Acting Agency in Aotearoa New Zealand: Hone Kouka's and Briar Grace-Smith's Debut Plays

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Abstract
Māori culture has a rich oral tradition which includes the recitation of *whakapapa* (genealogy), *karakia* (incantations), *whakataukī* (sayings) and *kōrero* (narratives), the singing of *waiata* (sung poetry), and the performance of *haka* (action songs). Despite the presence of numerous "performative behaviours", in Richard Schechner's terms, theatre in the Western sense is alien to the indigenous population of Aotearoa New Zealand. Since the 1980s, however, there has been a flowering of this art form among Māori artists. Theatre has proved a congenial medium for combining customary knowledge/rituals and present narratives, myth and realism, artistic creativity and political denunciation. The result is a hybrid genre, developed according to the cultural needs and purposes of Māori practitioners and audience. My article will focus on the debut plays of two Māori award-winning contemporary playwrights, Hone Kouka and Briar Grace-Smith, whose works succeed in finding a balance between conformity to traditional frameworks and Western dramatic conventions while posing important social and political issues; they can be legitimately considered as typical examples of Māori theatre today.

Keywords: Māori theatre, Hone Kouka, Briar Grace-Smith, performance theory.

1. Between Performance and Theatre

In traditional Māori society the concept of theatre in the Western sense is considered "foreign" (Kouka 2007: 241). Māori culture is rich in oral literary genres and rituals, which include *waiata* (sung poetry), *whakapapa* (genealogy), *whakataukī* (sayings), *kōrero* (narratives) and *karakia* (prayers and incantations) (Mc Rae, 1991: 1). As Eva Rask Knudsen suggests, pre-contact times Māori were "non-literate" rather than illiterate or preliterate, which means they were

"trained readers" not of books but of their own cultural texts, for example the carvings in the *wharenui* (ancestral or meeting houses) or oral storytelling (Rask Knudsen 2004: 23-4). Each genre was used for particular purposes and on particular occasions. *Waiata* were generally laments or love lyrics, sung publicly on a *marae*[1] or elsewhere to express the poet's feelings and arouse emotions in the listeners. They were used to convey a message or pay homage to someone (an important guest, a dead person, a beloved). *Waiata tangi*, for example, were laments sung at *tangi* (funerals) and *waiata aroha* (love) were songs of love and longing.

Migration myths and tribal history generally took the form of *whakapapa* and were not only recited as part of the protocol on public occasions but visually represented in carvings and decorations at meeting houses. The *mana* (prestige, charisma, psychic energy) of a chief depended highly on his ability to speak, to show knowledge of tribal history and to construct ornate speech by quoting *whakataukī*, reciting *kōrero* and singing *waiata*. The *karakia* were recited by *tohunga* (priests) in sacred ceremonies and rituals. *Haka* (posture or action songs) were performed in different public events. Today, as in the past, visiting a *marae* still involves a series of performative rituals known as *pōwhiri* (formal welcome) with fixed roles played by the participants. The rituals include various *karanga* (summons and replies, issued by selected elderly women) acting as 'keys' to entry, that is, "the medium by which the living and the dead of the *manuhiri* [guests, visitors] may cross the physical space to unite with the living and the dead of the *tangata whenua* [hosts, people of the land]" (Tauroa 1986: 50). The host people will sometimes welcome guests with a *haka pōwhiri* (ritual action chant). Then chosen speakers (elderly men) from both parties utter various *mihi* (greetings) and *whai kōrero* (formal speeches), each followed by a *waiata*. After that, the guests place a *koha* (gift) on the ground. If the hosts accept it, physical contact can take place with the traditional nose to nose greeting: the *hongi*. Roles are distinct and pre-established: the *tangata whenua* stand on one side, the *manuhiri* on another. An elderly woman of each party is in charge of the *karanga*: the *kai karanga* (caller of the hosts) and the *kai whakautu*

[1] A *marae* is the open space in front of the meeting house or ancestral house, where public meetings take place.

(caller of the visitors). A similar ritual accompanies the *poroporoaki* (farewell ceremony). Present and past meet on the *marae*: living beings and their dead ancestors, the real and the spiritual, history and myth.

