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Taonga Whakaari: Maori Playwrights Festival 2010

Purapurawhetu

by Briar Grace-Smith

directed by Cathy Downes

at Hawkins Theatre, Papakura, Auckland

From 16 Jun 2010 to 18 Jun 2010

Reviewed by Tamati Patuwai, 17 Jun 2010

I had the honor of being in Wellington on the night *Purapurawhetu* was born in the late 90s. Almost 15 years later I am again honoured to view Briar Grace-Smith's delicately crafted and, to this day, profoundly relevant theatre classic.

On this particular wintry night I attend the inaugural Taonga Whakaari Festival in Papakura's Hawkins Theatre. In the Hawkins lobby area, I am pleased to see that many others have ventured southward from the central city to support tonight's play. Equally pleasing it is to see an assortment of spectators who, it seems, are proud to play host to this Maori Playwrights hui. This hui, more typically housed in the eminent institutions in the Big Smokes of our country, has been carried to this bustling little town and with that I commend the festival organisers. Yes, take it to the people. Bravo!

Mana Whenua, Te Akitai gives the Karakia and welcomes the audience into the theatre. As I move with the brimming crowd I am heartened to see a Kaumatua delicately finishing his pack of KFC with finger licking refinement preparing for his night at the theatre. You don't see that in town.

The *Purapurawhetu* story itself follows a small, barely functioning whanau in a rural coastal community. The family is in the process of restoring the Tukutuku panels to their Whareniui as an imposing Kuia arrives out of nowhere to uncover hidden secrets. She challenges the frayed relatives to confront their truths and to restore their own Mana and ways.

The *Purapurawhetu* Tukutuku design, representing the stars in the sky, is a metaphor for the complexity of family connections. As a journey of self discovery through loss of identity and even life, I restate that *Purapurawhetu* is as poignant today as it was when it was first performed.

The principal set is a large and seemingly well used Kupenga, or fishing net, draped atop an undulating steel frame. This almost rustic structure morphs from boat shed to Whareniui with the tilt of the head and shift of scene. Though the set - designed by Joshua Thomas - is central and, of itself, a well informed construction it is by no means domineering and complements the tones of the play graciously.

Rawiri Paratene returns to the New Zealand stage from his excursion at the Globe theatre to play the Koroua, Hohepa. In recognition of his performance and staying with the net analogy, there is an aphorism in Māori: "Cast the old net aside and let the new net harvest the fruits of the ocean." This proverb conveys the notion that the older generation must at one time or another stand aside to allow the younger leaders to take their place. However Paratene, who is the most senior of the *Purapurawhetu* cast, presents as someone who is actually standing in his prime. One minute he is like a bewildered Tuatara perched amongst a rocky outlet stricken with grief and loss, the next minute he struts a fine tango with true Nga Puhī gusto. In humility I have a deep sense that Paratene is consistently leading the way as a Chief of New Zealand actors. Pai Marika e Mara!

Scotty Cotter is also a delight as the young Tyler, who emerges as the unsung hero. Additionally Roimata Fox, exquisite daughter of Ngati Porou, generally executes the distinctive and elaborate charms of the upbeat Kuia, Aggie with obvious skill.

However generally it is Paratene who holds the piece together. At times the younger cast members tend to float around with a disconnected sense of [stage] direction. Further on from this, as the play unfolds, flaws continue to appear as fundamental shifts in character and plot clunk around with no congruency. The offers from the actors for a moment grab my attention but do not hold me for long. The cast offer bold moves yet what could be needed is a more careful and exacting directorial approach.

With respect, while there is a clear effort to honour a superb narrative and writer, my

general impression would be that the *Purapurawhetu* team needs more work to engage with the complexities and types of nuance that a play such as this demands.

In saying this I must state that overall the cast's energy and skill is evident, as they make every effort to share their hearts and minds with the audience. Moreover, *Purapurawhetu* is an important NZ play. I mihi to Briar Grace-Smith's wisdom and deep understanding of her people and the stories that she continues to grace us with.

Purapurawhetu remains a vital contribution to NZ theatre that deserves a long life on the stage for generations to come.

It is also imperative that communities partake of the fruits that the Taonga Whakaari Festival so generously offers. Enjoy this Papakura based festival. Tautoko the festival so that it grows and maybe even stimulates others of its kind to take root in other communities.

Kia Ora.

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Venus Stephens	posted 17 Jun 2010, 01:21 PM / edited 17 Jun 2010, 12:00 AM To evoke feeling in others is the best critique one can hope for, the heart gauge is the best one there is. Purapurawhetu is a beautiful piece of writing, as too was last nights performance. To the Actors, Directorial and Production folk who have brought its light back onstage to share this Matariki festival, thankyou. You're 'o' for awesome.
Tamati Patuwai	posted 17 Jun 2010, 04:32 PM / edited 19 Jun 2010, 12:00 AM Nau te rourou noku te rourou kia ora ai te korero
Josephine Stewart-Tewhiu	posted 20 Jun 2010, 11:46 PM / edited 21 Jun 2010, 12:00 AM It's Scotty Cotter, NOT Scotty Coffe, and the fabulous set designer was Joshua Thomas. Cheers. [Fixed - and thank you - ED]

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