



Towards a New Pacific Theatre

Bert van Dijk

This article presents an overview of a current PhD research project 'Towards a New Pacific Theatre' - focusing on some of the ethical and political issues of Intercultural Performance and articulating a number of guiding principles with regards to intercultural exchange.

But let me first situate myself. I have been a dancer, actor, and theatre director for most of my professional life. Michael Chekhov, Grotowski, Min Tanaka, Etienne Decroux, Eugenio Barba, Roy Hart and Enrique Pardo are among those that shaped my approach to theatre. In my work I value and integrate the vocabularies of Body, Space, Voice, Text, Objects and Light as equal partners in the process of image making. I use the devising (i.e. collaborative) process to explore and generate performance content. For the last 16 years I have been based in New Zealand. In the Netherlands children are told that if you drill a hole through the earth you end up in New Zealand. This tickled my imagination and I was determined that one day I would check out the world on 'the other side'.

In New Zealand the natural environment is physically and spatially incredibly dynamic, yet Body and Space appear such underdeveloped elements in our theatre practice. I asked myself: how can it be that - after more than 200 years of Māori and Pākehā (non Māori) co-existence - mainstream NZ theatre remains more or less unaffected by Māori culture? These reflections led me to my current PhD project.

Research Overview

The aim of my PhD project is to develop - and test - an intercultural approach to theatre making, that is inspired by Māori, Contemporary European and Japanese performance principles. Based on performative enquiry into bicultural and intercultural performance praxis I want to construct a model of actor training

and devised theatre, that is strongly connected to, and reflective of, the unique geographic, cultural and spiritual qualities of New Zealand.

For theatre to be current it needs to relate to the cultural identity of its audiences and, somehow, reflect their natural and cultural environments. In New Zealand, the natural environment is breathtakingly dynamic, and the people a rich mixture of Māori, Pacific Island, European and Asian cultures. However, this is not reflected in the NZ theatre practice where it appears that:

- Actors have no feet
- Gods are missing
- Adventure and risk-taking is lacking
- Theatre appeals only to a portion of its communities.

I propose a New Pacific Theatre that is cutting-edge, experimental, embracing the latest technologies and theatre expertise, as well as being deeply rooted in the spiritual and cultural dimensions of Pacific tradition - its actors connected with their body and the earth (They Have Feet), the archetypal qualities of the gods incorporated in training and performance practice (Return of the Gods), a sense of adventure prominent, and relating to our various cultures and communities.

For pragmatic reasons, it has been necessary to narrow the field of my inquiry to a definite number of praxis within each of the fields of Māori, Japanese and Contemporary European Performance. Within the field of Māori performing arts I am concentrating on the pre-European form of Te Whare Tapere. The reasons for this are three-fold:

1. To circumnavigate the complex issue of colonialism that has influenced current Māori theatre practice in ways that makes it hard to establish what is essentially Māori, and what is Pākehā based
2. Having access to the in-depth research on Te Whare Tapere by Dr Charles Royal, undertaken in the context of his PhD research at VUW (1998)
3. A strong personal and professional attraction to the performance principles and value-base of Te Whare Tapere: Manaakitanga (reciprocal relationships), Rangatiratanga (leadership through unity), Tohungatanga (knowledge of symbols), Ūkaipo (spiritual nourishment), Whanaungatanga (inter-connectedness of all things in the world) and Kotahitanga (unity of all things).

Within the diverse field of Japanese performance the spotlight is on the two contrasting genres of Nō and Butoh. Nō Theatre is one of the oldest theatre genres in the world that has stayed alive for many centuries in more or less the same form. It is still possible to observe Nō training and performance in action. The Nō philosophy and practice are well documented in the English language, and a number of NZ theatre practitioners have incorporated elements of Nō in their work. In contrast Butoh is a con-

temporary, rebellious response to some of the formal and restrictive aspects of traditional Japanese society and theatre practice. It offers an exciting example of intercultural performance in which Western and Japanese codes and expressions coexist and collide.

In the domain of Contemporary European Performance I am focusing on Devised or Collaborative Theatre, the Michael Chekhov Technique, and Intercultural Performance. Devised Theatre is one of the most effective strategies to deal with the ethical, political, and spiritual complexities of intercultural performance. It offers a number of ways for cultural identities and environmental qualities to inform the creative process:

Firstly, the collaborative nature of Devised Theatre allows an ensemble, made up of artists from various cultural backgrounds, to incorporate ideas, values and modes of expression that are culturally formed (in New Zealand: Māori, Pacific Island, European and Asian).

