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HOKI MAI TAMA MĀ

at Mangere Arts Centre, Auckland
From 3 Jul 2014 to 5 Jul 2014

Reviewed by Nik Smythe, 4 Jul 2014

At the best of times it's a challenge to accurately express the experience of a live theatre production in written words. With its new original hybrid form of mask discipline created by the team who identify as Te whanau o Hoki Mai Tama Ma, to even adequately describe this work-in-progress feels more difficult than usual.

Being told we are the first people in the world to witness Te Mata Kokako o Rehia certainly feels pretty special. The creation of the masks, and this play, began when actor /producer Regan Taylor mentioned to his friend and colleague, writer /producer Tainui Tukiwaho, an idea he'd mused upon for some years: what if commedia dell'arte masks spoke Te Reo Maori?

Employing the services of artist Tristan Marler to design the exquisite masks, and of mask performance veteran Justin Lewis to train the cast in the form basics, they assembled a company who have shared an eighteen-month journey to reach this world premiere evening. There is a distinct sense that history is being made.

The play begins near the end of the story as Tama, a handsome young lad from an unspecified rural town played by Rawiri Jobe, returns from Italy where he followed his Koro, 'Piri', who inexplicably took off to Italy after the death of his beloved wife Puhi. The ensuing play tracks Tama's undertaking to work out why Piri absconded, by reading the worn old war journal that Koro says will explain his motivation.

As he reads the entries, when he gets a chance in between family duties as they all prepare for their annual Matariki feast, the distinctive commedia-inspired characters emerge. The elegantly carved half-masks with stylised moko speak in simplistic Reo and communicating as much if not more so in mime. Tama's Kuia Puhi's mask is contrastingly full-faced, with a chin moko.

During his tour of service, Piri meets and befriends another Maori by the name of Morehu before they are captured and impounded in a fascist POW camp. The camp guards, distinguished by more authentic commedia dell'arte masks, are repeatedly lampooned by Piri and Morehu as they make various attempts to escape. When one of their guards begins to become their friend, clues as to what Koro's big secret might be begin to emerge.

The cast bring their exquisite visages to life with skilled physical performances. These in turn contrast with the natural performances of the 'present-day' young whanau.

Director Gerald Urquhart successfully blends the distinct theatrical styles so that the transitions flow naturally in and out, aided greatly by Calvin Hudson's evocative lighting design. Rory Drew's sound design plays into the mix perfectly, effectively engaging our sense of mood and place with old war tunes, waiata and birdsong.

Tama's cousin and Koro's favourite grandchild Bella (Amber Curren) has many sides to her personality, at first mainly abrasive ones - stern, frank, sharp-tongued, no-bullshit. All her warmth and understanding is apparently reserved for her beloved Koro, but that doesn't stop their friend and neighbour Nuku from determinedly wooing her as he has been doing all these years.

Taylor's Nuku is a hilarious clown savant; polite but cheeky, and impressively knowledgeable on any topic you name from animal behaviour to Elvis. Further to this, he is multi-skilled in musical styles, farming and food preparation, among other things no doubt, and overall his shy, honest humour charms and exasperates everyone in spades.

As Tama's new girlfriend Patricia, Ascia Maybury is the newcomer to the whanau. Her red hair and blue eyes prompting suspicion from the staunch Bella, but she fairly soon proves to be a worthy match for all the talk and action taking place on this ceremonious day.

Despite being the Kaumatua of the household and the centre of the narrative, Koro (Taylor) is offstage for almost the whole play. When he does emerge, his secret reveals itself to the more deductive audience members, just before it's finally revealed to his family.

Some parts in the script and performance could use loosening up, as there's an occasional tendency to sway from the usual natural, dynamic interplay to more didactic information sharing. Meanwhile, during the Matarua scenes the clarity of what's happening precisely has scope to be sharpened up in places, which ought only to intensify the enchantment of this fledgling artform.

All told though, the heart of the story and its ultimate significance are very strong. It's clear a great deal of time, mahi and aroha have been taken to produce an exceptional piece of work - according to the players during their opening night mihi, they were still workshopping up to an hour before the doors opened.

Not content with conceiving, developing, producing and performing, Taylor also designed the simple set. The functional screens of corrugated iron, wood and woven grass mats, plus a few wooden crates, are equally redolent of wartime compounds and rural farmlands. I am intrigued as to what the easy-to-miss woven fibre nests that hang overhead upstage are meant to symbolise until they light up - of course: Matariki!

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