If 'orthodox' theatre was alien to Māori culture, one could reasonably assert that traditional Māori culture was imbued with many different kinds of "performative behavior", which Richard Schechner describes as an essential communicative, emotional and normative need of humans, which belongs to intercultural tradition. The concept of 'performance' has been revolutionized by Schechner's "performance theory" according to a "broad spectrum" approach (Schechner 1993: 21), which sees "aesthetic theatre" (i.e. Western theatre) as

> only one node on a continuum that reaches from the ritualizations of animals (including humans) through performances in everyday life – greetings, displays of emotions, family scenes, professional roles, and so on – through to play, sports, theater, dance, ceremonies, rites, and performances of great magnitude. (Schechner 1994: XIII)

Schechner therefore aims at exploring the "horizontal relationships among related forms rather than searching vertically from unproven origins" (Schechner 1994: 28). He is referring to the (never scientifically demonstrated) theory of Cambridge School anthropologists, which gained currency well into the first half of the twentieth century. Their assumption was that the origin of ancient Greek theatre (from which Western theatre derives) was to be found in the evolution of a Primal Ritual (*Sacer Ludus*) in honour of god Dionysus to promote fertility and natural rebirth (1994: 1-4). Schechner, on the contrary, shifts theatre from a sophisticated position in some evolutionary ladder to a group of performance activities that are primeval in themselves (as demonstrated by their intercultural existence and duration in time) and do not need to be set in a hierarchical position through the search of 'origins' and 'derivations', or labels such as 'primitive' or 'modern'. A further implication of this theory is that aesthetic theatre is not a superior kind of performance resulting from a long evolution and tied to a superior (Western) civilization, but just one of the many possible inflections of the notion of performance.

Interestingly, Schechner underlines two points that are pertinent to the scope of this article. One is the close relationship between performance knowledge and oral tradition. Performance knowledge is much more than knowing the great dramatic (written) texts – from Aeschylus to Shakespeare or from Chekhov to Beckett – since a performance is more than just "the staging of a playtext" (1985: 22). Performance knowledge belongs to the oral tradition insofar as it relies on the master-disciple relationship, on the direct manipulation of the body as a means of transmission, and on the respect for "body learning" as distinct from "head learning" (Schechner 1985: 23). Performance knowledge is imparted by handing down practices, techniques, rituals, notions from generation to generation, in various cultures and different genres. In the West it occurs, for example, in conservatories of music or drama schools. In other cultural environments it is carried out through the passing of "performance consciousness" by observation and practice, as for the deer dance of the Arizona Yaqui (1985: 4-5), or in the master-disciple training, as for Japanese Noh drama (1985: 6-8), two performance practices that are surprisingly likened to the way professional sports in America are coached and taught (Schechner 1985: 23). Coaches, Schechner argues, tell their secrets to younger players, as it happens in traditional cultural contexts, where neophytes learn and practice customary knowledge passed down through oral transmission. One can discern a similar pattern in how performance knowledge is passed down in Māori culture: first through observation and participation in public events on the *marae*; then through the handing down of *mātauranga Māori*[2] and customary rituals from generation to generation in the *whanau* (extended family) or *iwi* (tribe), and in Māori educational institutions such as *kōhanga reo*, *kura kaupapa*, *wharekura* and *wānanga*[3]. The texts of *waiata*, the recitation of one's *whakapapa*,

[2] *mātauranga* Māori: "a body of knowledge originating from Māori ancestors, including the worldview and perspectives, Māori creativity and cultural practices" (Kēpa, McPherson, Manu'atu 2015: 21).

[3] *kōhanga reo*: Māori language nests for pre-schoolers; *kura kaupapa*: primary schools, providing all teaching in Māori within a framework of Māori values and culture; *wharekura*: Māori schools; *wānanga*: tertiary education institutions for Māori. These are the educational institutions in charge of conveying Māori values and capable of reaching large numbers of families at one time (Kēpa, McPherson, Manu'atu 2015: 91 and 94).

the body movements for men in the *haka* (foot-stamping, tongue protrusions and rhythmic body slapping) or the facial expressions for women (notably, the flashing eyes) in *waiata-ā-ringa* (action songs) are all part of Māori performance knowledge, in its different tribal inflections.

Another point of Schechner's theory that is worth considering is his conviction that "orthodox dramaturgy – the theater of plays behind prosceniums, in fixed settings, for a settled audience, relating stories as if they are happening to others – is finished" (Schechner 1994: 146), because it does not meet the needs of most people any longer:

> This kind of theatre doesn't meet the needs of many people, needs as old as theatre itself, combining ritual and entertainment. These needs also include group interactions as one of the remedies for runaway mechanistic technologies. I am not against technology [...]. But I know a need exists for encounters that are neither just informal person-to-person gatherings like parties nor formal, mediated programmed routines like office or factory – or watching TV and movies for that matter. (Schechner 1994: 146)

Orthodox theatre has lost the combined function of ritual and entertainment as well as the idea of being a sort of "middle world" (p. 146), where different groups interact not only through audience participation but also by means of audience inclusion and environmental staging. In this process it has also been deprived of much of its social/political/spiritual/therapeutic efficacy and has been replaced by other media, institutions or group activities in Western societies. Much avant-garde and experimental theatre in Europe and the USA made attempts to redress this loss in the late twentieth century.

