes in Commedia comedy). They continually try to escape, only to be busted by the Il Capitano figure (Maybury with a very long nose). It's amusing, but does need some tightening for best effect. The medium really bares comic fruit with a cross-cultural encounter with a sympathetic Italian guard (Taylor) who, though initially weary of the hongī, delights in learning from the Maori and sharing some of his own culture too.

There's no 'in-story' reason as to why these flashback sequences are told in through commedia. Perhaps it's how Tama initially sees the entries, unable to grasp the gravity of the war sequences, or do the entries themselves understate the severity? Certainly, we can make some readings of our own. The masks themselves suggest a fluidity of cultural identity - Maybury playing both a Maori wahine and an Italian. Do they point to the outward construction of identity? Do you choose the mask, or does the mask choose you?

Part of the difficulty in *Hoki Mai Tama Mā* is how to balance the two worlds of the play. The world of Mata Kōkako, perhaps because of both theatricality and novelty, is generally more engaging than the naturalistic world. A subplot, with charming and fact-obsessed neighbour Nuku (Taylor) hoping for some Matariki magic in wooing Bella, is the strongest stand in the present day narrative. The way the production merges the two worlds together for the play's ending is unexpected, brilliant, and incredibly resonant.

Hoki Mai Tama Mā points to a world of possibilities, and I hope the company continue to develop both this play, and the larger artform. While including both the naturalistic and Mata Kōkako were necessary in delivering their stunning conclusion, I'm intrigued about the potential of using just to tell their story. Imagine a whole whanau of these characters!

***Hoki Mai Tama Mā* is presented by Te Rēhia Theatre Company and Auckland Live and plays at the Herald Theatre until 12 July. Details see [Auckland Live](#).**

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