Secondly, devisers aim to create performances that are current. This implies that the performance material is somehow reflective of, and connected to, the people and their environment.

Thirdly, devisers are committed to experimentation, exploring a wide range of possible locations in the natural and urban environments as a site for performance.

The Michael Chekhov Technique - recently experiencing a huge international revival - enables the actor to draw from their body and imagination in order to create intention, feeling and quality of being (character). It beautifully balances the demands of form and content in theatrical expression. When aiming to bring together a number of theatre practices from various cultural ancestries, we are entering the domain of Intercultural Performance – an arena fraught with ethical and political issues. In New Zealand the unique relationship between Māori and Pākehā has crystallised the intercultural performance debate on issues of bi-cultural theatre.

Intercultural Performance Debate

On reviewing the ideas of Rustom Bharucha (1993), Christopher Balme (2007), Charles Royal (1998) and Janinka Green-



Agamemnon:
Matariki Whatarau as Agamemnon in
AGAMEMNON
(dir. Bert van Dijk): New Zealand, 2005

wood (2002), it appears that the intercultural performance debate centres on the following issues:

- a) Globalisation and Diasporas
- b) The relationship between tangible and intangible aspects of cultural expressions (in other words: matters of form and content)
- c) The appropriation of cultural material
- d) Mutuality in relationships during the process of intercultural exchange.

Issues of Globalisation:

In her article Researching the Native Māori (Norman & Lincoln, 2005) Linda Tuhiwai Smith observes that the current globalisation carries in it a danger of losing the culturally specific.

“For indigenous communities, the “something lost” has been defined as indigenous knowledge and culture. In biological terms, it is our diversity; in sociolinguistics, it is the diversity of minority languages; culturally, it is our uniqueness of stories and experiences and how they are expressed.” (p. 95)

Across the globe our cities are starting to look more and more the same - containing similar food and drinking outlets, manifesting ‘a sameness’ in architecture, and using English as the main language. For some people it is comforting to

Xê'no~pho'ria n. the ecstatic love of all things foreign.

know that - no matter where you are in the world - you can get your latte, your Big Mac, or your favourite Italian food. Others deeply regret and resent these homogenizing developments, and long for authentic cultural encounters when travelling.

The increased mobility of people across geographic borders also presents an opportunity for people to connect across cultural differences, and to learn from, and appreciate, these differences. I argue that Intercultural Performance can play a significant role in the survival of the culturally specific (language, cultural expressions, values) as well as enriching the palette of our artistic experiences.

Some people respond to things foreign or 'other' with a feeling of fear or terror (Xenophobia), while others are attracted and fascinated, perhaps even obsessed by the 'other'. For me, the attraction to 'otherness' (Xenophoria) is what drives me to travel, to engage with other beings, other cultures, and other practices. It is what expands my horizons, and deepens my understanding of how people and communities operate and express themselves. To give theatrical expression to this strong drive in me I created a solo performance in the mid 90's, directed by Enrique Pardo. For the title of this show I invented a new word: XENOPHORIA

This word fuses the linguistic roots of Xeno (foreigner) and Euphoria (ecstasy) into 'the ecstatic love of all things foreign'.

Tangible and intangible aspects of cultural expressions:

The discussions around the appreciation of tangible and intangible aspects of cultural expression - particularly concerning issues of universality versus the culturally and historically specific - are rather complex and, at times, distorted

by personal or professional bias. In her monograph *History of Bicultural Theatre* Janinka Greenwood (2002) observes that the theatre of cultural exchange, as explored by Brook, Barba and Grotowski, is more concerned with theatrical form than with the complex meanings those forms carry in their original contexts. In this context she notes that:

“[Bharucha’s writings] have problematised practices of intercultural borrowing and the understanding of both theatre and culture that underlie them. At the base of Bharucha’s critique is an insistence that “bios” cannot be separated from “ethos”; that stories and forms cannot be separated from the meanings they hold for their own people, without doing violence to both the forms and the people.” (p. 8)

It appears that Bharucha (1993) is more interested in the culturally specific than in the universal when he declares:

“There are no universal values in theatre. There are only personal needs, which get transformed into social and political actions, rooted in the individual histories of theatre.” (p. 67)

I want to counter this declaration by observing that many audiences have been able to enjoy and appreciate performances based on cultural expressions and codes foreign to their own. This demonstrates that theatre contains and reflects universal values, as well as the socially, politically and historically specific. In terms of actor training, it is crucial for an actor to develop the ability to shape physical and vocal actions beyond cultural conditioning. It would be extremely limiting if an actor were only able to ex-

press the culturally specific - unable to achieve some kind of neutrality or universality, from which to transform into any chosen quality or state of being.