Schechner's statements also reconnect to a postcolonial context. The rise of Māori theatre signifies that Māori performers have seen the limits of the genre in the current historical period but also its potential for incorporating and developing Māori performative knowledge and behaviour. The "appropriation" of this genre by Māori artists and the "abrogation" of its rules – to use two terms coined by postcolonial criticism with reference to the process of re-modelling a cultural genre of a dominant culture according to the terms of the dominated one (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 2002: 37-8 and 77) – have given birth to a hybrid form of theatre in Aotearoa

New Zealand. Cultural concepts, rituals and performative behaviour were inserted in the theatrical event and re-adjusted to fit the new form, which was in turn changed and had to re-adjust itself to the new elements. The result was Māori drama, that is, a type of drama not about Māori but by Māori and representing Māori priorities and worldview.

Māori theatre combines Māori performative behaviour and Western theatrical conventions, ritual and entertainment, myth and realism. Moreover, it can be seen as the construction of a 'middle world', where theatre practitioners interact with the audience by creating a culturally marked environment: the theatre space becomes a *marae* where the audience are welcomed as *manuhiri* in a *pōwhiri* ceremony. This is part of the novelty of Māori theatre and can be found in Kouka's and Grace-Smith's debut plays, which will be explored in the next sections.

2. Māori Theatre: the Rise of a Postcolonial Hybrid Genre

Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin define postcolonialism as "the study and analysis of European territorial conquests, the various institutions of European colonialism, the discursive operations of empire, the subtleties of subject construction in colonial discourse and the resistance of those subjects" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 2000: 187). Focusing directly on postcolonial drama as one of the colonisers' cultural texts supporting imperial discourse, Gilbert and Tompkins pinpoint the most important features characterising postcolonial performances, which are included in the following list:

1) acts that respond to the experience of imperialism, whether directly or indirectly;
2) acts performed for the continuation and/or regeneration of the colonised (and sometimes pre-contact) communities;
3) acts performed with the awareness of, and sometimes the incorporation of, post-contact forms; and
4) acts that interrogate the hegemony that underlies imperial representation. (Gilbert and Tompkins 1996: 11)

The two plays that will be analysed in the next section, Kouka's *Mauri Tu* and Grace-Smith's *Ngā Pou Wāhine*, definitely include all four points. They respond to the experience of imperialism in their

denunciation of the effects of colonialism on the indigenous minority. This is effected through the exploration of some crucial topics of contemporary Māori society: the loss of identity, disempowerment, the problem of relocation after dislocation, the changing role of social institutions such as the extended family (*whanau*), intergenerational conflicts, competition with Pākehā[4], and violence and criminality among young people. These themes are however explored within a Māori framework, that is, a 'regeneration' of pre-contact traditions, which implies reviving traditional knowledge and myth, and accepting supernatural elements as real (for example, the presence of spirits or ancestors). The performance incorporates customary rituals or symbols and the set recreates traditional environments or situations. These items are contained within a post-contact genre, which is utilised but re-adjusted according to the cultural needs of the playwrights and their community. Finally, the way Māori are represented in the plays challenges that of non-Māori playwrights, where Māori tended to appear as exotic ornaments, comical subjects or symbols of a noble race doomed to extinction. Here they emerge from stereotyped or archetypal figuration to appear as complex and multifaceted human beings.

The rise of Māori political activism from the mid-1970s was a propulsive force for Māori theatre. The first work by a Māori playwright to get into print was Harry Dansey's *Te Raukura* (first performed in 1972 and published in 1974), which focuses on the story of two prophetic Māori leaders. The first theatre company set up and run by Māori was Te Ika a Maui Players, formed in 1976, initially to present Rowley Habib's *The Death of the Land*. Performer and manager Roma Potiki helped to form the radical theatre company Maranga Mai, which dramatized recent events from the Māori protest movement. In 1979 the company toured schools and *marae*, and were invited to give a performance at Parliament Buildings in Wellington. In 1972 Rawiri Paratene was the first Māori graduate of the QE II Arts Council Drama School (later the New Zealand Drama School and Toi Whakaari) and became an inspiration for a later generation of Māori actors (Te Ara: 2017a and 2017b). He was followed by Rangimoana Taylor, who graduated in 1975 and formed

[4] New Zealanders of European origin.

Te Ohu Whakaari, a Māori theatre cooperative in Wellington. This was the company Grace-Smith joined at seventeen as an actress, and which also produced Hone Kouka's *Mauri Tu*. The artistic careers of the two playwrights intersect at several points in their youth, as they belong to the same generation and were both connected to the Wellington scene.

