

Tu Tangata goes backstage

Te Ohu Whakaari is one of the few full-time Maori drama groups in New Zealand. It works under the Wellington Arts Centre Trust, and started in June 1983.

The group consists of six members, Rongopai Broughton, Rawiri Marshall, Himiona Grace, Maringikura Saltzmann, Maria Duffy, Briar Smith and director Rangimoana Taylor and administrator Rea Ropiha.

Between them the tribal areas cover most of New Zealand and one member is of Cook Island descent.

Darcy Nicholas, director of the arts centre and John Tahuparae, Maori advisor to Television New Zealand, were two people instrumental in forming Te Ohu Whakaari. They talked about the idea to Rangimoana, who was then directing and acting in Selwyn Muru's 'The Gospel according to Tane'. Several people were interviewed and Te Ohu Whakaari was born.

Rangimoana is of Te Whanau a Apanui and Ngati Porou descent and was brought up in Wellington. After graduating from NZ Drama School, he worked extensively in theatre throughout New Zealand before thinking it was time he shared his knowledge with his people.

"Maori people have a lot to offer the theatre because they have a different base to the pakeha. They also have over two thousand years of oral tradition including song, poetry and abstract thought, but because of the pressures on them, they are forgetting this, drama is one way of releasing these things."

Before Te Ohu Whakaari started work some of the members were unsure if they could perform in front of an audience despite all having had some sort of performing experience behind them. Group members were first asked to read aloud a favourite Maori legend and this helped to overcome fears. Since then they've performed in front of thousands of people at schools, polytechs, universities, parks and hospitals as well as Wellington's Depot Theatre.

They feel confident now but it's required a lot of hard work, including morning exercise routines, rehearsals and script writing. At first any excuse was used to get out of the exhausting work, and there were times when people got so fed up with working closely with one another that they'd just slam the door and leave, but five minutes later they'd be back.

This is the first of a series of articles about a young Maori theatre group that'll be featured in upcoming issues of Tu Tangata magazine.



To help produce a new work based on Maori myths, it was decided to create a marae atmosphere at the arts centre. Mattresses were set down on the floor and hot kai was provided by Mei Winitana, the supervisor of Nga Uri o Niwareka, the weaving group at the centre. Songs were sung and then work began on the myths, with some of the best ideas coming at two in the morning. Three days later came the first public performance of the myths at the arts centre.

"We started the myths by singing a few songs, during which we were all supposed to stand up and take part in the actions. Well that day nobody stood up, we just sat and looked straight ahead.... But after the first laugh during 'Maui's return to earth' we all eased up", said Maringi.

Since then, Te Ohu Whakaari have performed the myths many times, mainly at schools. For the women this meant learning to karanga and the men, gaining confidence in whaikorero.

"I think it's during our performances at schools that we have the most fun, the children's response is great and sometimes we want to join in with their laughing", said Maria.

The women in the group were asked by Keri Kaa, a lecturer at Wellington Teachers College, to support her lectures on 'Maori women in mythology' at Victoria University and Wellington Polytechnic. During her lectures she told how Maori women were just as powerful as men with roles as important. The actors were told to make the characters Taranga, Hine-nui-te-po and Hine-ahu-one come to life.

During October last year, Te Ohu Whakaari worked for the first time in a theatre, performing 'Nga paki o te Maori' as well as the myths programme. The three nights were sell-outs. Nga paki had a combined effort of group or individual pieces brought together by Rangimoana. It was a chance for the different talents of the group to be seen.

Rongopai Broughton started the night off with a mihi and then got straight into the haka 'Ruamoko'. About this haka Rongopai says.

"Ruamoko, the earthquake god, is known throughout the world and has been used, as I see it, as an outlet for people's anger within their society.

Himiona Grace followed with a piece he wrote called 'The visitation'. In this he played the part of a young boy torn between two cultures and two places. Of it he says, "the visitation is part of what Maori life is today, what it was yesterday and what it will be like in the future."

Rawiri Marshall then did a movement piece called 'He Toa', which included modern movement as well as traditional haka, which he learnt with help from friends, Damen White, Keri Kaa, Tim Vincent and Danny Goddard. Rawiri says, "He Toa tells of the evaluation of man from the very beginnings to becoming a warrior."

The women came on last with, 'A view from the younger generation'. Through a series of pieces, both light-hearted and serious, it told of the problems Maori women face today. Maringikura Saltzmann wrote a song, 'Woman the comforter' which was used throughout the programme. In it she told of the important role that women play and just how strong they have to be".

Maria Duffy ended the piece. "We are not a race of degenerates and if we fail within the system then maybe it's the system that should change, not us."

Nga Uri o Niwareka, the weaving group, added to the performance by providing several wall-hangings for the theatre. A closeness between performers and audience created a unique atmosphere and greatly aided the production.

Rangimoana Taylor. "It is thanks to the very positive feedback from the Maori community as well as some outstanding reviews that we have been invited to perform at Auckland Independent Theatre from February 21 to 26."