An Example of Cultural Appropriation:

When I saw Peter Brook’s *Mahabharata* in Paris (in 1986) I enjoyed the visual spectacle of this 8-hour long production with its stunning use of costumes, fire, water, fight scenes, and imagery. As I was unfamiliar with the source material, the intrinsic meanings and context of the stories went over my head.

After reading Bharucha’s argument that this show was “one of the most blatant and accomplished appropriations of Indian culture in recent years” (Bharucha 1993), I came to realise that I had been rather naïve in my original response, and that Peter Brook’s production was unethical in a number of ways. Bharucha compares Brook’s *Mahabharata* with the process of commercial textile exploitation:

- i. Raw materials (the story) were taken from India
- ii. These materials were transformed into commodities (costumes, props, a text decontextualised from its history in order to sell)
- iii. Sold (forcibly) to India

What is the point of an international ensemble, Bharucha asks, when most of the actors’ voices have been homogenised within a Western structure of action, and where they have to speak in a language foreign to them?

Mutuality in Relationships During Intercultural Exchange:

At the heart of Bharucha’s critique on intercultural performance practice is his observation that there is often a lack of mutuality in relationship during the pro-



The Blue Shawl: From the left: Tia Barrett, Tema Kwan Fenton-Coyne, Ngahuaia Murphy (Noh Chorus in the background) in **THE BLUE SHAWL** (written / directed John G. Davies): Hamilton, 2008

cess of cultural exchange, particularly in the context of colonialism. Colonialism does not operate through exchange: rather it appropriates, decontextualises, and represent the ‘other’ culture, often with the complicity of its colonial subjects.

Guiding Principles for Intercultural Exchange:

It is impossible within the scope of this article to cover all the issues of intercultural performance. To conclude I would like to articulate a number of guiding principles with regards to intercultural exchange.

1. Consider and absorb the original cultural and historical context of the material or stories that you are using as you point of departure
2. Ensure that your working relationships are mutually beneficial, and that there is equal pay amongst the collaborating artists
3. When working with an international or intercultural ensemble of actors allow the performers to use their first tongue and their native performance codes, and cultural expressions
4. Through the use devising and collaborative strategies allow each artist a voice in the exploration and generation of performance material

The Blue Shawl:

The Blue Shawl (2008) is a recent New Zealand intercultural performance that is exemplary in the way it adhered to the fore-mentioned guidelines. The show is giving the Māori perspective on a historical event - wrapped in a poetic narrative - and presented within the structure and staging conventions of a Nō Play, incorporating Kapahaka (Māori performing arts) expressions, using both Māori and English language, with a mixed cast of Māori and Pakeha performers, and accompanied by Taonga Puoro (traditional Māori musical instruments), a small Taiko Drum and Nohkan (a Japanese flute).

The original historical incidents were considered and absorbed within their cultural context by writer / director John Davies. Permission to tell this story was obtained beforehand, and the performance material was developed in ongoing partnership and consultation with a close relative of the protagonist of the initial story. Throughout the writing and rehearsal process John consulted the appropriate Kaumatua (Māori elders) in matters of Te Reo (Māori language) and Tikanga Māori (Māori protocol). All the artists, involved in this project, participated on a voluntary basis, motivated by a deep commitment to tell this particular

story, a strong desire to work with the director, or both. The Māori performers were able to use Te Reo as well as English; they were encouraged to incorporate Māori codes and expressions, such as Māori footwork, wiriwiri (fluttering of the hands), pukana (facial animation), waiata (song), haka (dance), and Māori actions.

As the director, John is committed to creating the right atmosphere and circumstance that invite the appropriate response from the performers. He places huge value on the contribution of each individual, and allows room for experimentation and error. As such he employs devising strategies that allow each participating artist to have a voice in the ultimate performance.

Final Quote:

“If inter-culturalism is born through the meeting of ‘self’ and the ‘other’, the real challenge is to maintain the reciprocity of this dynamic“ (Bharucha 1993: 155)

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