Grace-Smith's experience with Te Ohu Whakaari somehow marked her beginnings as a writer for the theatre, too. In an interview, Grace-Smith describes Te Ohu Whakaari's theatre as "devised theatre", an approach that recalls *commedia dell'arte*, and relies less on a fixed script and more on improvisation (O'Donnell 2007: 270). Scripts originate from the collaborative work of the group. In this context, however, she and Apirana Taylor did most of the writing: "One of us would come up with the stories and Apirana Taylor[5] was one of the cast members, so him [*sic*] and I did a lot of the writing for the group" (O'Donnell 2007: 270). Grace-Smith's career in acting and writing continued a couple of years later, when she joined Roma Potiki's company He Ara Hou and participated in the collective writing of *Whatungarongaro* (1990), which was "one of the first plays to combine realistic storytelling with *tikanga* (the correct customary way of doing things)" (Grace-Smith 2007: 271). The play "was devised by the group and came from the stories of their lives" (Kouka 1999: 21), offering a picture of dysfunctional (sometimes violent and abusive) family-relationships. When Grace-Smith wrote her first professional play, *Ngā Pou Wāhine*, she was deeply influenced by this experience. *Whatungarongaro* was the first example of hybrid theatre and it also made an indelible impression on Kouka, who saw it from the perspective of the audience.

Kouka's interest in theatre started in the mid-1980s, when he was a university student in Dunedin. Later he continued studying in Wellington, where he also trained as an actor and finally graduated at Wellington's Toi Whakaari (previously called New Zealand Drama School) in 1990. He was particularly attracted by the activity of the Depot Theatre (later named Taki Rua Theatre), which initially produced only New Zealand works and later opened its doors to Māori theatre practitioners. However, he felt Māori theatre had not

[5] Māori playwright and actor, best known for *Whaea Kairau: Mother Hundred Eater* (1995).

fulfilled all its possibilities, as he states in his essay "The State of Contemporary Māori Theatre":

> I still felt there was a lack of Māori perspective from my own generation. In general New Zealand theatre was Pākehā theatre and Māori theatre remained ghettoised. I felt determined to change this, inspired by the work of Riria Brown, Apirana Taylor, Rangimoana Taylor, Don Selwyn and Rore Habib. (Kouka 2007: 240)

The great creative turning point for him was seeing the above-mentioned *Whatungarongaro* in 1991:

> For the first time in a piece of Māori theatre, I saw traditional Māori concepts and Western theatre practice integrate seamlessly and become a healthy theatrical hybrid. Previously, the inclusion of things Māori seemed to be merely for show rather than an intrinsic part of the storytelling. In retrospect I believe that from this time onwards Māori theatre had entered its golden age. (Kouka 2007: 240)

Thus, the artistic beginnings of Kouka and Grace-Smith converged in the same play, which turned out to be a major influence for their future works as well as an indicator of the direction to take.

A further source of inspiration for both playwrights was the development of 'Marae Theatre' in the 1990s, led by the aforementioned Roma Potiki and Rangimoana Taylor but primarily driven by actor/director Jim Moriarty. In this type of performance the audience is called into the theatre space, greeted with *waiata*, encouraged to vocally support the actors during the performance and in general to treat the theatre as a *marae* (Kouka 2007: 241). Kouka's *Mauri Tu* was first performed in 1991 and published in 1992. Grace-Smith's *Ngā Pou Wāhine* premiered in 1995 and was published in 1997. Interestingly, both are solo performance pieces[6]: one actor/actress plays all the roles with minimal changes of costumes and scene. The topic of the next sections will be the analysis of these two

[6] In the "Author's Foreword" to the first edition of *Mauri Tu* (1992) Kouka calls his play "a solo piece" (p. x). The play is described as a "solo performance" in two reviews included in the critical appendix at the end of the volume (pp. xviii and xix). In O'Donnell's interview to Grace-Smith, *Ngā Pou Wāhine* is defined "a solo show" (Maufort and O' Donnell 2007: 273).

plays, based on the texts of their first published edition and on the included notes of direction, which refer to the second production by Te Ohu Whakaari for *Mauri Tu* and to the first production by Ngā Kete Wāhine e Toru for *Ngā Pou Wāhine*. Both performances were at the Taki Rua/Depot Theatre, Wellington.

3. Between Reality and Myth: The Quest for Identity in Kouka's *Mauri Tu* and Grace-Smith's *Ngā Pou Wāhine*

Mauri Tu and *Ngā Pou Wāhine* centre around the search for identity of their problematic young protagonists in modern times and its resolution within the boundaries of traditional values. Each play deals with disrupted *whānau* (families) unable to be reference points for young adults and is incorporated in a mythical frame, reflecting the interpenetration of the two levels of the same reality: living people and ancestors, present and past, history and myth. The frame is created by the inclusion in the play of rituals, symbolic objects and references to traditional spaces in the sets. As mentioned before, *Mauri Tu* and *Ngā Pou Wāhine* are solo performance pieces, so one actor/actress plays all the roles. This structure might have been simply out of convenience, for it allowed two young playwrights at their debut to cut cast and expenses to the minimum. The choice of this type of performance also emphasises the importance of the artist, who becomes central to the action and to the imaginative world of the play. A solo performance goes against the principle of mimesis on which Western drama is based (Gilbert and Tompkins 1996: 56) and stresses cultural priorities. It reinforces "performance consciousness" in Schechner's terms, that is, it activates simultaneously "this" and "that", is "subjunctive, full of alternatives and potentiality" (Schechner 1985: 6). An example of this performative principle given by Schechner pertains to Japanese Noh Drama, where actors wear masks that are much smaller than their faces. The same applies to Kouka's and Grace-Smith's plays, in which the actor/actress becomes the vehicle of "this" and "that", embodying the predicament of contemporary Māori people and a larger reality.

