Marc Maufort and David O'Donnell, eds., *Performing Aotearoa: New Zealand Theatre and Drama in an Age of Transition*

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Marc Maufort and David O'Donnell, eds. *Performing Aotearoa: New Zealand Theatre and Drama in an Age of Transition*. Brussels, New York, Oxford, etc: Peter Lang, 2008. 463 p. ISBN 9789052013596/9052013594. £32.20 / €57.93

- 1 *Performing Aotearoa* is the twenty-second title in the series "Dramaturgies", under the editorship of Marc Maufort. It contains twenty-eight contributions, consisting of twenty essays and eight interviews with dramatists (Gary Henderson, Ken Duncum, Jean Betts, Rangimoana Taylor, Briar Grace-Smith, Nathaniel Lees, Linda Chanwai Earle, and Jacob Rajan). As these names alone would indicate, this collection makes a valuable contribution in terms of surveying the multicultural landscape of contemporary New Zealand theatre. Maufort explains in his brief introduction, which also situates the volume in the context of recent work in the area, that the principal focus of the essays is to shed new light on the shift from a Pākehā-dominated identity to "a fruitful hybridization of different races, classes and genders" (13).
- 2 The essays and interviews are organised into four groups. The first focuses on what are termed "theatrical issues" (traditions and trends in practice and training); the second concentrates largely on Pākehā playwrights and covers formal or thematic developments in dramatic texts, including challenges to gender stereotyping; the third is devoted to Māori theatrical traditions and contemporary practice; and the final selection moves "beyond the binary Pākehā-Māori model" (15) to look at Pasifika and

Asian elements, before closing on an analysis of the ways national identity is represented in television drama. As a result of this structure, there are a number of internal echoes and parallel reflections. There are notably multiple references within the first group of essays to the influence of Grotowski and Lecoq; in the Pacific Island/Asian section, to the pioneering work carried out by Māori playwrights (eg. John Broughton, Hone Kouka, Apirana Taylor) and theatre groups (Te Ohu Whakaari, Taki Rua); while the Māori-focused studies and interviews refer repeatedly to the same founding works and writers. These repetitions certainly make clear what the cutting-edge work is considered to be and how its initial impact on the New Zealand theatre scene has evolved over the years. Within such a wide-ranging ensemble, there are a number of stand-out pieces. Not all the interviews are equally informative, but several offer intriguing insights into aspects of theatre not normally available beyond a small circle of initiates: Nathaniel Lees explains at some length the creative process leading to the staging of *A Frigate Bird Sings*, stressing the collaboration necessary; Rangimoana Taylor and Jacob Rajan provide insider perspectives on the slow emergence of voices differing from the monocultural and, later, bicultural scene respectively. Te Ahukaramu Charles Royal's overview of his doctoral thesis research into historic forms of Māori entertainments echoes nicely even if not explicitly in Sharon Mazer's description of the Atamira Dance Collective's performance of *Ngai Tahu* 32.

- 3 Some of the essential dichotomies and contradictions of theatre are also evident in the volume. There is an implied appreciation of the printed text in Maufort's comment that two of Briar Grace-Smith's works "have now achieved the status of published classics" (247), as well as in Jean Betts' remark that "[o]nce the play is published [you] realise it's permanent, it can never go away, people can read it, it really completes the circle and makes sense of the whole thing" (187). To some degree this is at odds with Murray Edmond's lively description of the work of Amamus and the continued influence of autonomous theatre in New Zealand that he points out (65), and it challenges the reality of collaborative and continuously evolving playscripts mentioned elsewhere in relation to a number of productions. The role of the performer in relation to the audience also raises some conflicting interpretations. While for Noh practitioner John Davies, they are to be thought of as stones and the performer's identity is to be seen as an obstacle in the performance, the application of a *marae*-based protocol, welcoming the *manuhiri* (guests) into the theatre, opening and closing the play according to *tikanga* rituals, is surely a directly opposed tendency. Whether over time a greater respect for the practices of the *tangata whenua* will emerge or not is a moot question, but it is clear from *Performing Aotearoa* that local theatre is in an exciting state of continuing evolution. As Lisa Warrington points out, "[o]ne of the strengths of New Zealand theatre is surely located in its relative infancy. Playwrights look back to established tradition, but also feel a freedom to synthesise old and new modes of presentation" (366).

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Jean ANDERSON did her postgraduate studies in France and Canada, and then returned to New Zealand where she teaches French and francophone literature. She is the founding Director of Te Tumu Whakawhiti Tuhinga o Aotearoa, the New Zealand Centre for Literary Translation, at Victoria University, Wellington. She has co-translated into French a volume of short stories (*Electrique cité*) and two novels by Patricia Grace and is currently working on a third (*Tu*) for Tahiti-based publisher “Au Vent des îles”. She is also involved in putting together an anthology of indigenous Pacific theatre for the same publisher.