Mauri Tu, first published by the Aoraki Press (n. 1 in the Theatre Series) in 1992, is preceded by a foreword by the author, which might "help others to recreate this work" (as stated in the preface).

Kouka reveals his source of inspiration and describes the set, props, lighting, and costumes that were used in the second, notable 1991 production at the Taki Rua/Depot theatre in Wellington, co-directed by Apirana Taylor and Riwia Brown and featuring Hone Kouka as the leading character[7]. The author also explains which customary rituals were used to create the cultural 'frame' of the play and underscores that the genealogical link of the characters (grandfather, father, his two sons) justifies their being performed by the same actor: "My reasoning for this [writing a solo piece] is that all four characters are of the one whanau [*sic*] – originally of one Woman. Therefore they each have traits of the others, inseparable" (Kouka 1992: x). Whether disrupted or not a *whanau*, which includes ancestors among its members as well, is the matrix of individual identity. The passage from one character to another in the performance, effected with minimal costume changes, is signaled not only by a vertical spotlight, but also by the recitation of *Taki Tūpuna* (identifying chants referring to the family tree – the *whakapapa* – of the characters) during the transitions.

Similarly, the first edition of *Ngā Pou Wāhine*, published by Huia in 1997, presents a preface by the author and a description of the first production. A symbol of Māori traditional architecture was used to identify each character, the *poupou*. This is one of the many wooden carved posts of the ancestral house that represent the story of an ancestor or god. The set of the play consisted of four sloping platforms, one for each character, behind which stood a *poupou* identifying him/her. The woman performer moved from platform to platform according to the character speaking. The only character without a platform and a *poupou* is the protagonist, Kura: the girl in search of identity. As in Kouka's case, Grace-Smith resorts to tradition to define each character, identified in relation to a certain *whakapapa,* or not identified if he or she cannot trace his/her roots. The motivations behind the play were explained by the writer in an interview where she said her purpose was to tell a story that hadn't been told before, to talk about Māori women and to create a strong role for a Māori actress (O'Donnel 2007: 273). Grace-Smith reflects the will of Māori women in the 1990s to engage in a medium that had

[7] There had been another production six months earlier at the Allen Hall Theatre in collaboration with the University of Otago Drama Department.

previously been used mostly by men. Furthermore, she expresses the need for a Māori gendered drama, a genre that is more reflective of Māori women's current experience, of their stories, problems and points of view: the need for self-representation.

3.1. A Quest for Male Identity: Hone Kouka's *Mauri Tu*

The central idea of *Mauri Tu*, which means "forceful special character" (Maufort 2003: 206), came to Kouka from a newspaper report of a real court case about a young Māori man, who had made a plea to have his case heard on the *marae*, following Māori protocol. This started a public controversy over whether Māori should be judged by a mono-cultural justice system that did not take into account cultural and ethnic factors. In Kouka's play the central character, Tero Tahihi, has almost beaten a Pākehā man to death in a pub for having insulted him with a coarse racist remark because Tero was talking to his girlfriend. In prison, the young Māori applies to take his case to the local *marae*, despite the fact he has actually been raised as a Pākehā. Tero is in the typical liminal state of many young Māori of his generation, trying to integrate into Pākehā society and be successful at the expense of their own identity. As Maufort underlines, Kouka's work provides "a dramatic allegory of the hybrid predicament of the Native 'Other' in the contemporary modern world" (Maufort 2003: 206).

The list of *dramatis personae* in the play includes the four members of the Tahihi family (with details of their identifying clothes) and the "Actor", who is described in his function, that is, when he is not playing the other roles. Waru, the little brother, is 10 years old and wearing a baseball cap; Tero, in his twenties, is in black jeans and a T-shirt; Jerry, the father, is a businessman in his forties and is wearing a cardigan; Matiu, the grandfather, is over sixty and has an aged suit jacket. The "Actor", on the other hand, "represents the Whanau [family] and their Tūpuna [ancestors], the Whakapapa [genealogy] always present in spirit whenever any character is speaking" (Kouka 1992: XIII). He is a sort of meta-theatrical figure and the unifying thread of all the characters. He is also the spirit animating them, a "supernatural" entity, the vital force who takes different shapes after reciting the *Taki Tūpuna*, the identifying chants of the family: its genealogy. As with the symbol of

the *poupou* in *Ngā Pou Wāhine*, the mythical frame encompasses the characters defining their identity.

The problems of the protagonist, however, are tangible and pertaining to the present. The play consists of a sequence of sketches showing the audience three generations of Māori men who have reacted to Pākehā physical and cultural colonization in different ways. Grandfather Matiu is proud of *Māoritanga*[8], can speak Māori and supports his grandchild's wish to be judged on the *marae*. His son Jerry, on the other hand, is completely 'Pākehāfied' and seems quite isolated in the family. Matiu and Jerry have become estranged from each other. While talking to the picture of his own dead mother, Jerry justifies his decision to say "no to all things Māori" (Kouka 1992:15). He followed her advice to "live the Pākehā way" (Kouka 1992: 14) and pursued the cult of Western success. He also adds that he raised his sons in the same way, indirectly acknowledging his responsibility for Tero's disorientation. Now he is dismayed by the results. Tero has committed a criminal offence and Waru is living with his grandfather. The younger boy is even learning to speak Māori. Jerry is ashamed of Tero's act and the only explanation that comes to his mind reflects his own material values: "Was it money? Why?" (Kouka 1992: 27). He also resents having to go to the *marae*, a place alien to him. He regards Māori culture as 'useless' and sees no point in maintaining one's roots. What Jerry cannot see is that Tero's violent reaction is a sign of frustration and alienation deriving from his lack of identity.

The play is divided into two parts. Each contains four sketches, one for every character. The first sequence introduces the characters, describing them in different situations. Waru is praying to his mum "via God"; Matiu is watching Waru at a rugby game; Jerry is at home, before going to the *marae*; Tero is in jail, talking to another prisoner. The second sequence of sketches, taking place on an imaginary *marae*, defines the characters. On the *marae* Tero appears embarrassed at his complete ignorance of the rituals, confessing he had to learn them from his younger brother. He feels empty and confused, and utters words in broken speech. The emphasis with which he describes his American car shows us his assimilation into

[8] Māori culture and traditions.

Western civilization. In a moment of epiphanic lucidity, however, he realises why he needed to come to the *marae*: "Look I'm here cause [*sic*] I wanted to know what I was missing out on. I wanted *in*" (Kouka 19912: 30). He feels he does not belong anywhere. He is not only scorned by Pākehā, as in the pub. He is also excluded by Māori for his education in the best schools:

> "Nobody wanted to know me because of *this*…
> *(Touches his arms and face)*
> It was the same when I came back here.
> Nobody wanted to know me cause I was considered *white*. Hell, I just wanted to know what it was like. I wanted *in*. [….] (Kouka 1992: 31)

While Jerry takes no blame for Tero's crime, Matiu seems to understand his grandson's disorientation. Interestingly, the grandfather's introductory speech on the *marae* is in untranslated Māori. His following comment explains he has done it intentionally to make the audience (on the *marae* and in the theatre) feel the darkness that pervades a person deprived of his/her language. Kouka accentuates this concept by having all the theatre lights progressively switched off. Matiu's next words underscore his sympathy for Tero's predicament, seen as a symbol of the hybrid condition of most Māori:

> Darkness… And you wonder why we stumble, why we fall, why we harp back to the past, as you call it.
> Well the past is what we once were, and can be again. The past gives us light.
> When you have light you are strong, and when you have darkness you are weak. All I ask you is to understand this.
> *(Lights come back up full)*
> My moko[9] is guilty. Lives in darkness. (Kouka 1992: 21)

By speaking in untranslated Māori, grandfather Matiu has the audience experience the destabilising effects of the loss of cultural references. But he strikes a positive note, too. His grandson's decision to be judged on the *marae* is a way to say: "I *am* Māori. I have come to claim my past" (Kouka 1992: 23). Matiu promises him

[9] Abbreviation of *mokopuna*: grandchild, descendant.

that when he comes back from prison, he will "give him light" (p. 23), that is, teach him Māori culture and language.

No women are physically present on the stage. Tero and Waru's mother is in "heaven", as we learn from Wairu's innocent (and often comical) prayers. Their grandmother is just mentioned by Jerry as a major influence on his Westernisation (but he does not say if she was Pākehā or not). The closing lines are Waru's, in one of his imaginary talks with his mother. We learn that Tero has been sentenced to one year's imprisonment. Matiu and Waru have already visited him and noticed there are many other young Māori like him. Unlike Tero, here and in the rest of the play, Waru appears as a serene child. His roots have not been undermined. His last line, "the coach reckons I have a bright future" (Kouka 1992: 34), referring to his rugby practice, could be read as a good omen for Māori people. The closing chant, this time sung not by the "Actor" Māori by Tero, augurs even better.

3.2. A Quest for Female Identity: Grace-Smith's *Ngā Pou Wāhine*

Grace-Smith's *Ngā Pou Wāhine* explores the quest for identity of a young woman: red-haired Kura. As Maufort points out, the title suggests that "the wāhine [women] seen in performance possess the strength of their pou, their ancestral posts" (Maufort 2003: 219)[10]. The set includes four platforms with a *poupou* identifying each character: Lizzie (Kura's foster mother), Walter (Kura's foster father), Miro (Kura's dead mother) and Tia (Kura's good friend). For example, Lizzie's *poupou* carries a cross, symbolising her strong Christian faith, and Walter's has a hook, which indicates he was once a great fisherman and hunter. For most of the performance, however, Kura acts at the front of the stage with no *poupou* referring to her. This condition, corresponding to her life up to that point, debilitates her. She has no strength. In the centre there is one *poupou* with no platform. This belongs to ancestor Waiora. All the characters are Māori women except for Walter, who is Pākehā. So the actress has to act the role of a man, too, going against the mimesis principle.

[10] *Ngā* is the plural article, *wahine* means woman (the macron in *wāhine* is for plural), *pou* means post, pole; *poupou* is the carved post of the ancestral house. A *poupou* tells a story and may represent an ancestor or god.

The play opens with a lament recited by Waiora, alluding to her legend and providing the mythical frame. It is followed by a *karanga*, as if the theatre were a *marae*. The rest of the play consists of a series of monologues from the various characters. The protagonist is described from different perspectives. For Lizzie, Kura has become an angry, sullen stranger. There is no dialogue between the two women, nor any interests or feelings. Tia, a university student Kura met on the bus, perceives her as a special girl with a repressed potential: a fire smothered by some unresolved questions. Miro's ghost, whose presence is accepted as real in a magic-realist vein, confirms Kura's *mana* (prestige and charisma) in mythical terms. She recounts Kura's birth and traces her connection with the mythical red-haired ancestor Waiora. The action takes place in three times: the present in which Kura, Lizzie, Walter and Tia live; Miro's recent past; and Waiora' mythical time. The real and the magic interpenetrate constantly, affecting Kura's evolution. The audience witnesses the rise of her new consciousness, which will lead to the final epiphany, marked in the very last scene by Kura's recitation of a *waiata*, with Waiora's *poupou* symbolically lit in the background, and the subsequent construction of Kura's own *poupou*.

Various genres are mixed – myth, fairy-tale, realistic fiction – making the play a typical postcolonial hybrid work. The mythical thread, started by Waiora's lament, is continued in Miro's monologues, where she tells Kura, among other things, the story of her *tupuna* (ancestor). Symbolically, both Waiora and Kura have a flowing mane of long red hair. Waiora was a great *rangatira* (chief) of the Moa people, who prospered under her rule. She did not belong to them, but was a gift from the Tūrehu, the fairy people. She had been found in a spring riding high on a fountain and covered in *kōkōwai* (red ochre, also called Māori gold dust). Waiora was gifted with magical power and foresight. Her *mana* caused the anger of envious Takimoana, a powerful male chief of an enemy tribe, who decided to kill her. Waiora knew Takimoana was a danger for the Moa people and thought she was prepared to confront him. But when she saw him covered in *kōkōwai* and sparkling in the sun, as handsome as a god, she was reminded of her origin. She was spellbound and realised she could not avoid her fate. So, she did not fight him back but asked him to meet her in secret. Waiora's offer of love was not repaid equally. Takimoana eventually betrayed her.

She was not killed, but beaten and abducted. Takimoana wanted to take her *mana* away with him. Waiora accepted her predicament, but also reacted to help the Moa people. On the canoe that was taking her away, she cut her red hair, strand by strand, and threw it into the water. The strands were eaten by fish that became food for the people. Her *mana* and strength therefore passed onto them and were not lost. This way she assured the continuation of a genealogy of powerful chiefs among the Moa. In associating Kura with Waiora, Miro stresses her daughter's *mana* and special gifts. For Kura, discovering her roots means acquiring personal strength and agency.

Maufort stresses the blend of Māori mythology and Christian symbolism in the legend. Waiora becomes a scapegoat figure in a similar way to Jesus Christ. She sacrifices herself for the good of her people in order for them to be spiritually reborn, as evidenced by "the idea that the spirit of Waiora/Christ should be eaten, in the form of a fish, by people, if they are to preserve their mana (honor)"; on the other hand "the myth opposes Christianity in its feminised version of Messiah/Saviour" (Maufort 2003: 223).

A feminist approach is found not only in the mythical frame but also in the fairy-tale thread, which sees a heroine (Kura) saving herself without a Prince Charming. Many elements of the fairy tale are present, in particular from Cinderella (Maufort 2003: 220). Little by little, we learn from Lizzie's monologues how she actually snatched the baby girl after Miro's death, against the will of her mother – who had destined Kura to be brought up by her own sister – to compensate for the affective void in her life: an idealised unfulfilled love outside her marriage, whose fruit (a baby) ended up in abortion. Kura appears to be a prisoner in the naughty stepmother's house: a place where she does not belong and where she has to play an enforced role. The lack of communication between Kura and her foster parents (although there are hints of tenderness in Walter more than Lizzie) is a sign of their estrangement. Lizzie's moralistic and churchy attitudes are a cover for her behaviour (her lover, her abortion, her lies in order to obtain Kura's custody). She embodies a narrow-minded and obsessive Christianity rather than *Māoritanga*. Walter is a good-minded person but a man and Pākehā, hence he cannot help Kura in her personal and cultural crisis.

The affective isolation at home is increased by the alienation she experiences in her work at the conveyor belt of a canning factory, considerably affecting her stability. Kura earns a living as "colour analyst" (Grace-Smith 1997: 18) in a tomato sauce factory, checking cans for defects. To escape the dullness of her work she takes refuge in a dream-world, inventing imaginary stories and characters, as indicated in the stage directions: "*Kura lives out a fantasy in which she is saving the factory from a defected demon; sometimes she takes the role of the demon*" (p. 24). The realistic strand of the play alludes to the widespread poor working conditions of Māori in New Zealand, employed as unskilled labourers in industries.

Tia's humorous definition of Kura as *pōrangi* (crazy) alludes to her liminal state in-between two worlds, since she deconstructs the word in the terms *pō* (night) and *rangi* (day, sky): "She's well and truly stuck between pō and rangi that dawn child" (p. 18). Tia calls Kura "dawn girl" because of her red hair, which her full name evokes. Kura is the abbreviation of Te Atakura (the red dawn), because she was born early in the morning, when the sky is red, and because she had red hair. The meaning of her name, as Maufort underscores, is "palely echoed, in a degraded way, in the tomato sauce she has to inspect" (Maufort 2003: 220). Tia also has a function in Kura's rebirth. She represents a category of educated Māori, intellectually independent, culturally proud and politically conscious of their rights, like those rising in the Māori Renaissance. When Kura leaves her adoptive parents' house, she will move to Tia's place. Her room has been painted not red (it would recall tomato sauce) but green, which means "rejuvenation" (Grace-Smith 1997: 34) and rebirth. Kura's last words to Lizzie and Walter are not dictated by anger or frustration but simply by a positive assertion of her new awareness of the past and future:

> I'm sorry Aunty Liz, Uncle Walter, but something has changed. (*pause*) I heard the words. I saw the memory. Her singing. Telling me of my past, my future. The dreaming has become real and I can't stay here any more. I need to find out where I'm meant to be. (p. 34)

Two final considerations can be made on Grace-Smith's play. First it can be included in what Gilbert calls "Marae Theatre" (Gilbert 2001: 348). The setting with the *poupou* evokes the sacred

space within a *wharenui* (ancestral house), the place which most represents Māori culture and the notion of primal identity, based on the enlarged family and the communion with the ancestors. It also uses some performative rituals "embedded in the culture of the marae" (Peterson 2001: 18), for example Waiora's lament and *karanga* at the beginning of the play. The audience is therefore taken into the *wharenui* and partakes of Māori rituals. These are more accentuated in the performance than in the book, since the texts of the Māori *karanga* or *waiata* are probably untranslated on the stage (while you find the translations at the end of the book), and become close to their original function of "presentational actions" rather than being "representational" as Western drama (Gilbert and Tompkins 1996: 57). All this reflects an idea of drama that inflects the conventions of the canon according to the cultural needs and views of indigenous people. It is an act of cultural abrogation and appropriation in postcolonial terms (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 2002: 37-8) and a political stance as well.

Second, the play is a piece of drama but is also part of that myth-making process that constitutes oral tradition. In an interview, Grace-Smith has revealed that it was her (Pākehā) father who told her Waiora's legend and he probably invented most of it:

> He told me about a quarter of the story as it's written in *Ngā Pou Wāhine* and the family all said they vaguely recognised it but it seems pretty clear to me that my Dad made the whole thing up. But people know the play now, so it's turned into a myth. It's turned into something people believe is true, believe it's come from a genuine old story. So you can actually create myths. (O'Donnell 2007: 274)

The (made up) legend of a great female chief is then associated with the story of a contemporary woman and re-elaborated to meet the needs of the present, support Māori women's self-confidence, encourage the awareness of their possibilities in tune with their cultural identity, and finally send a message of hope.

By inflecting Western drama according to Māori aesthetic and ontological views, Kouka and Grace-Smith have shown the vitality of this genre, its performative possibilities within and outside Western tradition and its capacity to meet the artistic and political needs of an indigenous minority in a contemporary postcolonial

country. Māori theatre is a hybrid genre, but we should rather call it "composite", a term "embracing creativity as part of its intrinsic meaning", as asserted by Eva Rask Knudsen (Rask Knudsen 2004: 11). A term that suggests richness instead of lack, affirmation instead of submission, dynamism instead of static essentialism. So much so that Kouka's and Grace-Smith's debut plays were just the first fruits of two promising ongoing careers in New Zealand drama.

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